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Exploring the Experiences of Former Alternative  
Education Participants: Case Studies

by

Shirley L. Washington-Cobb

A dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

School of Education

Exploring the Experiences of Former Alternative  
Education Participants: Case Studies

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Shirley L. Washington-Cobb

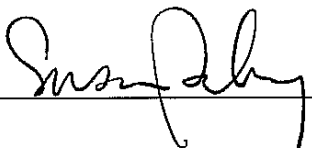
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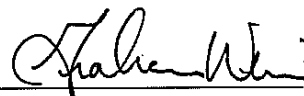
degree of

Doctor of Education

School of Education

Dr. Susan Isenberg, Dissertation Chair  Date 9-21-12

Dr. Stephen Sherblom, Committee Member  Date 9-21-12

Dr. Graham Weir, Committee Member  Date 9-21-12

### Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

Signature Shirley Washington-Cobb Date: 10/17/2012



## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Abstract**

Alternative education has become an integral program, in one form or another throughout most school districts in the United States. Alternative education is a very complex and controversial issue that is best understood through the stories of former alternative education students looking back on their lived experiences. Children in the alternative education program studied here were generally those who did not fit into a general education program due to behavior problems or lack of academic success.

The purpose of the study was to investigate alternative education primarily through in-depth interviews and case studies of 18 previous alternative education students who were voluntary participants and secondarily through interviews of current alternative education professional staff. The main research question was: In what ways has the study program been meeting the needs of students in the alternative education program, and in what ways may it be improved? The sub questions were the following: (a) Which aspects of this alternative education program are effective or ineffective and why, according to former participants? and (b) Which strategies utilized in the alternative education program may be useful in general education classrooms, according to the participants?

Results revealed that the majority of students viewed the alternative education experience as positive if there was a patient, supportive, caring adult in their school life. The study program was effective in meeting the needs of the

students through low student-to-teacher ratios, highly structured classrooms, school and community mentors, and high quality academic instruction. However, more of the following is needed: funding for some students who need services outside the school, initial and continuing education for staff to counter teacher burn-out and stereotyping of students, space to alleviate overcrowding, parent involvement, and leadership. Ten themes emerged from the data: anger, victim mentality, neglect, abandonment, apathy, self-doubt, bullying, academic struggles, unequal prospects, and most important—a relationship with a caring adult.



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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

As an experienced, general education teacher with a background in special education, the Primary Investigator (PI) has much knowledge of and experience in working with children, adolescents, and young adults who are referred to an alternative education program. Alternative education programs were designed to provide a separate educational environment for K-12 students who are not academically successful in a general education setting due to their behavior. The PI became interested in alternative education after spending many years in a particular school district, and observing the difficulty in managing these easily distractible, and mutually distracting students. In addition, the PI desired to select a topic that she felt would maintain her interest for the duration of the dissertation. After careful deliberation and the discovery that there is a sizeable amount of research on the topic mostly from the education professional perspective, the PI also felt that the use of case study methodology would offer readers an opportunity to learn about real alternative education students and their life situations. Data collection involved interviewing and observing former alternative education students and current alternative education teachers.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem is that alternative education is a very complex controversial issue, which in this study could possibly be better understood primarily through the stories of former alternative education students and secondarily through the interviews with educational professionals. Significant challenges are recurrently

faced by alternative education professionals. They continuously seek the most meaningful ways in which to implement methods and strategies that beneficially impact the academic and behavioral problems presented by a growing number of alternative education students.

Public education in the U.S. has undergone a gradual but profound set of changes over the past 20 years since the publication of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and *A Nation Prepared* in 1986 (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986).

The purpose of this study was to investigate alternative education primarily through the reflections and relayed experiences of former participants and secondarily through perceptions of current alternative education teachers. Specific foci will include (a) inquiring into whether the study program was, in fact, an adequate alternative education; (b) whether students perceive the program to have prepared them for life after the program; and (c) what can be said about the dynamic interaction of program resources (including personal relationships) and student situation (student needs, circumstances, behaviors, attitudes, etc.) in explaining for whom it worked and for whom it did not. The significance of this study is that alternative education is viewed here not only by the sometimes biased education professionals who teach in the program, but primarily by the students who lived the experience.

High quality alternative education programs are generally known for their adherence to youth development principles (Smith & Thomases, 2001) such as: (1) physical and psychological safety (e.g., safe facilities, safe

ways to handle conflicts between youth, etc.); (2) appropriate structure (limit setting, clear rules, predictable structure to how program functions, etc.); (3) supportive relationships (warmth, closeness etc., with adults and peers); (4) opportunities to belong (meaningful inclusion); (5) positive social norms (expectations of behaviors, etc.); (6) support for efficacy and mattering (empowering youth, challenging environment, chances for leadership, etc.); (7) opportunities for skill building (e. g. learning about social, communication skills, etc., as well as media literacy, good habits of the mind, etc.): and (8) integration of family, school, and especially community efforts. (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2001, p. 1)

### **Strengths of Alternative Education Programs**

Aron (2006) identified strengths of alternative education programs, which can benefit most eligible students who are academically behind their peers. “The programs develop individualized academic plans for each student that both map out pathways for academic success and help identify and organize a range of services and supports that the student might need to achieve academic success” (p. 10). Aron believed that many alternative education participants typically require some years to achieve academic rankings, which measure near their peers.

The alternative education program investigated in this study is located in a large Midwestern school district in a mostly middle-class suburban environment. The demographics of the district reflect an approximately 60-65% population of Blacks and mixed races, 30% Whites, 4% Asian, and approximately 6% Hispanic.



This district claims to have a national reputation as an innovative educational leader at all grade levels. The district covers over 90 square miles and encompasses all or part of 11 municipalities. This school district offered on-campus and off-campus counseling, as well as a great number of academic and behavioral services, providing more of such services than do traditional schools. The study district's alternative education program's design claims to aid and assist student participants to such a degree as to be comfortably able to eventually rejoin their grade level peers.

Alternative education programs may be of value if they are supported and uphold the belief that student learning is enhanced when individual needs, learning styles, strengths, and life situations are factored into the design. "The best programs also address the specific needs of children from various racial and ethnic groups and those with special needs including students with learning or other disabilities that have not yet been identified" (Aron & Zweig, 2003, p. 2).

Flexible scheduling in alternative education programs helps meet the need or desire of many students to work while attending school such as those students participating in a vocational program. Other elements of successful alternative education programs are accommodations such as extended testing time, greater test preparation, tutorials, and accelerated curricula (typically for those students who lack knowledge due to years of misbehavior during lessons). Many of the students in the study's alternative education program struggle academically as a result of external factors such as family problems or limited abilities. While some

students languish, there are others in alternative education programs that attain both academic and social achievements in spite of personal struggles.

### **Challenges Faced by Alternative Education Programs**

Some of the challenges faced by students who are transferred into the alternative education program are the following: lack of parental involvement, need for differentiated instruction, and methods of behavior modification, etc. These challenges can appear overwhelming; however, the interviewed teachers stated that they function with the challenges as best they can. The alternative education professionals who voiced their opinions during this study stated that they were often frustrated by parents who are inconsistent regarding upholding promises they make to offer support (participation in their child's educational plans, hearings, meetings, conferences, etc.). The same education professionals were also frustrated with parents who seem to be less concerned about their own children than the teachers.

The interviewed teachers further explained that they sometimes feel overburdened by students who tend to dramatically act out, and typically lag below academic proficiency on standardized test assessments. In fact, the students in this district's alternative education program typically perform at a two to three year deficit (or more), compared to their grade level peers. As a result, some of this district's teachers are at a loss when they are presented with these ever increasing behavior and academic challenges.

There are still a noticeable amount of programs which are referred to as alternative education programs, yet they have been recognized as failing to

adequately address the overall needs of a sizeable number of participating students. The PI's experiences have caused her to remain cautious about making personal judgments regarding the challenges of this school district's alternative education program, but the PI acknowledged that there are noticeable deficits, which need to be addressed. Hopefully, the teachers will become better trained to work with these challenges, and participate in professional development regarding the more contemporary issues such as students with emotional handicaps, as well as those students who were born addicted to the street drugs and alcohol abuse that their mothers used while pregnant. The lasting effects of some of the contemporary issues are yet unknown and not sufficiently researched.

Unfortunately, the teachers in this district's alternative education program were not required to be trained or certified by a teacher preparation program such as special education in order to work with alternative education students. Aron (2006) stressed one element in particular that must be addressed with alternative education students: "better diagnostic tools to determine reading and math levels and specific learning issues among students with a particular need" (p. 10). Examples of better diagnostic tools among the plethora available might include the following: (a) frequent standardized tests (i.e., Gates MacGinitie reading test), (b) interactive computer examinations, and (c) norm and criterion based tests that have been developed by some school districts.

### **Research Questions**

Main research question:

In what ways has the study alternative education program been meeting the needs of students, and in what ways may it be improved?

Sub research questions:

1. Which aspects of this alternative education program are effective or ineffective and why, according to former participants?
2. Which strategies utilized in the alternative education program may be useful in general education classrooms, according to the participants?

### **Limitations of the Study**

This qualitative study has limitations such as the PI's degree of confidence in what she has seen or heard; in other words, whether she has been misled.

Another limitation of this study is the familiarity of the PI with some of the participants who were once her former students. The PI was initially concerned about the levels of truth (from the former students), as a result of familiarity. The PI feared that her past students would not divulge as much information and cause them to be more guarded about their responses, or to discuss sensitive topics. In fact, the PI cannot confirm that information divulged by some of the former students was actually the full truth.

### **Definition of Terms**

**At-risk students.** According to Murdock (1999), at-risk children have a “greater likelihood of becoming [educationally] disabled because of conditions surrounding their births or home environments” (p. 318). Ashcroft (1999) writes

of students “at risk for becoming delinquent.” Sagor (1999) cites “a mismatch between learner and learning system.” And Bickford (2001) equates at-riskness with violence. McDonald (2002) summarized: “However, based on the preponderance of available research, it can be safely said that at-riskness is most frequently manifested by poor academic and social skills that promote a general disconnection with the school culture” (p. 1).

**Academic failure.** Poor academic performance is a clear indication of at-riskness (Guerin & Denti, 1999; Karlsson, 1996; Murdock, 1999; Sagor, 1999). The concept seems to be both cyclical and progressive, in that academic failure increases the likelihood that a student will be labeled at-risk of the ultimate academic failure: dropping out.

**Alternative school.** The name used in some parts of the world (in particular the United States) to describe an institution, which provides part of alternative education. It is an educational establishment with a curriculum and methods that are nontraditional. These schools have a special curriculum offering a more flexible program of study than a traditional school. As Korn (1991) noted, “A wide range of philosophies and teaching methods are offered by alternative schools; some have strong political, scholarly, or philosophical orientation, while others are more *ad-hoc* assemblies of teachers and students dissatisfied with some aspect of mainstream or traditional education” (p. 1).

**Observational research.** Qualitative methods provide means whereby social contexts can be systematically examined as a whole, without breaking them down into isolated, incomplete, and disconnected variables.

Qualitative reports are usually complex, detailed descriptions that cannot be reduced to numbers without distorting the essence of the social meanings they represent. Qualitative reports are usually complex, detailed narratives that include the voices of the participants being studied. (Hatch, 2002, p. 16)

**Participant observation.** Participant observation is a form of participation where the researcher actively engages in the environment of the study (Dewalt et al., 1998, p. 261).

**Non-participant observation studies.** Examples of non-participant observation studies include: naturalistic observations, simulations, and case studies. Researchers, such as Barner-Barry (1986) have conducted observational research, which usually examines a purposive sample of participants. Non-participant observation is a technique of field research, used in anthropology and sociology, by which an investigator studies the life of a group by sharing in its activities (Barner-Barry, 1986, p. 2).

**Observational bias.** Any factor that might change the results of a study from what they would have been if observation of the factor was NOT present. The direction of bias may be unpredictable. The validity of a study is integrally related to the likelihood that the results have been biased by factors extraneous to the study design (Berg, 1995).

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The framing literature was reviewed and the following topics with specific regard to the topic of alternative education are included: (a) historical overviews of alternative education, (b) history of disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEPs), (c) alternatively prepared teachers, (d) best practice strategies, (e) transition services, and (f) academics. A good deal of the research began with a historical overview of alternative education, through to modern day practices. In so doing, the PI also utilized the experiences of former students who were once participants in the study school district's alternative education program. The PI chose to use the literature as a conduit through which to compare and contrast samples, methodologies, and experiences. As a result of thorough research, the PI elected to review a vast amount of literature regarding school districts, which are similar to the selected school district and those alternative education programs that utilized diversely dissimilar approaches. The comparisons were based upon the following: location, size of the district, racial and gender balance, teacher preparedness, professionalism, and type of alternative program.

### **Historical Overviews of Alternative Education**

A significant amount of research exists, which offers historical background regarding various alternative education programs (charter, magnet, parochial, private, and home-schooling, to name a few). However, this particular research was decidedly limited to a focus on alternative education programs as they apply to public education systems in general, and one selected school district in particular. This presentation of information regarding alternative education

will hopefully heighten awareness of a problematic area of education, which will be *paid forward* or paid tragically. Unfortunately, many of today's students are presented with so many opportunities to behave inappropriately. So many young people have responsibilities thrust upon them that are not age appropriate. No matter how mature they may have appeared to the PI, some of the former alternative education students were clearly impacted by their past experiences and expressed some bitterness and frustration since their participation in the program.

A number of the former students expressed that they needed noticeable signs of concern from supervising adults. A number of them stated that they wanted to feel academically and behaviorally supported. The former participants overwhelmingly mentioned that they would have benefited from adults who appeared to earnestly care about them and who genuinely expressed a desire to try and understand the many hurdles, which often hindered their progress.

According to most of the historical literature, there are some alternative education programs cited for their lack of support for minority students during the late 1950s, and the early 1960s. In fact, many of the early alternative education programs were considered racist. Rather than attempting to salvage the educational experiences of all students, it appeared that these early programs existed in favor of attempting to forge greater success among the few. As Raywid (1981) described it, "These schools were cold, dehumanizing, irrelevant institutions, largely indifferent to the humanity and the personhood of those within them" (p. 552). The PI has personally witnessed how some minority students, (especially Blacks), were thought by some educational professionals to



be mentally inferior, loud, brash, and aggressive, to such an extent that some Black and non-Black education professionals felt justified in a reluctance to work with these (perceived) more difficult students. There were some teachers who mentioned to the PI how they simply did not have the time to pamper students who brought baggage to school, and that they felt ill equipped to provide assistance beyond what they could provide within the school environment.

Several resources defined the 1960s as a time of heated racial tensions with some segregated education (in spite of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to integrate all American schools in 1954). As a result of continued polarization, Black students were often met with unfair treatment, and kept from being integrated with other ethnic groups, especially White students. Black students were considered to be disruptive, more violent than, and not as intelligent as other races. History notes that many Blacks during this period were thought to be intellectually inferior. As a result, most Black students were expected to seek training that leaned toward a more vocational path. During this time, it was unlikely for many of the Black students to expect that they could better prepare themselves through their participation in an alternative education program.

The 1970s was a period of more liberal thinking, and the end of conflict in Vietnam; however, the government cut many programs that were beneficial to those people at the lower end of the financial spectrum, and both research and observed documentation was produced in the 1970s about alternatives in education. The PI benefitted by including notable works from researchers such as Barr, Colston, and Parrett (1977), who argued that “the promise and relevance of

alternative options for students within public education, is not only a natural extension of national democracy, but is a necessary tool for renewal within the schools” (p. 1). At the close of the 1970s, many public schools were integrated, yet, there continued to be distancing between the Black and White races. Most racial groups tended to bond with others within their group due to shared cultural commonalities.

The 1980s marked a noticeably more punitive shift to the general population of students within alternative education settings. Alternative programs within the 1980s were designed for students who were extremely disruptive to the overall learning process, with different standards, and policies to help reduce youth violence and dropout rates. Initially, punitive methods seemed to be effective. Over a relatively short period of time, the severe discipline began to wane in its effectiveness, and alternative methods began to be contemplated, utilized, or attempted in hopes of realizing more demonstrable progress.

The definition of alternative schools began to narrow in scope in the 1980s. According to Raywid, (1981) “Within their first decade of existence, public alternatives [for alternative education programs] exploded from 100 to more than 10,000” (p. 551). Several of the first open schools did not survive and options seemed to change from the more progressive and open orientation in the 1970s to a more conservative and remedial one in the 1980s.

As emphasized by researcher Harrington (1994), school violence became disturbingly more prevalent during the 1990s. The killings at both Columbine and Thurston high schools led to the implementation of more punitive

consequences also known as zero tolerance policies. These policies were directed toward all students; however, alternative education students seemed to be in particular jeopardy since they were the students more prone to be the most behaviorally disruptive to the instructional process.

Disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEPs) serve a different purpose than the original concept of alternative education programs in that they are geared toward students who exhibit delinquent or disruptive behavior in the regular classroom as well as students who have a higher likelihood of dropping out. Many alternative education programs provide a combination of instructional and behavioral services for at-risk students. Other programs such as DAEPs are punitive in nature and stress positive behavior modification. It appears that DAEPs were created in response to societal frustrations with violent and undisciplined youth. Adult educational authorities were no longer in a position to implement corporal punishment in most states. In fact, many students became more aware of their legal rights, and were not afraid to threaten adults with some sort of repercussions if they felt uncomfortable. It became quite common for adults (including parents) to call 911 and report students' threatening, harassing, or abusive behavior. A number of alternative education faculty (not associated with this study), claim to the PI of this study that they no longer meet with an individual single student to avoid a potentially dangerous situation.

Looking back, there appears to be no all-encompassing definition of an alternative program. However, there were programs, which have realized some noticeable improvements. "The following research outlines alternative education

programs as they are implemented in certain school districts throughout the country, along with strategies for successful alternative education” (Gregg, 1999, p. 107). These programs have made claim to more observable progress. The researched school district claimed to realize success, but appeared open to any studies where there was demonstrable progress.

### **History of Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEPs)**

According to Barr et al. (1977), “the promise and relevance of alternative options for students within public education, is not only as a natural extension of national democracy, but as a necessary tool for renewal within the schools” (p. 11). This well documented information produced results from some programs that were less than flattering. As each year of the 1970s concluded, many stakeholders felt that alternative education programs were too lenient.

Documentation of this time period in alternative education displays how educators were still in the process of attempting to figure out the best methods to handle those students who were growing more and more difficult for many of the educational professionals to handle. The 1970s educational resources seemed to be ill-prepared for the growing population of students who were becoming more impulsive, disrespectful, prone to violence, and more aware of the disbandment of such strategies as corporal punishment. It was during the later 1970s that a noticeable volume of students became responsive to the powers offered unto them to place authority figures on notice that their abilities to carry out unquestionable consequences were observably diminished.

Through the 1980s, the definition of alternative schools began to narrow in scope. Many of the first open schools did not survive and options seemed to change from the more progressive and open orientation in the 1970s to a more conservative and remedial one in the 1980s. (Young, 1990, p. 20)

The 1994 passage of the federal Guns Free Act was a direct response to the well-publicized violence demonstrated at Columbine and Thurston high schools. “These incidents also caused many alternative education programs to put forth greater efforts toward attempting to reach new and/or specific types of students” (Levin, 2006, p. 10). The original intent of DAEPs was for mandatory removal; however, currently over 80% of DAEP placements are discretionary.

Mandatory placements in DAEPs include criminal offenses that occur on campus or violent offenses punishable as a felony off campus (e.g., homicide, assault, or bullying (Levin, 2006; Safe Schools Act, 2004). Discretionary placements are generally utilized under two types of circumstances. Students can be placed in DAEPs for crimes believed to have occurred off campus other than those acts of conduct described for mandatory removals under the Safe Schools Act (2004) (e.g., assault with bodily injury, selling or possession of marijuana, or engaging in public lewdness/indecent exposure). “In the second circumstance, school districts are also placing students in DAEPs for engaging in behavior that violates the school’s student code of conduct” (Levin, 2006, p. 10).

While some DAEPs exist on the regular campus, others are housed in facilities separate from the home campus. Under the Safe Schools Act (2004), DAEPs are required to teach positive behavior skills in addition to providing

instruction in the core subject areas of math, science, language arts, and history. DAEPs must also provide adequate supervision and counseling services for the students. However, the PI was not able to conclusively find research, which adequately addressed the topic of follow up services for former DAEP students. Typically, most former alternative education students reenter the traditional school setting while their home environment has not been altered in such ways as to benefit the student.

According to many educators, alternative education programs are critical to student success. Alternative education is based on the idea that there are various methods and environments in which a student can receive a quality education. Morley (1991) stated that some of the most common types of alternative schools and programs include the following:

(a) continuation schools (e.g., schools geared towards dropouts, pregnant students/teenage parents), (b) fundamental schools (e.g., schools providing basic curriculums with a strong emphasis on discipline and academic learning), (c) schools within a school (e.g., to reduce size of comprehensive high schools into more manageable units), and (d) learning centers (e.g., vocational, technical, career awareness, and preparation programs). (p. 8)

The PI was able to discover a large number of characteristics, which are relevant to the curriculum of alternative education programs. There are programs throughout the country, which have adapted their curriculum specifically for age and grade variations in the same classroom. Also, students maintained or

accelerated their academic grade level after participating in an alternative program.

### **Alternative Program Teachers**

McKibbin (2001) found that, “programs with several non-overlapping layers of support tend to be the most successful and that support must be site based and available from the beginning” (p. 133). The PI has witnessed noticeable student progress when there is parent cooperation and participation in supporting and working along with the school personnel. Additionally, it has been the PI’s experience that when alternative education teachers feel that their school administrator, co-workers, the school district and other essential personnel support them (as they are often verbally attacked). The PI spoke with some professional staff members who do not (at least obviously) claim to have a personal vendetta against any child, but may often be accused of such a transgression. The teachers observed by the PI appeared to be involved in providing services to hopefully prepare students’ for reentry into the general education setting.

A sizable number of the alternative education teachers felt that they had received a lot of coursework regarding alternative education; however, they felt that there remained few opportunities to practice, or participate in structured field experiences prior to being thrust into the program ill-prepared. “Most reported that mentor teachers and grade-level meetings provided the most support services to them. Only 24% had a teacher specifically assigned to them as a helper” (Stone & Mata, 2000, p. 205). Overwhelmingly, the teachers interviewed by the

PI felt that they could benefit from more professional development, and input by the more experienced teachers. The new teachers further expressed that having an experienced mentor would be advantageous as long as they were not going to be treated as very young children.

In an analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics Schools and Staffing Survey 1993–1994, Shen (1997) “found that a higher percentage of alternatively certified teachers worked in schools where 50–100% of the students were members of minority groups” (pp. 277-278). Many teachers who’ve been at a school for a longer period of time, and are more familiar with the students and their surroundings, will defer the most challenging students to the newly, (and typically younger) certified teachers.

In their study of fast-track teacher education programs in California, Stone and Mata (2000) found that, “beginning teachers were frequently placed in schools with highly diverse student populations, low socioeconomic levels, and high numbers of limited-English-proficient students” (pp. 205-206).

### **Best Practices Strategies**

In a 1996 publication entitled *Creating Safe and Drug-Free Schools*, the U.S. Department of Education (1996) identified components for fostering effective alternative programs, “including lower student-to-staff ratios, highly trained staff, and district-wide support of the program, collaboration with sectors of the school system and agencies that can provide services to youths, as well as career and emotional counseling” (p. 2). Guerin and Denti (1999) identified four essential themes which surround a program’s best practices; “(1) classroom



climate, culture, and management; (2) teaching methods and curriculum; (3) parent involvement; and (4) institutional factors” (pp. 76-77). It has been this PI’s experience that at least two of these factors are subjective. Teaching methods and classroom climate, culture, and management fit into the category of subjectivity.

As the PI reflects upon her early career, she remembers a professional development workshop when faculty members were being trained regarding the inclusion of other cultures into the curriculum. Many of the teachers expressed concerns that this focus would subject them to yet more work to their already overwhelming tasks. Although the faculty was shown how to incorporate, and not add on to, their workload, at the conclusion of the workshop there were still staff members who were convinced that another task was being heaped upon them. Other staff members felt that the workshop finally addressed a topic that was long overdue.

### **City-As-Schools**

Buffalo, New York has a program entitled City-As-Schools (CAS). This program allows students to work as interns at various businesses across the city. Students who participate in the program alternate through four internships each semester. Upon completion, students must have earned credits in English by working with a theater, or newspaper, etc., or social studies/government by working with a local politician, etc. Expectations for CAS students include becoming accustomed to the community and becoming prepared for the labor force.

### **Questioning Effective Programs**

Researchers such as Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) seem to have successfully tackled questioning the effectiveness of several alternative education programs. They discovered that “by recognizing such programs, they were able to effectively address who benefited from the program and how their measure of support was evaluated” (p. 277). Katsiyannis and Williams concluded that a successful program benefited both struggling and challenging students by identifying areas of weakness and strengths in an alternative education program. The role of these researchers was to share information about the negative and positive methodologies, as well as, how the program attempts to modify itself in order to assist students to become successful.

By reviewing state legislative and guideline dictations, along with responses to a survey, Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) gathered data. “Surveys were mailed to 50 state coordinators of alternative education and the District of Columbia with 38 states responding. Data was collected between 1995 and 1996” (p. 277).

As a result of Katsiyannis and William’s 1998 survey, a valuable amount of information was obtained. Some data results included definitions applicable to alternative education and ways in which students have functioned while a part of the program. In order to feel more confident about how certain alternative programs were being managed, applicable legislation and policies, such as strengthening and continuation of special programs such as 504 plans (special education), monitoring and compliance of rules and regulations, government

funding, and accountability, were enacted. Legislation may be minimal and is primarily assigned to state policies that may not be comprehensive (lack of definition and limited description of policies and legal procedures).

Due to the results gathered from the Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) surveys, there were attempts to make sure these programs were effective. “Generally, the definition and procedures of alternative education programs vary from each state or school district” (Lehr, Lanners, & Lange, 2003, p. 27). Thus, these programs were evaluated and monitored for compliance. These programs were also judged by their strengths, barriers, and trends. “Respondents identified the students most commonly served by or placed in alternative education as those who were pregnant, homeless, migrant, delinquent, and in need of remedial education” (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998, p. 277). A personal issue for the PI is that it seems many of those who are in positions to effect dramatically positive changes within the public school alternative education programs have neither personally been engaged in working with, nor have spent a noticeable amount of time observing children and their various home environments, distinct behaviors, typically lower educational aptitudes, and suffering from situations beyond their control.

### **Transition Services**

Transition services are a necessary component in order to deem a program either effective or ineffective. Whether students are successful once they return to the regular campus is seriously important, especially since the benefits of the program heavily rely upon a reduction in the rate of recidivism back to the

alternative campus and overall betterment once students return to the regular campus.

The PI has researched numerous sources, which suggest that there are four best practice reenrollment strategies identified with greater student success. These strategies were identified for children returning from juvenile facilities: (a) community and agency cooperation, (b) parent and student involvement, (c) a swift reenrollment process, and (d) appropriate placement of the child. Presently, the researched school district is not achieving all of the suggested strategies. Parent involvement, swift reenrollment, and community and agency cooperation, are the most lagging.

Several of the general education teachers (from the researched school district), felt that approximately half of the students who returned from the alternative education environment realized some noticeable progress, and state that these students returned with newly found progress having been made due to their participation in the alternative education environment. The interviewed general educators stated that they are always pleased when students return to the traditional school setting after having made progress while in the alternative school setting. These educators also stated that the students who typically made the smoothest transition back into the traditional environment were those students who experienced manageable behavioral problems.

### **Sample State Laws/Codes**

State laws in Maine require that the coordination for reentry be performed in advance, with interagency communication, family involvement, and

transfer of records. Similar to laws in the Texas Education Code, the laws in Maine require that the Commissioner of Education is also responsible for setting statewide standards for reintegration and transition programs. Florida's Education Code requires school districts to maintain an academic record of each student transferred to a juvenile facility. In California's Education Code, school districts are required to develop a transition strategy for all students. This strategy includes the responsibilities of all agencies and services that will aid the child upon reentry to the home campus. Most sources regarding alternative education programs appear to agree that

Providing supportive and expeditious transition procedures back to the regular or alternative campus from juvenile facilities reduces the likelihood of students' recidivating criminal behavior. A variety of services or techniques are offered to help youths, including encouraging positive connections with the community, developing empathy for others, channeling emotions of anger into positive feelings, and challenging negative self-perceptions). Immediate transition back to the regular or alternative campus allows students to begin receiving special services.

(Granello & Hanna, 2003, p. 11)

Reduced class sizes have been researched and proved to have been of significant benefit to both students and staff. However, in order for an alternative education program to be successful, lower class sizes are but one of the essential factors. Successful programs also require alternatively prepared staff members, noticeably caring and concerned adults, behavior modification, and adapted

academic instruction geared toward a variety of learning styles. Effective alternative programs have also been associated with promoting social interaction among students and teachers and with reduction in school violence. For example, in their study of 14 alternative schools, Wehlage, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) “found that students regularly reported that one of the reasons they were willing to participate in their alternative school program was the sense of membership that they felt in the community as a result of the warm, caring environment” (p. 77).

Regarding dropouts, Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990) suggested that poor student-student and student-teacher relationships could play as large a role in students’ decisions to leave school as academic failure. They recommended that programs for at-risk students work to strengthen student connections to peers, to adults in school, and to the school as an institution. Alternative schools were cited as an example of programs well suited to facilitate these relationships. “These relationships also contribute to a sense of school membership—the reciprocal relationship that encourages a student’s attachment and commitment to the culture and goals of the school” (Wehlage et al., 1989, pp. 77-78).

Comparative studies (primarily surveys), appear to be the most commonly used qualitative method for collecting data. However, during this study, the PI was most interested in conducting case studies. By virtue of using case studies, the PI was able to gather relevant information regarding student performances from both the regular/traditional school and the alternative school settings. The overall agreement amongst a number of studies, appears to have led to the

conclusion that students, who at some point were decidedly required to leave the regular school environment (in order to participate in the alternative education program), were more highly susceptible to certain aspects of the school climate. It seems as though those students who were referred to the alternative education program were more likely to become disheartened by their circumstances than their counterparts attending a regular high school.

An emphasis on an inviting school climate and individual relationships with teachers is often associated with the mission of alternative schools. This emphasis is based on the theory that a sense of caring will encourage students to persist in their school experience and, together with a sense of academic success, will increase self-esteem. (Arnove & Strout, 1980, p. 453)

Factors related to encouraging student success at alternative schools, as investigated by Wehlage et al. (1989), include “teacher accountability for student success, extended teacher role, persistence with students, and optimism about student potential” (pp. 77-78). The former students agreed that when modified instruction took place, and the teacher seemed to believe in them, they tried harder to achieve. The same former students stated that their behaviors improved toward caring adults, especially those adults who demonstrated that they cared about them, and who tried to understand the environmental challenges most of the students endured.

Studies of alternative programs (Wehlage et al., 1998), led them to conclude that these elements, together with a sense of school ownership and

enabling school structures (such as small size, one-on-one relationships, autonomy, flexibility, and control), worked together to create a culture of care and support defined as creating a supportive environment (pp. 77-78). Students' sense of belonging, satisfaction, and self-esteem are frequently examined together in alternative school studies because of the similarity among the characteristics and their importance for the success of students who are alienated from the educational system. For the purpose of this review, findings in these areas are reported together.

As stated by Griffin (1993),

In general, student reports of their experience at alternative education programs have been overwhelmingly positive. The school size, amount of flexibility, and teacher relationships characterized by overt care and concern have all been reported as reasons for high levels of student satisfaction. (p. 416)

The studies by Gold and Mann (1984) "highlight the success of alternatives in meeting students' needs for positive peer and student relationships" (p. 78). Students in the Gold and Mann study reported more personal contacts with peers and teachers than their counterparts in traditional high school. Likewise, Lange and Lehr (1997) found that "regular classroom students reported more positive relationships with teachers than at-risk students in comparison high schools" (p. 27).

As their dialogue regarding school reform continued, Wehlage and Rutter (1987) reflected that



Evidence from case studies of effective alternative programs for marginal students indicates that such students respond positively to an environment that combines a caring relationship and personalized teaching with a high degree of program structure characterized by clear, demanding, but attainable expectations. (pp. 86–87)

Some alternative school settings are strongly associated with addressing student needs prior to their becoming (possibly), insurmountable risks of dropping out. A great deal of emphasis in this school district has been placed on academic areas of weakness, as well as behavioral appropriateness while at school with teachers and peers.

### **Academics**

An abundance of the research gathered by the PI points to the effectiveness of, as well as a great need for educational professionals to address the whole child in alternative education programs with the same fervor as the students in the general population. In an examination into the effects of recognized structure on students who drop out of school, Wehlage and Rutter (1987) concluded the following:

The picture of high school that emerges for most [dropouts] is a place where teachers are not particularly interested in students, and the discipline system is perceived as neither effective nor fair. Dropouts are not satisfied with their schooling. For the dropout, school is a place where one gets into trouble; suspension, probation, and cutting classes are much more frequent for this group. (pp. 86-87)

Wehlage and Rutter's 1987 investigation is noteworthy because of their emphasis on the interaction between school and students. As a result, these researchers gathered that students who felt disenfranchised from the program, often times dropout. Research completed by Barr and Parrett (2001), supports the theory that

students who are failing be placed in multi-grade-level classrooms that emphasize accelerated curriculum for mastery and attention to individual needs. Though the majority of these characteristics are generally agreed upon as present in alternative programs, emphasis of alternative programs in any particular state or local community may vary. (pp. 224-225).

In the early 1990s, Raywid (1994) suggested that alternative education programs be grouped into three types. Raywid (1994) noted that alternative school programs typically fall into one of these types; however, some of the programs may be a combination of all three types:

Type I alternatives are schools of choice, sometimes resembling magnet schools, based on themes with an emphasis on innovative programs or strategies to attract students. Type I programs tend to focus on the match between program and student, simply on correction of a problem within the student. Raywid (Alternative Schools) finds the first group of programs the true educational alternatives to be the most successful, while alternative discipline programs are much less likely to lead to substantial student gains.

Type II alternatives are “last chance” schools where students are sentenced as a last step before expulsion. These are not schools of choice and their emphasis is typically on behavior modification or remediation. Type II programs aim to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students who typically do not choose to attend and are placed in the program for specific periods and short-term participation. The curriculum is limited and/or students work on assignments provided by home schools. Type II alternative education programs are highly structured and can be punitive in nature.

Type III alternatives are designed with a remedial focus on academic and/or social emotional issues. Type III alternative education programs are short-term therapeutic settings for students with social and emotional problems that create barriers to learning. This type of program focuses on attitude, behavior remediation, or rehabilitation and students may choose not to participate. (pp. 26-31)

A more recent three-level classification also advanced by Raywid (1999), combines Types II and III into a single group whose focus is on “changing the student”. A second grouping is focused on “changing the school” and is analogous to the first type described above, and a newly-defined third group is focused on “changing the educational system” more broadly.

Each of the three previously mentioned types of alternative education programs appear to continue pointing in the direction of standardized definitions of academic prowess. According to the analyzed research, Raywid (1999)

expressed agreement with the way in which Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) appeared to demonstrate the epitome of a Type I school.

As a result of their research, Lange and Sletten (2002) proposed a fourth type of alternative education program. The program, which they suggested for further review, involves a second chance program that offers additional opportunities for student progression. This program would consist of school choice, successful methods of remediation and proven opportunities to form a “second chance” agenda that provides another opportunity for success within the educational system following some problem or failure.

Comprehensive or all-inclusive classifications of alternative education programs are difficult to supply. It is not easy to obtain a comprehensive listing of the various types of alternative schools. The constantly evolving nature of alternative programs and the rules that regulate them, cause some programs to appear to be moving targets and difficult to describe. Many state education agencies suggest that states often have a category of service called alternative.

Although the types of alternatives may vary from state to state, there seems to be a central focus that frequently details how alternative programming varies within each state. Lange and Sletton (2002) researched programs throughout the United States and “offer a glimpse of several examples of these programs from various states across the country” (p. 30).

Unfortunately this study did not provide the PI with more opportunities for the PI to uncover additional, far-reaching and follow-up information (more than could be contained within this research project), into the varied alternative

programs throughout all 50 states. The literature that the PI obtained from her research, suggests a comprehensive array of approachability and program design in alternative schools across the country. The variability, as to how each researched state implements their version of an alternative education program design illustrates the trouble created by attempting to universally define the functions or methods of all alternative education programs. However, most alternative education reviewers agree that there is a dominant focus on secondary students; who appear to be more inclined toward withdrawing from school or in jeopardy of school failure. Though programs and schools for elementary students can be found, it appears most are geared for older students.

The instructional prominence is placed upon individual student's learning styles in order to guide instructional planning. Ideal class sizes are small, in order to provide the most individualized instruction possible. Typical teacher-student ratios range from 1:10 to 1:15. The curriculum utilized in most researched alternative education programs integrates technology as well as career-vocational skills.

Teachers are expected to assist students as they are being trained to make connections between school and work by collaborating with potential employers. By doing so, teachers are better able to formulate the curriculum in order to mesh more effectively with real-world career opportunities.

It is critical that teachers consistently maintain high expectations for students, routinely employ positive discipline techniques, and establish rapport with students and peers. "Caring and demanding teachers are perhaps the most

powerful variable in effective programs for at-risk youth” (Barr & Parrett, 2001, p. 77). School and class sizes, caring teachers and administrative support, modification of assignments, and flexible schedules, seem to be the most critical factors in the success of alternative education programs.

### **The Essential Characteristics of Effective Alternative Education**

Lange and Sletten (2002) argued that effective alternative education programs are characterized by

- clearly identified goals to inform both evaluation and enrollment (Gregg, 1999);
- wholehearted implementation without a piecemeal approach to structuring programs (Raywid, 1993);
- teacher autonomy (Gregg, 1999);
- student-centered atmosphere (Frymier, 1987);
- integration of research and practice in areas such as assessment, curriculum, teacher competencies, and integration of special education services (Geurin & Denti, 1999);
- training and support for teachers who work with at-risk populations with or without disabilities (Ashcroft, 1999; Krovetz, 1999); and
- links to multiple agencies, an element that may become increasingly important as alternatives are required to serve students with special education needs (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998; Leone & Drakeford, 1999).

Whether these indicators of success are practiced by most existing alternative education programs appears to be a matter yet to be more thoroughly

documented. The lists within this research project provide a glimpse of elements that many examiners and advocates concur to be important descriptors of effective alternative schools. The points made in a few of these lists can be summarized as follows.

Clearly, alternative schools and programs have evolved over the past four decades. They began as a means to ensure appropriate education for students who were struggling/acting out due to academics, behavior, and/or a combination of both of these important factors. Based on a growing body of research pointing to the characteristics shared by successful alternative education programs and schools, the National Association of State Boards of Education (2007) reported that “the success of these programs has been measured in terms of improved grades, school attendance, and graduation rates; decreases in disruptive and/or violent behaviors and suspensions; and an improved sense of directions and self among participating students” (p. 572).

Some researchers have stated that initial alternative education programs provided (in large part) substandard services. Current research (that which was examined by the PI) purports a view that alternative education programs have mostly evolved into a group of programs or schools that provide an educational option for students, and has been disenfranchised from the traditional educational system. In some school districts students are mandatorily placed in alternative programs. In other school districts, students have the opportunity to enroll in alternative programs by choice.

**Summary**

A sizeable number of the sources investigated by the PI agreed that successful alternative education programs are dependent upon certain factors being in place.

In order for alternative education programs to be successful and remain so, the idea of alternative education must not denote a substandard education.

In fact, students needing alternative education are required to receive the same high standards offered in regular school settings. (Leone & Drakeford, 1999, p. 86)

The dominant factors include, but are not limited to effective, appropriate, and efficient decision-making by all responsible adults. In addition, a successful alternative education program attempts to solicit involvement from parents and/or the community-at-large.

Tobin (2000) found that “strategies for successful alternative programs involved small class sizes, organized classroom management, behavior management, adult mentors, and interventions for students with less manageable behavior problems, and who demonstrated inappropriate social skills” (p. 234). As many researchers have indicated, community support of alternative education programs is essential for their success. According to Tobin and Sprague (2000), “alternative education programs need quality teachers with appropriate education and training in how to work with at-risk adolescents” (p. 180).

Many researchers have found that an alternative program’s success depends on the special services or best practices that are necessary for the



particular students being served (e.g. one-on-one instruction, counseling, equivalent education standards; as the referring campus, community, leadership, student support, and other factors. (Aron, 2006, p. 10)

Barr et al. (1977) clearly stated that “research relative to alternative education does exist; however, many researchers have not adequately investigated the topic. While research on alternative education does exist, it does not adequately speak to the many questions that remain” (p. 11). Issues that point to the character of an alternative education program, student portrayals, special education service, and academic outcomes are all in need of efficient and, ongoing research.

Leone and Drakeford (1999) explained, “alternative education needs to become a meaningful alternative to traditional, contemporary public schooling.” Leone and Drakeford state further that, “Quality alternative programs should have many of the same high expectations, standards, and outcomes valued in more traditional settings” (p. 87).

Authors such as Guerin and Denti (1999), surmised that students referred to DAEPs have a higher likelihood or risk of failure in the regular school setting; it is critical that such students receive specialized instruction from teachers who are trained to provide the necessary skills to improve academic performance and reduce negative behavior at the DAEP. ( pp. 76-78)

The interviewed faculty members unanimously agreed that on-going

professional development is sorely needed. It was this faculty's opinion that special training was a necessary component if noticeable progress was to be observed.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This study examined how one school district implements alternative education and relates the summarized experiences of 18 former alternative education participants. This district deliberately attempts to meet the needs of many struggling students and has initiated numerous educational programs. The PI, deemed alternative education as a program that stands out as a societal/educational issue in need of prominent investigation.

Quality scientific research relies heavily upon ensuring the objectivity of the investigation. The PI's questions relied upon the incorporation of what readers want or need to know about the topic. The relevant literature identified in this study displays both the strengths and challenges faced by alternative education programs.

Commitment to a particular finding suggests that the predominant purpose of the project is to confirm one's own bias. Dissertation work, like other research worthy of the name, requires a dispassionate commitment to the results, even if they are not what one had hoped with considerable passion. Designs that can have only one acceptable outcome are advocacy designs, not research designs. A research design, whether quantitative or qualitative, must be calculated to yield information about an important question that can be answered in more than one way. (University of Virginia, n.d., p. 1)

The elements of purposeful investigation used throughout this dissertation include: the revelation of strategies which involve acute knowledge of the subject

matter, the ability to implement relevant literature regarding this topic, the selection of former alternative education participants who would be open for discussion, observation of alternative education classrooms, construction of pertinent questions to be asked of the former participants, conducting (consensual) tape-recorded interviews with former participants, and interviews with the program director and several of the program's teachers.

The alternative education program discussed in this study is located in a relatively large Midwestern school district in a mostly middle-class suburban environment. The demographics reflect an approximately 60–65% population of Blacks and mixed races, 30% Whites, 4% Asian, and approximately 6% Hispanic. This district claims to have a national reputation as an innovative educational leader at all grade levels. The district covers over 90 square miles, and encompasses all or part of 11 municipalities.

The PI used qualitative data-gathering methods because she felt that this was the best method for answering the research questions. Qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to go directly to the particular setting in which the investigator was interested to observe and collect data. The investigator spent a lot of time actually being in a school, observing in classrooms, and meeting with alternative education staff members and former participants.

As Bogdan and Biklen (1992) pointed out,

Qualitative researchers go to the particular setting of interest because they are concerned with context—they feel that activities can best be

understood in the actual settings in which they occur. They also feel that human behavior is vastly influenced by the setting in which such behavior takes place, and hence whenever possible they visit such settings. (p. 172)

Qualitative research may include the review of transcripts relative to the participants, field notes, and audio recordings, diaries containing personal comments, memos, official records, textbook passages, and anything else that can convey the actual words or actions of people.

The purpose of this investigation was primarily to explore the impact of an alternative education program through the reflections of former participants. Further, this investigation attempted to answer probing questions about the functionality of an alternative education program, the factors that appear to be the dominant factors as to why some students were successful, the apparent intervening factors as to why some former students were less than successful when the program design was the same, how effective staff interventions were in helping these students, and how the students think their time in this program affected them.

At the inception of this research project, the investigator decided that she would include equal numbers of successful and unsuccessful students, as determined by whether or not a former participant matriculated from high school. This method was deemed by the PI as an ineffective determinant. Some of the interviewed students realized some degree of success without having formally graduated from the school district's program, and/or the alternative education program. The PI ultimately determined that whether participants were successful

or unsuccessful was primarily based upon how well these former students performed after having been in the alternative education program. The PI reasoned that she could not simply base success upon matriculation from high school, as there was at least one example of a former student who did not graduate from high school, and has yet to pursue a high school equivalency program; however, he is successful by most standards. This student has a successful career and has made positive choices. Eighteen former alternative education program students were the subjects. Some students have done well without having had a positive experience in the program; others realized some success in the alternative education program; however, they have not fared well following their alternative education experience.

### **Investigative Challenges**

There were several challenges to the investigation of this study. Some of the challenges associated with this study included: (a) securing would-be interviewees, (b) locating suitable meeting locations, (c) missed or broken appointment times, (d) scheduling time(s) to meet with the director and/or staff members of the district's alternative education center, (e) asking pertinent questions, and (f) synopsising the various experiences of former participants. It was also important that the investigator make certain that a suitable number of former students were represented and that the outcomes of their experiences in the program would lead to further clarity about this alternative education program. Additionally, it was necessary for the PI to listen to the former students without making personal judgments as to why some former student participants appeared

to realize success, while others appeared to have made poor choices either in the alternative program or in their life outside of the program.

### **Sample Selection**

The investigator utilized several methods to contact 34 former alternative education participants, as well as a number of alternative program staff members who have known several of the students for an extended period of time. The contact methods used included telephone and in-person contacts with the PI's former students and referrals from professional and personal associates. The PI approached 34 former students; however, only 20 agreed to share some of their experiences for this project. Although 20 former participants agreed to participate, the PI had to take into consideration the concept of saturation. Stipulations for participation in this study required that former students understand that they were going to be asked questions that addressed memorable alternative education program experiences. Former students were told that they would be asked questions regarding their experiences while in the program as well as their experiences after they had participated in the program. The PI chose not to present any surprise questions. Therefore, the participants were given the questions to review in advance.

Each participant in this study was required to complete a consent form, which was stored in a secure location along with participant information. Participants were allowed to discontinue involvement in the study at any time during the interview process up to the initial submission of the PI's dissertation. If any respondent became uncomfortable during or after the interview, he or she

would have been dropped from participation in the study. No participants decided to quit.

Although confidentiality was assured, some former participants remained reluctant to share their experiences and were very guarded about their privacy. They let the investigator know that several things caused them to be suspicious about participating in this investigation. Other former students were afraid that they might be violating conditions of parole, or that they had warrants that might be called in if they were contacted by university personnel. Some others failed to see any benefit of their reliving a past that they seriously wanted to place behind them.

The investigator ultimately decided to interview only 18 of the former alternative education students. The 18 selected former students were those who were most willing to be open during an interview for this investigative study, and who also met the selection criteria without experientially saturating the study. Participants had to have been in the alternative education program between Grades 6 and 12, for at least one year. A necessary component for involvement was that former participants were currently between 18 and 33 years of age. Considering that all of the participants were of an age of majority, each former participant was able to legally sign the consent form, respond to each interview question, and agree to be tape recorded during this study.

### **Summary of the School District's Alternative Education Program**

The cooperating school district in this study describes their alternative education center as a place where at-risk students receive more personalized



support in both academic and social progression. While this at-risk program places a strong emphasis on nurturing academic success, learning to successfully adapt to limitations and boundaries within society was even more consistently promoted. Although graduation from high school was desired, learning to appropriately function in society was the more prominent desire and focus in the program. Participants were expected to become more responsible after completion of the program and demonstrate the life, academic, and behavioral skills learned from their participation in the alternative education program.

As a result of the district's policies relative to behaviors, all of the students in this study were assigned to the alternative education center due to unacceptable behavioral issues. Typical alternative education students in this district may be those who: (a) are deemed to be frequently disruptive to the educational process, (b) may feel that others, primarily teachers, are picking on them for no cause, (c) display behavioral or emotional problems that adversely impact student learning, (d) demonstrate a clear and present danger towards others or themselves, and/or (e) seem to be unable or unwilling to follow directions. Many of the potential alternative education students act as though school rules do not apply to them. Some students eventually recognized the error of their ways, while other students were intent upon testing the behavioral limits set by the school district.

Anger management and behavior modification techniques were the most frequently implemented disciplinary strategies during the time most of the PI's interviewees participated in the alternative education program. School district personnel, however, refer to the alternative education program as a non-punitive

program. Instead, the program is meant to direct students toward success in the general education classes through innovative teaching strategies, better access to counseling and/or social services, more individualized instruction, flexible scheduling, a more supportive classroom atmosphere, and a student/teacher ratio of no more than 15:1.

### **The Selection Process**

If a student is referred to the alternative education program, that student has been deemed to be overwhelmingly in need of more acute care than the home school believes is tolerable in its educational setting. As a result, the assigned student remains in the alternative education program until such time as the student demonstrates more appropriate behavior. The building administrator, psychological examiner, and the alternative education director make the final decision as to whether a student qualifies for entry into the alternative education program. Students remanded to the alternative education program are initially deemed to be either nearly incorrigible or a constant behavioral problem.

### **Student Assignments to the Programs**

Some of the major reasons students are assigned to the alternative education program are: (a) students are disengaged from the learning process and are creatively disruptive to the learning process of other students; (b) students are violent toward others to the point that they become a threat to others or themselves; (c) students are repeat offenders relative to stealing, inappropriate sexual escapades, or running away from school; and (d) a large number of

students benefit from a small group setting due to their inability to act appropriately within the general education population.

### **The Former Students**

This investigation drew from the information and experiences provided by former alternative education program participants, alternative education teachers, a counselor, and the present director of the program. Information collected from these interviews and observations, along with testimonials from 18 students, was analyzed and interpreted to determine whether the former students felt as though they realized personal success and/or a lack thereof, during their participation in this program.

### **Participant Observation**

Participant observation is a form of participation where the researcher actively engages in the environment of the study (Dewalt et al., 1998). The PI in this study was a teacher participant and a student participant observer (p. 261).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher (referred to as PI in this study) can play one of four roles in qualitative research. The PI can immerse himself/herself as a participant, maintain complete separation, participate as an observer or act with complete separation as an observer. In this particular study, the PI's primary role was to act as an observer; however, the PI acted as a participant as well. The PI conducted interviews, which required the asking of scripted questions (audio-recorded), and advised participants of their role in the study.

The PI met with former alternative education students at various times and locations. Meetings tended to predominately occur at the PI's public school, a neighborhood library, and different fast-food locations. The average length of meeting time was between 35 and 90 minutes. All participants were required to sign a consent form. Participants were granted anonymity, were told that their information would be destroyed shortly after the PI's doctoral defense, were notified that they would be tape-recorded, and had the option of withdrawing from participation at any time before the final submission of this dissertation.

Through an exploratory case study design, the experiences of these former alternative education participants were addressed. As recommended by Patton (1990), "some data triangulation was used to support the credibility of the investigation" (p. 57). There were a number of sources of data collection including structured and unstructured interviews with teachers, administrators, some parents, and former alternative education participants.

This exploratory design was chosen due to its flexibility and because it is appropriate for getting at the meaning that individuals place on their school experiences, both in alternative education settings and in the traditional school environment. A considerable number of researchers have placed an emphasis upon understanding how individuals behave once they have become accustomed to a particular environment, and how those behaviors are affected as a result. Researchers such as Yin (1994) felt that case studies were a preferred plan of action when the researcher has only minimal control over a situation, as well as a

particular topic and/or focus that the investigator has little control over events and when the focus is on a modern occurrence within some real-life context.

The PI used qualitative data-gathering methods because it appeared it would be the best method for answering the research questions. Qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to go directly to the particular setting in which the investigator was interested in observing and collecting data. The investigator spent at least two weeks of cumulative time actually being in the alternative school, observing classrooms and meeting with alternative education staff members and former participants.

As Bogdan and Biklen (1992) pointed out, “qualitative researchers go to the particular setting of interest because they are concerned with context—they feel that activities can best be understood in the actual settings in which they occur” (p. 172). They also feel that human behavior is vastly influenced by the setting in which such behavior takes place and hence whenever possible they visit such settings.

The kind of data collected in qualitative research may include interview transcripts, field notes, and audio recordings, diaries containing personal comments, memos, official records, textbooks, and anything else that can convey the actual words or actions of people. Former alternative education students, who were interviewed by the PI, demonstrated a willingness to contribute information that may be of use to others curious about this relevant and increasingly critical topic.

The PI has for several years held an active interest in alternative education. As a result of this interest, the PI's original concept was to interview 18–20 former alternative education students between the ages of 18 and 33. The former students who agreed to participate in this study were asked to share some of their personal experiences associated with alternative education. Most of the former students were willing to speak in a very open manner, as long as the PI used pseudonyms and the record of their experiences would be used solely for the purposes of this dissertation and would be destroyed shortly thereafter.

### **Developing the Investigation**

The PI began this study bearing full knowledge that the chosen dissertation topic would need to be a theme of personally noteworthy interest and intrigue in order to sustain the PI's interest for an extended period of time. The study of this school district's alternative education program upheld the power to both maintain and captivate the investigator's interest.

Prior to the actual investigation and interviews associated with this topic, the PI became more knowledgeable about the general issues, research, and numerous works of literature about the topic of alternative education. There exists a plethora of information on this subject, which allowed the investigator to sort through a significant amount of literature. Most of the literature was supportive of alternative education programs (if they are properly run); however, there were other bodies of text that were less than favorable regarding the topic of alternative education.

### **Schools Are Resorting to Removing Students**

The Texas Education Code details the discipline, law and order regulations enforceable for safe schools to exist (Texas Education Agency & Texas Juvenile Probation Commission, (2000). The law outlines some reasons why students can be removed from their regular classroom settings:

- Offense of assault or terroristic threat
- Use or selling of illegal drugs, alcohol, and/or abuse-able glue and paint
- Public lewdness
- Retaliation against any school employee

Students may also be removed for violating the student code of conduct that is created by individual local school districts at their discretion. A student may be expelled if he or she:

- Uses, exhibits, or possesses a firearm, an illegal knife, a club, or a weapon;
- Engages in aggravated assault, kidnapping, criminal mischief, murder, felony, or indecency with a child; or
- Continues to violate the district's student code of conduct (TEA, 1994).

In order for alternative education programs to achieve positive outcomes, the number of students in disciplinary alternative education programs must decrease, and the number of days spent in the alternative settings should be kept to a minimum. These students should receive educational counseling and other support services needed to cause true behavioral change and conflict resolution. The law states that the quality of education in alternative programs

must be equal to that of the regular school settings, and high standards must be maintained for all students.



### **Chapter Four: Results**

The results of multiple interviews with 18 subjects who experienced the studied school district's alternative education program are as follows. The subjects' voices are the quoted or block quoted material in their case study. No citations are used in the case studies because it is understood that only the case study subject speaks in the case study subject's section.

#### **The Case Studies**

This research was conducted with interviews of 18 former students from one alternative education program. Through the interviews, information was obtained about the participants' experiences in the program and their lives after leaving high school. The PI found that the former student participants who agreed to contribute to this study were mostly willing to share their life and school experiences while in the program and after their alternative education experiences.

A number of the former students exposed a good deal of raw emotions once they were assured that this study was not for reasons of interrogation. A number of students had to be convinced that this was an investigative research study. They were also assured that their contributions might help lead to further studies regarding how to improve upon alternative education. The PI clearly stated that this study was by no means some type of punitive consequence.

**Case study #1 – David.** David is a handsome, energetic, intelligent, personable, and charismatic 25-year-old who was very open to participating in this study. It actually appeared as if David was being presented with an opportunity to relieve himself of some issues he had suffered with for a noticeable period of time.

I became a participant in the alternative education program after my parents were told that I suffered from some sort of learning disability.

They weren't sure what the disability was, but *they* told my parents that I may have been ADD. Whatever was wrong with me, it caused me to act out in classes. Mostly, I acted out in classes because I didn't understand a lot of the schoolwork that they wanted me to do.

David was an easily distracted student; teachers told David's parents that he wasted time by disturbing other students, was often noncompliant, and submitted incomplete schoolwork. David's teachers implied that he often compromised the instructional process and interfered with the learning of other students. David adamantly disagreed with his teachers and thought that he was no more disruptive than any other student. David thought his teachers were just mean and picked on him (most of the time), for no good reason.

The general education classes didn't mean much to me. At least for me, when you're not school smart, you get so bored and embarrassed that you start doing things that you're not supposed to do and you can start getting into trouble.

I didn't feel that any of the adults at my traditional school cared about me, much less that I suffered from any kind of special needs. Some teachers treated me like an idiot, but I thought that they should have really been doing their job and teaching me, even though I wasn't the greatest student and I acted bad a lot of times.

Following a number of parent/school conferences, David's parents reluctantly agreed, after strong suggestions from the school, to allow him to participate in the alternative education program. Once David realized that his parents were in agreement with the school's professionals, he was dismayed by their decision. David felt as if his parents were agreeing with the enemies, and that he did not have in say about his life plans.

The smaller classroom sizes and the chances to get along with students who had hard times in school just like me made me feel better about myself. I didn't feel like I was the only dumb kid in school who wasn't getting things right.

David felt that the alternative education teachers appeared to be more concerned about him becoming a *test ready* and well-behaved student than helping him to handle his personal circumstances. David felt nervous, with no one to share his pain, and desired to live like a normal teenage kid. David wanted to be heard regarding his basic wants and needs; however, he initially seemed unable to express his full feelings to school professionals.

A lot of times I got schoolwork that I didn't understand and I didn't really feel that the teachers were going to go out of their way to help me to

understand. I did not have a good relationship with the teachers because they just really didn't seem to care about me. I think that the teachers there only tolerated me, and they just tried their best to get me ready to go back to my other school.

While David did not consider his experiences with the alternative education teachers to be the most educationally beneficial, the camaraderie between him and other students was described as an asset. "I met a lot of students who were in the same boat as me, and that made me feel like I wasn't the only kid in school who had struggles in an out of school." David did well during his time in the alternative education program; however, the program did not make enough of an impression upon him to complete his studies altogether.

Two years after participating in the alternative education program (Grades 7 and 8), David felt more confident about returning to the traditional high school. Although David continued to feel academically challenged, he felt that he had absorbed some compensation skills, and was certainly more able to express himself and his needs. However, his confidence was to become both shaken and short-lived once his environmental circumstances had grown particularly burdensome.

David's home life had always been exceedingly dysfunctional. David's mother and father had long been heavy drinkers. In addition, David's sister was morbidly out of control with her drinking. When David entered the ninth grade, his dad was cautioned by doctors that it was imperative to his health and well-

being to discontinue drinking altogether. David's dad chose not to surrender to the advice of his physicians and was pronounced dead a year later.

While David's dad had been a heavy drinker, he was also the primary financial provider of the family, earning a very nice salary. David's dad was the only adult in the home who could minimally control his violent, drug-addicted, and promiscuous daughter.

Just when I thought that things in our house couldn't get worse after my father died, my sister and my mother continued to fight like cats and dogs. My mother couldn't deal with me or my sister and stopped being involved in our education. My mother acted like being a single parent was too much for her.

The strain of attempting to raise a difficult daughter and a challenging son, led the mother into the arms of another, often drunken man. David's mother appeared to have completely lost control of her disrespectful and challenging daughter. David's mother was exhausted both emotionally and physically by her daughter. As a result, the devotion that David's mother had once demonstrated toward his receiving a quality education seemed to have become one more load upon her now overly weighted shoulders.

David's mother very nearly collapsed under the pressures of single parenthood. The seemingly unmerciful stress exacerbated her already prominent drinking habit, and she buckled under the pressure. Once David's mother submitted to her depression and self-medication, David was left to be an ill-prepared man of the house.

My mother decided to just leave us alone. My mother left our house and moved in with her new boyfriend. Her boyfriend lived about 40 miles away from us and we didn't see our mother a lot. Then, my sister got pregnant and moved into a new place with her boyfriend.

All of these transitions left David feeling alone and drove him into a mode of personal survival. David, now alone in the family home and in the 11th grade, decided that he would drop out of school since he had no rules, boundaries, guidelines, or parental support. However, David's overwhelming responsibilities and lack of maturity became too much for him to handle, and he dropped out of school.

I didn't feel that the general education school system supported me. Instead, they really seemed bothered by me. We kept hearing how no child was supposed to be left behind, but I sure was. Nobody for the school called to check up on me, they just left recorded messages. When the messages weren't returned, they still didn't try to see how I was doing. I got more help and supervision from neighbors than I did the school system.

Although David could not cite any reasons to return to any school setting, one of his neighbors convinced him to reenter the alternative education program in hopes that he would at least obtain his high school diploma. So months after having dropped out of school, David agreed to return to the alternative education program; however, David's return was simply a temporary attempt to please the neighbors who he knew deeply cared for him. No matter how much he knew that

his close neighbors desired for him to finish school, David's immaturity, lack of personal restrictions, and lack of enthusiasm about school, caused him to make the decision to drop out of school and begin to use his natural charisma to become a salesman.

Upon David's return to the alternative education program, David did find a special teacher, whom he found to be nonjudgmental and out of the ordinary relative to his previous experiences. David began to embrace all the positive attributes the special teacher bestowed upon him. The special teacher in his life encouraged him to put into effect his natural abilities: a winning personality, charm, charisma, and unique interests.

Shortly after David's short reentry time spent in the alternative education program, the lure of his independence weighed heavily upon his decision to quit school for good. The special teacher who held special significance in David's life was unable to compete with David's independence and liberation. The family home was paid in full upon David's father's death. This financial freedom led David to believe that he could live as he chose without interference from anyone. "I absolutely hated the traditional school environment!" David said.

If my family hadn't broken up, I would have probably stayed in the alternative education program until I graduated. At least in the alternative education program, I felt like there were other kids like me, and I had also met a special teacher who cared about me.

I was never an angry student, but I was a frustrated one. How come the teachers didn't understand that I was a child with grownup

problems? For the most part, people who should have been protecting me didn't protect me. I didn't feel good about being a student in the alternative education program. I wanted to be smart and the teacher's pet. I knew that what I wanted from different schools was never going to happen.

Ultimately, David dropped out of school prior to graduation. Although David did not graduate from high school, he has become a contributing member of society. "I always knew that my life was full of helpful possibilities. I knew that I had more to offer than the schools gave me credit for."

Subsequently, David's most positive attributes have allowed him to progress in spite of his noncompleting of high school. True to David's beliefs, he did get a lot of support from others and presently works in an industry that provides a good living. David also has a wonderful fiancé, is purchasing his own home, and has accepted his sister's shortcomings.

I know that I need to get my GED in order to do all that I want to do in life, but I don't have the time to complete it right now. My life is still really good without a lot of education, and I know that I have a lot of people who support me either way.

True to David's beliefs, he did get a lot of support from others and presently works in an industry that provides a good living. David also has a wonderful wife, is purchasing his own home, and has accepted his sister's shortcomings. David's sister is now the mother of two children, who have been removed from her custody as a result of her violations of parole, including



continued drug use. David has been instrumental in helping his mother to abstain from drinking; however, he has not yet obtained and/or given any indication as to the importance of completing his GED.

Alternative education was basically good for me, but I think that most of the teachers need to be trained better in how to treat kids. I don't know if it's true or not, but I did feel like some of the teachers were not working from their hearts, but they were just there to get paid. As a salesman, I know when someone is just b\*##@!+\*## just to get paid. If teachers are going to say that they care about kids, then they should really mean it.

There were a majority of assets and some deficits during David's participation in the alternative education program. David felt that he received more support and concern from the alternative education staff than at any time during his tenure in the traditional school. One particular teacher stood out as a trusted mentor and confidant. David was also a popular and friendly student who could relate to those students with whom he shared circumstantial and/or environmental conditions, which were out of their control. In fact, he was a favorite of many alternative education staff members because of his natural charm and charisma; however, he began to understand that charm and charisma will only go so far in either an educational setting or society at large.

David was offered opportunities (decidedly by the alternative education program), to share his innermost feelings with counseling specialists in order to discuss his dysfunctional family life and its influence upon his productivity (or the lack thereof), in particular. Unfortunately, David made the decision to attend the

counseling services sporadically. David missed a significant number of sessions which might have allowed his mother and him to possibly work through some important matters. David and his mother needed to primarily discuss topics such as the effects of residual damages, which could be attributed to his father's death, his mother's abuse of alcohol, and his sister's variety of problems.

Throughout the entire process to help David get himself on the right path, David determined that his best option was to take some time off from school. Unfortunately, David has never returned to the alternative education center specifically, and/or the public school in general. Still, David considers himself a success since he has a good job and states that he is very stable regarding his finances. The PI hopes that David accomplishes all that he thinks is within his control; including a quality education. Presently, David's mind is made up to believe that he will always make a good living (due to his work efforts and confidence) and that he will get around to his high school diploma when he gets the time to do so.

**Case study #2—Sharon.** Sharon was eloquent, charming, and willing to share her experiences with the PI. Later, it would be discovered the Sharon is still attempting to purge herself of a history that she'd rather forget and underlying anger she needs to address. Sharon initially thought that everything about the alternative education center was negative. She was filled with anger about her environmental circumstances. Sharon did not view herself as out of control. Instead, she thought that she and her siblings were targeted for failure. Sharon's initial resentment was brought

about due to her belief that there was some sort of conspiracy plot against her and her family members.

I ended up in the alternative education program because my teachers and others involved in my education thought that I was too opinionated, smart-mouthed, obnoxious, and undisciplined. They just placed me there and I had no choice in the matter. They just decided that I should go there.

After all, my siblings had been there so why shouldn't I?

In the beginning, I thought that some of the adults were a bunch of white, racist teachers who looked down on us. They looked down upon the way we dressed, the way we smelled, and how our hair was all messed up. We were just other *things* from Kinloch. We may as well have been dogs. They didn't treat you like a person, they treated us like an item, or at least they treated me like an item; rather than a person.

Sharon determined that the alternative education program, as it related to her, was an unnecessary evil. Sharon thought that she was wrongfully placed. Yet, over time and several introductions later, Sharon began to agree that the alternative education program might be an appropriate assignment for her after all, since she did realize that she had problems that were both academic and behavioral. Sharon liked to believe that she was much different than her peers from the neighborhood.

It was embarrassing and humiliating, but mostly it was because I was so angry. They had a voice, and I had no voice. I had no control over where I went to school or what happened to me. They made the decisions and

they carried out their plans. They put me in the program and I thought it was personal because I didn't have anybody to speak up for me. I didn't have anyone to support me. I was ill behaved, but I was just a kid. I was thrown in with losers. I wasn't supposed to be there with them. It seemed like our whole Kinloch community seemed to be thrown in there. There may have been other kids in there, but I don't remember them. So, it was mostly kids that I knew.

She knew that her environmental circumstances were similar to those of her peers; however, Sharon thought that she had dreams, ambitions, and goals beyond her surroundings and the absence of support from her home. Sharon admitted that her initial focus was based on obtaining material goods in order to feel successful. As time has passed, Sharon is much more appreciative that she has obtained a quality education and is very saddened by the fact that she was not able to persuade at least some of her peers to work toward achieving the same goals as she had set forth for herself.

At first, I saw the alternative education center as a bad place. It was always somebody white who had a title and a voice who put us there. We weren't people to them; they weren't trying to help us; at least that's what I thought at first. It's like they just gathered us all in a box and sent us there. Later on, some teachers actually took an interest in me and they helped drive my instruction. They helped to push me, and showed me that there were alternatives to what I was doing. After awhile, some of the

teachers seemed so nice and helpful; the little *Ice Queen* in me began to melt.

Sharon stated that she initially hated going to the alternative education center. It appeared to the PI that Sharon was confused about her placement and appeared to feel that authority figures within the school system were not protecting and providing for her and her siblings; rather, she appeared to view them as adversaries. As a result, Sharon felt powerless and resentful.

I didn't like a lot of those people. It was like they had to be after us, because my brothers and sisters were all put into the alternative education program or special education. Every one of us, I mean we ain't all crazy, they must be crazy. They had to be pin-pointing or targeting us. With my momma being crazy, it didn't help us.

The greatest obstacles to me being there were people who didn't even know me, but treated me like I wasn't a person. Instead, they treated me like an item and my parents never had opinions about whatever they were doing to me. If my parents had any opinions, they didn't express them to the school. It was like I couldn't win for losing. My mom didn't say anything, they didn't show up for anything and they didn't talk to people at the school. When my mother did show up, she was always embarrassing and still didn't have an opinion. My circumstances weighed heavily upon me. There are things that I still find hard to put into words, not because I don't remember, but it's the painful part of my growing up. I mean, as teachers were trying to teach, I would be sleepy and they didn't

seem to understand that maybe I had been up all night because my parents were fighting or there were fights in the neighborhood that lasted all night long. They never knew because I didn't think they cared enough to ask me. My own mother was an obstacle. My mother was like one of the kids, it's hard raising your mother. It was also hard listening to teachers whose instructions meant nothing to you when you were hungry and your life was unstable. At one point, we were taken away from the school because my father was accused of some not so fatherly things; well he was accused of molesting his daughters or abusing us. When they came to get me, I didn't know what was happening, I just knew that I spent about two weeks in some people's home, who I didn't know.

The alternative education program housed other children from Sharon's neighborhood whom she considered to be routinely badly behaved. Sharon could not imagine that she was placed in an environment that was beneath what she was for those students who weren't trying to do anything positive in school. Sharon defended herself and knew how to speak the language of the streets; but, she felt certain that she was going to be successful one day, and that these students were probably going to end up to repeat the cyclical patterns of their environment (having children too soon, drugs, laziness, dependence upon the government, etc.).

I got along with the other kids, if I liked them that day. If I didn't like them that day, then I had to handle (take care of) mine. I think the teachers could have helped me more, but they started out treating me like I

was so stupid or so dumb. They talked down to us; however, they started to warm up to me though, and began treating me better. They started helping me turn some of my bad behaviors into benefits. Because I could be so argumentative, they told me that I could be a strong debater. They helped me to turn around some bad things I had done, and showed me how it felt so much better to do things that would make me successful. I still had to fight though. I had to fight in the 'hood [neighborhood], and I had to fight in school; both physically and mentally.

Sharon remained a functioning angry person; however, she began to use anger to her benefit. She allowed her anger to mentally battle anyone who disbelieved in her.

God and my angel teacher helped me to deal with the anger, but I'm still pissed. I felt like I was swimming upstream, even though I liked school and I liked schoolwork, I didn't like school rules. There were just too many of them. If you're constantly told that you ain't nothing, you ain't never gonna be nothing or if somebody's always pulling on your coat tail to do something, it's hard. I had things to do at home; I was handling the bills, helping to raise my younger sisters and brothers, and helping my mother to manage the household. I was confused, and turned around.

Sharon did acknowledge that in spite of numerous obstacles, there were also great assets during her time in the alternative education program. "My assets during my time at the alternative education center were my grandmother, my

angel teacher and some other special teachers.” After some time in the alternative education program, Sharon eventually became a successful student.

During my time at the alternative education center, there were teachers who began to believe in me. These teachers taught me to rise above my environmental circumstances. They assured me that, while I lived in the community, I didn't have to allow it to consume me. There were some teachers who cared about me. I wasn't just another number to them. They pushed me; they instilled in me a desire for success, so I began to want to be successful.

These teachers also showed Sharon how the very qualities that many of the traditional school teachers considered deficits could be converted into assets. For example, one teacher, whom Sharon refers to as “my angel,” showed her how she could use her outspokenness to become one of the best debate team members. This teacher challenged Sharon to exercise her persistence and determination to become an even better student by selecting five words from the dictionary daily. Sharon was asked to write down the word and use a dictionary and/or thesaurus in order to locate the word's meanings and proper usage.

Even though it got on my nerves to have to work on these words every night, it did help me to improve my vocabulary and the way in which I speak. I further developed these skills once I was back in the traditional school setting. Another teacher knew that I had always struggled with communication arts. I felt like reading sucked, but math was great.



While I was being assisted, I still didn't know how much time I was going to spend in the alternative education program. I ended up spending one and a half years in the program. Those teachers and one teacher from the traditional school setting are involved in my life to this day because they chose to become involved. They were much more involved than my parents.

Sharon's parents defy definition. The PI, having been introduced to Sharon's parents, could not imagine how Sharon and some of her siblings managed to survive and rise above such familial dysfunction. Their apartment was filthy; the younger children were in soiled clothing and made several attempts to ask their unresponsive mother if they could have something to eat. Unfortunately, the PI met the father while he was in such a state of mind that he was unclothed, but for a pillow covering him. Sharon was so embarrassed by her home life that she did not try to explain the goings-on of her family until some years later.

I can't explain my parents' lack of involvement, but I can tell you about it. They were the most unconcerned parents that I knew. I can tell you that they may have been responsible for our miseducation. My mother and father had always disappointed and embarrassed me. My mother wasn't much involved in the education of my siblings and me. My father, who is dead now, loved drugs way more than any of his 10 children! My parents allowed decisions to be made about their children's education without very much input from them.

Sharon felt that nearly every adult associated with this school district, and the schools which she and her siblings attended, was purposely trying to sabotage any success that they might have realized. Sometime afterward, Sharon realized that adults within the alternative education program were trying to help her understand that while she may have to assume a leadership position in her home, she would be regarded as a child within her alternative placement. Sharon was so accustomed to adult responsibilities within her family, that it was very hard for her to adjust to the program's expectations for her to assume the role of a child.

As I reflect back on my life, it is difficult for me to think about the many things which most of the traditional education teachers did not bother to discover about me. Were they to have cared, they would have known that living in a dilapidated housing project was neither my, nor my siblings fault. One of the traditional school teachers visited my home. If other teachers had done the same, they would have realized that we shared our apartment with a lot of roaches and rats, we actually had roaches on the outside of our front door!

Sharon was so embarrassed by her surroundings that she apologized continuously for all of the clutter and lack of appropriate caretaking in her home. She knew that there were some things outside of her contiguous environment which could have laid a positive foundation for at least her and the other children in her family. Sharon hoped that all of her dreams would be realized and that her dreams would someday become tangible.

My alternative education teachers and one traditional teacher became my surrogate parents and caretakers. They bothered to ask questions and to determine how best they could help me. I still wish that my angel teacher was my birth mother. I don't understand sometimes why her own children treat her the way that they do. I should have been her child! It's hard, it makes me depressed sometimes, and it makes me question God. I'm thankful though because I still get to see my angel teacher.

Our clothes were dirty because most of the time my mother didn't have the money to go to the laundry mat. They didn't know how hard it was to focus on school when you're hungry, when your lights have been shut off, or that you had stepped over a dead or drugged out person in the hallway, just prior to running to catch the school bus.

My alternative education teachers and one traditional teacher became my surrogate parents and caretakers. They bothered to ask questions and to determine how best they could help me.

Sharon clearly did not know what she would have done without the help of adults within the alternative education program, as well as some adults outside the school environment who realized her struggles and tried to help as much as possible. Sharon stated that some of the struggles she feels are attributable to having been left by her mother and the feelings of abandonment that soon followed. Once again, Sharon was basically on her own, and left to depend upon her own skills and talents in order to be more successful. Sharon had relied upon the assistance of others before; however, this situation left her feeling lost and

alone. She did not know how she was going to proceed, but she knew that she would somehow beat the odds against her.

Some years after I became very close to my angel teacher, my dad was transferred from St. Louis to Arizona. My father was not transferred for a job, but was sent away to a federal prison in Arizona. Following his release, my mother opted to take her three younger siblings to join their father. Her mother told the four older of them, you're on your own, and you'll have to make it; I can't take care of all of y'all. I was 15 years old! I will give my mother credit for giving birth to me; however, there was no turning around when my mother left the older of her children, to make it the best way that we could. She just left us to fend for ourselves. We were deserted by our mother and faced one of a child's greatest fears, abandonment.

I didn't know how I was going to make it after being abandoned by my mother, much less, continue in the traditional school once I was dismissed from the alternative education program. Was I going to be supported? Were they going to look down on me? Would I continue to get the help I needed?

Sharon had only recently returned to a traditional school and was unsure about her future following her mother's decision to relocate. Fortunately, one of her former alternative education teachers allowed Sharon to live with her and her son for one year until the teacher was married. Sharon was more than grateful to the teacher, but so very angry with her mother for once again disappointing her by

demonstrating her once again illogical decisions. This teacher helped Sharon to improve upon her study skills, join the volleyball team, and make honor roll for the first time, and assured her that she needed to allow her persistence to overwhelm her tiredness and study words the teacher had designated for the evening, as well as complete her homework.

During this time, I was working two jobs in order to purchase a car. Just as I had gotten use to Mrs. K. making me look up new words every night, she got married and I had greater concerns. Where was I going to live? How was I going to be able to take care of myself? What school was I going to attend? Thankfully, I was able to pay cash for a car before I had to leave Mrs. K.'s home. I was also privileged that the traditional education teacher provided me with money, clothes, food, and most importantly, continued to express her beliefs in me. She told me that I could accomplish anything that I worked hard to achieve.

After Sharon's stay with the alternative education teacher, she moved in with a cousin who helped see her through to graduation from high school, where she was chosen as one of the class speakers. With encouragement from former teachers/surrogate parents, she enrolled in college. When Sharon was told that she needed remediation prior to actual enrollment, these caregivers and others tutored her through to college graduation, with honors.

"I presently work for the federal government as an IRS special agent. I will never forget the love, investments and kindnesses bestowed upon me," declared Sharon. While Sharon was participating in alternative education and

receiving support there, a fire was lit under her. Sharon looks back at the state of affairs of her life and the lives of others.

I would like to think that I am a much better person as a result. This group of educators taught me to pay it forward just as they had chosen to do.

When I look back about the things that happened to me and ask why, it's just like those people who want kids and can't have them. I'm sure they ask why, in the same way that I ask why I was born to the parents that I got. Living in Kinloch seemed to be unfair, but I felt my family's whole circumstances were unfair. My mom is still crazy, I think that my mother should get some kind of disability check, or be placed in a program. Let her see how it feels!

Near the conclusion of this interview, the investigator certainly detected a good deal of lingering bitterness that Sharon felt toward her parents, as well as how Sharon held on to lingering pain from how much suffering she had endured during her young life. Sharon simply could not understand why she seemed born to shoulder so much pain and the experiences that caused her to endure so many tragic experiences. Although Sharon witnessed the lives of other children within her neighborhood, she felt that she was so different from them. In Sharon's mind, she knew what she planned for her future. Sharon planned to be wealthy, have her own house, and to own a red sports car.

I continue to be embarrassed and angry about my upbringing. My mother and father were so stupid! They didn't seem to care about their kids at all! If they had cared, the teachers in the regular school would not have been

able to do what they did to me and my sisters and brothers. Every last one of us was either flunked a grade, sent to the alternative education program, or put in special education. They did not do us right and I'm still kind of pissed! My mama is so crazy. She has lived in Nashville for about five years now and is always asking *me* for money because she gambles my sister and two brothers' disability checks, when I'm trying to make it myself! Plus, my mother doesn't or didn't even show up for my sibling's IEP's. She is just as disinterested in them as she was with the older set of children. Happiness or contentment comes in spurts. Why did it happen to me that my mama's crazy and my daddy was in prison and on drugs? Why did I have to have so many sisters and brothers? Why did we have to live in such poor conditions? It seems unfair to me to this day.

"I go through bouts of depression, mostly because I am concerned about my mother's constantly bad behaviors." Sharon makes attempts to assist her mother in restructuring her life; mostly to no avail. "I worry about the futures of my younger siblings and whether they have the abilities to overcome many of the same hurdles I faced." Three years ago, Sharon moved to Ohio in order to try to escape her past. "I had to go away, to get away." Sharon is still working on self-progression in order to address her personal demons.

There were some things that Sharon did not want to expound upon. Sharon did not desire to have the PI delve into much information about her father and his incarcerations. While Sharon touched upon the subject, she did not want to talk about those uncles who had tried to seduce her in one way or another and

caused her to feel that she was degraded within their presence. Sharon never thought that she was responsible for their actions; rather, she was aware that their actions were detrimental to the entire family.

Discussions about my father are very painful. My father never worked one day of his life, had all of these kids, and was no kind of father to any of us. Wouldn't you hate to talk about a person like that?

Due to Sharon's frequent negative experiences with teachers and other adults in the traditional classroom environment, she initially felt like a target at the alternative education center as well as the traditional school. In actuality, Sharon *was* convinced that school personnel were against her and conspiring to make certain that she would be a failure and continue the cyclical path of her predecessors. As a matter of fact, Sharon thought that since her mother did not pay taxes, her children were doomed to receive an inferior education.

Sharon adamantly seemed to believe that many adults were against her because she was a little black girl who openly shared her feelings and offered too much verbiage. Sharon felt that sharing her opinions seemed to annoy many of the adults. Sharon felt that she was being purposely overlooked when it came to opportunities to share information. Even as Sharon tried to input information, she felt as though she was so disliked by so many teachers, that they preferred that she remain quiet at every turn.

There has been a lot of stuff I have shared with you about things that have happened to me. You should remember the time when my mother had given me \$400 dollars she had gotten in federal aid. Remember that there



was a teacher who saw the money and thought that I had stolen it? What the teacher didn't know was that my mother felt so weak to my father. My mother knew that I wouldn't give the money to my father; no matter how many times he asked, but she wasn't sure that she could be strong enough not to give it to him. If you remember like me, I became violent and it was like they were always trying to push my buttons. I couldn't believe that they were going to take the only money my family had for the whole month. I felt like my mother had trusted me, and here these teachers were trying to take the money from me. I could not accept that teachers were doing this to me. I guess they were so use to kids like *us* stealing.

I was mad at you [the PI] at first. I thought you were conspiring with them when you walked away from me to talk to them. I didn't know at the time that you were trying to explain my situation. I only knew that I seemed to have to handle a lot of things at home and when they took that money, they didn't know that that money wasn't just about me. It was about my family and how we were going to make it through the month, and my mother's dependence upon me.

In the end, I think that the alternative education program was mostly good for me. I don't like how they label kids instead of trying to work harder with them. I'm not sure that I ever belonged there, or if it wasn't just that they wanted me *and* my siblings to be there. Maybe my siblings and I were just the kind of kids that they thought needed to be

there. We were poor, black, and had no parents to support us or to ask questions about our placements.

Sharon felt that she and her peers probably knew more about their educational needs and endeavors than many of the adults who thought that they knew how best to help these students. Sharon certainly knew that she was an original, who was confident and defied any one to tell her differently. Sharon held on to dreams and aspirations that she was determined to fulfill. She was sure that one day she would have a beautiful apartment, a college degree, and a red sports car.

I can say that there were some adults in the program who seemed to care about me, but there were others who didn't want me to ask questions or be curious about things. I see that as racist, when they encouraged the white kids to ask questions and to discover things. What, I wasn't good enough to ask questions without being looked at as annoying? I believe that everyone should be treated equal about everything. I can only hope that the alternative education program looks at their program being more equal to meet all of the students' needs more carefully.

Sharon and the PI concluded their interview session by discussing words of advice that Sharon had previously discussed with the PI. Sharon wanted to be assured that the PI was committed to the advice that she had given with heartfelt emotions. "Do you remember that I asked you not to judge students by their appearance or behaviors?" The PI responded affirmatively; however, Sharon felt the need to reiterate the advice which she had previously given to the PI. "I'm

gon' ask you again to never presume to know what a child has gone through *before* you greet them at school."

Upon referral to the program, Sharon compared herself to an "Ice Queen." She initially felt certain that no one could penetrate the solid walls of anger she felt about her nearly untenable environmental circumstances. Fortunately, Sharon began to warm up to and was supported by a number of alternative education employees who chose to make varied investments in her because of her obvious strengths and fortitude. Sharon is a success story in many ways. She typifies the character traits of someone who demonstrates self-esteem and perseverance beyond that which the PI believes that she (personally) would have been able to endure. As a result of mutual affection and admiration, Sharon and the PI have agreed to consider each other as motivating factors in each other's lives.

**Case study #3—Jamal.** Jamal ended up in the alternative education program because, as he put it, "I was just a bad-assed little kid who got to be a bad-assed teenager." Jamal made it clear that he was a patently disruptive student. Jamal was prone to fighting students or staff, walking out of class at will, and cursing anyone who disagreed with him and/or disturbed him.

I wasn't trying to do no homework, and I didn't respect nobody who didn't respect me. I knew that my grandmother was always goin' to take my side. My grandmother always protected me and wasn't scared of nobody at school.

Jamal was retained in second grade due to what the school determined to be a serious learning disability and a diagnosis of ADHD. He and his younger brother lived with their grandmother and grandfather. “My grandmother didn’t think that I shoulda’ flunked, and she didn’t think nothing was wrong with me either.” Jamal’s grandmother articulated to school personnel that she had accepted Jamal’s issues; however, she actually remained in denial. Jamal’s grandmother in reality felt that if his academic skills were severely below average, it was due to inadequate instruction, and that if he behaved poorly or distracted other students, it was because teachers elected to single out Jamal and to pick on him.

I don’t know what they thought was good about them keeping me in the same grade two times. I wasn’t gon’ change. I kept on doin’ the same bad things for a whole lot of years, and I didn’t learn a damn thing that really helped me in my life. I mean, what was their point, I didn’t care about learnin’.

Jamal made it as difficult for other students to learn as he felt it was for him to learn. As well, Jamal derived great pleasure from unnerving the teachers. If Jamal could unsettle his teachers and/or other adult authority figures enough to scream and yell at him, then he felt satisfied to have accomplished something other than being bored by information he didn’t understand.

It seemed funny to me when I could make the grownups mad and then they would tell me to go to the PI’s office. They didn’t know that I wasn’t scared of no PI. He was short, and old, and I got to show that I wasn’t

afraid of him. If he bothered me, my grandmother was gon' take care of him anyway.

Jamal's grandmother certainly did come to his rescue and fought the school establishment until the conclusion of his sixth-grade year. By this time, Jamal was thought by most of the school's personnel to be incorrigible. Nearly all of the school staff appeared to believe that Jamal's grandmother had played a significant role in the creation of a monstrously behaved child.

At the end of Jamal's sixth-grade year, and his well-known reign of terror while in elementary school, Jamal was devastated when his grandmother died suddenly, during the summer between Grades 6 and 7. Jamal, for as long as he could recollect, had viewed his grandfather as a very docile man. Jamal's grandmother had quite obviously appeared to oversee/rule the family home. Jamal took it for granted that his grandfather would attempt to fill the void left by his grandmother following her death. However, Jamal was crushed when, after about three months, his grandfather moved his "other" family into his grandmother's home.

My grandmother had just been buried; we didn't know she was gon' die like that, and here this dude had two kids with another woman who was gon' try to take my grandmother's place. Hell to the no! I was not havin' it! I didn't think my granddaddy was right at all by doin' what he did. He was a old man *then*, because he was like 58 or 59 years old, but he had a 10 year old boy and a two year old baby girl with this fat *skank* [unsavory woman]!

Jamal thought that he could turn to his mother for some sort of care and consideration during this difficult period of time, in spite of her reputation as an irresponsible parent and person. Jamal's grandmother had always assumed the responsibilities of parenthood. Jamal expected nothing different than to rely upon his grandmother, given his mother's reputation for irresponsible, selfish, and outlandish behaviors. "My mother wasn't ready to be a mother. She was a kid herself when she had me and my brother. I guess I shouldna' expected too much more from her," said Jamal.

Jamal was sure that he had become accustomed to the goings and comings of his biological mother, who was only 14 years older than he. He also thought that he had for the most part accepted her lifestyle. Jamal's mother was often in the prison system due to solicitation for prostitution and/or drug trafficking. Jamal's mother was known to spend only sporadic periods of time in the grandparents' home—actually his mother's grandparents—with her sons. Jamal's mother minimally contributed to Jamal and his younger brother's upbringing and even less to her sons' education.

My mother never came to a conference or anything like that. The only thing I remember my mother doing for me that seemed to show that she cared was taking up for me when she broke out about three windows of one of our neighbors' house. What happened was, this big kid was walking his little brothers home from school and when I messed with his two brothers, he messed with me. My mother got so mad; she just got a big bag full of glass soda bottles, threw them, and broke out about three or

four of their front windows. I was glad my mother took up for me, but she had to go to jail behind it. When I think back about it, I really was the one who started the thing, but I just wanted somebody to take up for me like my grandmother did.

Instead of being there for Jamal after his grandmother's death, Jamal's mother told her children that she and her new boyfriend were moving to Colorado. Jamal was devastated. He had heard whispers about his mother; however, he did not realize that her secret life was more complicated than he had initially dared to think.

My mother claimed that she needed a break from all her stress. I don't really know what she was talkin' 'bout, 'cause my grandmother acted like she dealt with all of the stress. My grandmother was the one who had always made sure me and my little brother were protected, had clean, good clothes, a nice clean house, and good food. When my grandmother passed, I had lost my world man, 'cause I knew my mother and now, my grandfather, couldn't really be counted on.

Jamal returned to school relatively unsupported, facing several difficulties. Jamal was challenged by his grandmother's recent and unexpected death, the transition from elementary school to seventh grade in middle school, and adapting to his grandfather's new lifestyle and the unfamiliar people who'd moved into the home where Jamal had previously felt so comfortable and protected. Finally, Jamal and his younger brother were faced with their mother's decision to move,

leaving the brothers behind to fend for themselves. Jamal was so afraid of a future without his grandmother.

“I didn’t act no better in the alternative education program than I did in the traditional school environment.” Jamal continued to be a disruptive, disobedient, and unruly student while participating in the alternative education program.

Jamal was also getting into trouble within the community. Jamal began to steal from neighboring houses and businesses, regularly avoided attending school, and would fight with anyone who angered him.

I was so mad, man. My grandmother was not supposed to leave me like that. Because my grandmother died like she did, I wasn’t *trying* to learn anything while in the alternative education program. I hated the teachers, and administrators. I hated everybody except for my little brother! My mind was messed up man, and I didn’t care who I hurt, ‘cause I was hurtin’ so bad.

Jamal’s biggest obstacles to any kind of success as a participant in the alternative education program could be directly related to his grandmother’s death and his grandfather’s indiscretions. The grandfather’s indiscretions led to the subsequent upheaval of his family. Jamal felt that his grandfather’s secret life was simply thrust upon him and his brother.

“Couldn’t no teacher help me, man. I was lost. I didn’t care nothing ’bout no alternative education program.” As a result of Jamal’s attitude and emotional instability, Jamal’s first stay in the alternative education program was of little benefit. Jamal’s initial introduction into the alternative education program was



abruptly halted when he committed a crime that resulted in his being locked up within a juvenile detention facility.

“I came back to the alternative education program, where they said, ‘I don’t know how you made it to the eighth grade.’” Upon returning to the alternative education program, Jamal continued to be a seriously angry and emotionally tense teenager. Since his grandmother’s death, Jamal felt lost without any direction. His grandmother had always done the job of protector and decision maker.

I stayed in the program for another year, but I didn’t learn too much, excep’ that life is hard and not fair. The teachers may have cared ‘bout me, but I was in no shape to care ‘bout anything except for the pain that I was feelin’. My mom heard about how bad I was doin’ and finally stepped up, [did the proper thing]. My mother let me drop out in the eighth grade and move to Colorado in order to stay with her and her new husband.

Jamal’s mother did not force him to attend school once he’d moved to Colorado. In fact, Jamal was free to do whatever he wanted, as long as he did not interfere with his mother’s and stepfather’s lifestyle. By this time in Jamal’s life, he did not feel that he was capable of being a good student.

That was the way my mother had always been. She never wanted me or my brother to keep her from livin’ her life. When I looked around at other kids mothers, I didn’t feel like my mother was *ever* really meant to be a mother. She just didn’t seem to be responsible for that kind of job, even

though she let me come and stay with her for awhile in Colorado, she still didn't act like a mother. Since we only got 14 years between us, she didn't seem like a mother. I thought Colorado was goin' to give me a better kind of life. I thought that I was gon' do better, but me and my stepfather didn't get along, because he was always beatin' up on my mom. When I saw him beatin' up my mom, then I wanted to beat him up. So then, I got kicked out of their house and was homeless, in a place where I didn't know nobody excep' my mom and her man. I ended up getting in touch with my grandfather, because I couldn't take it any more in Colorado. My grandfather told me that I could come back to St. Louis and paid for my bus ticket. I was so happy to get away from Colorado and I thought that my grandfather was goin' to be my salvation. But, he didn't tell me that his girlfriend wasn't goin' to let me stay with them. So, I came back with no place to stay and didn't go back to school.

Amazingly, Jamal was taken in by the former neighbors whose windows were previously broken out by Jamal's mother. The family encouraged Jamal to return to school; however, once Jamal left their home, he was worried by more pressing issues than educational endeavors. "I had moved in with my girlfriend and got her pregnant. I thought me and my girlfriend really loved each other, but we fought all the time." The couple's troubles really exacerbated when Jamal cut off a small portion of his girlfriend's finger. The incident was a significant enough feature to be reported upon as a televised news story.

The girlfriend forced Jamal to leave her apartment, and so, Jamal found himself once again without a place to live. After some months of living on the streets, Jamal found retreat in short housing stays with friends. Although Jamal remained out of school, he assured his friends that he would never become burdensome. Jamal didn't attempt to further his education; however, he desired to find a way to better himself.

As a result of his self-reliance, Jamal has persevered. While he never seemed to believe that he would be in any way academically successful, he has for the most part overcome some huge obstacles. Jamal maintains a job as a result of embellished credentials, has his own apartment, supports his daughter, and owns a nice car.

While Jamal's self-determination is an asset, his temperamental outbursts are still intact and definitely detrimental. Jamal has been reprimanded for two other serious assault charges. In spite of some positive accomplishments, and although he has not served time in a criminal facility, Jamal is presently on probation. Fortunately for Jamal, he has been able to maintain the aforementioned assets.

Unfortunately, Jamal's grandfather, his partner, and Jamal's mother have no meaningful relationship with him. However, Jamal has become an independent individual who can appear to be an extremely charming person. All the while, Jamal appears to remain in need of counseling and mental support. "I'm a calm person, as long as nobody messes with me."

Jamal makes it clear that the alternative education program did little to assist or benefit him, in terms of the individual that he has become. “I can’t say whether the people in the alternative program could have helped me or not. They probably tried, but I was so caught up [absorbed], in my own problems that I will never know.”

Jamal was fueled by anger, resentment, and betrayal prior to his involvement in the alternative education program. By the time Jamal was referred to the alternative education program, he didn’t believe that he could trust any one of the people who attempted to help him, since Jamal was experiencing an empty life as a result of his personal tragedies. In spite of different options presented to Jamal by the alternative education staff, Jamal continued to be confused by the whirlwind of a life he was experiencing and eventually dropped out of school altogether. While a participant in the alternative education program, Jamal was offered counseling (including grief and behavioral), home visits with his grandfather and partner, as well as tutorial services. Most staff members were aware of Jamal’s conflicting personalities and lifestyles; however, there seemed to be no follow-up from the school when Jamal dropped out entirely and was remanded to the criminal justice system. Jamal continues to be mostly unsuccessful in his life choices. However, he continues to be a work under construction.

**Case study #4—Gina.** Gina appeared soft-spoken, shy, and somewhat reticent about the discussion, which she and the PI were about to begin. The PI was later to discover why Gina was so hesitant; however, as

one of the PI's former students, and with some encouragement from the PI, Gina began to settle into the discussion. The PI determined that Gina was embarrassed to discuss some of her failures to her former teacher. She recognized that her former teacher was willing to listen to anything that she had to divulge. "I ended up in the alternative education program because I was a really angry problem child. I was bad in my classes on purpose because I got a lot of attention from teachers and from other kids".

Gina wanted to make other students laugh, became a class clown, and hoped that she could encourage other students to take learning no more seriously than she. Gina was not to be laughing, or seeing any humor in poor school performances after she was told that she was a failing student. Gina was soon to be notified by school professionals that other educational options were being reviewed in order to provide the best educational services for her.

Gina admitted, "I got suspensions and detentions all the time, even though I knew my mama was gonna be mad at me." Gina created problems both at home and school. She worked successfully toward an expulsion from school altogether. Yet, she was afforded an opportunity to participate in the alternative education program as a final educational plan of action. Gina described some of her misgivings about her education and future:

I didn't think there was much anybody could do for me then. I was determined to be stubborn about what I wanted to do, even if they did send me to the alternative education program. I just didn't want to be in school

at the time, because I just didn't see where it was leading to. How was what I was supposed to be learning going to help me later on in my life?

Gina was more concerned about what boys thought about her, since she struggled so deliberately to draw attention to herself. She later discovered that the attention she was receiving from a number of boys was negative and less than beneficial. Sadly, Gina did not find out how very little the boys cared about her until her life became significantly altered.

I hadn't been in the alternative education program but about three months when I found out that I was pregnant. My mama was so mad at me, because I was only 12 years old. She didn't seem to recognize that I was mad at myself too. I didn't plan on getting pregnant. It just happened.

After I had had the baby I was madder than I had ever been before. I have to admit that I blamed everybody but me for getting pregnant. I was mad to have to get up with the baby all by myself, because I would be *so* tired. My mama didn't help me with the baby much, and I was mad that my baby's so called daddy, wasn't nowhere to be found after I had the baby. My baby's daddy went on with his life with other girls, *and* he got to go back to regular school.

Following the birth of her child, Gina returned to the alternative education program feeling overwhelmed with responsibilities, yet she remained underwhelmed about school. Gina did not see any way that further education was going to benefit her at that time. Besides, she was tired of asking family members to babysit, drive her some place, or help her out monetarily. At this time, it

seemed more important that she find employment in order to be a responsible mother.

I felt like a failure and that there was no way I was going to get all the help I really needed. I didn't feel that anybody there could understand me. How many of those people knew what it was like to be a mother by the time you were 13-years-old and try to go to school, too?

Gina admitted,

I just wasn't sure anybody in the alternative education program could help me. But, I can say that they did try to help me with tutoring and stuff; when I had hard times trying to keep up with my schoolwork. I was so tired most of the time, but different people at the alternative education center were helpful most of the times I needed them. As a matter of fact, I was surprised that most of them didn't seem to look down on me, like a whole lot of people did.

Gina's single mother tried to accept Gina's newfound motherhood without judgment as well; however, her mother had three other children to attend to at the time. Now, Gina compares her mother's life to her own. Gina's mother had warned her numerous times about the intentions of many young boys. Her mother had also shared her own experiences about having a child too soon and how burdensome a decision such as this might adversely impact her young life.

My mother wanted me to be better than her. My mother had had my oldest brother when she was a teenager, and told me that she couldn't do all that she wanted to do in school because she had made some bad

choices. At this point, I thought that I had let my mother down. I didn't meet her expectations at all.

The added responsibility of Gina's child was a tremendous strain on the family's dynamics. "My mother thought that if she was hard on me, I wouldn't have another kid." Gina began to feel resentment toward her mother and became a smart-mouthed burden upon her mother. Gina felt that her mother was not entitled to give her advice, and that she was going to need to create her own destiny.

My mother nagged at me all the time about doing better in school, and told me how hard I had made things on her. I got so depressed and started to go back to some of my old ways. I started getting into trouble again, and when teachers and counselors tried to talk to me, I wasn't *trying* to hear them. I wanted to do my own things and I wanted to do them in my own way. By that time, my grades *and* behavior were getting really bad.

When I was in class, or I was being tutored, I acted like I was paying attention, but I really wasn't. The biggest obstacle to me making better success was really me. As an adult, I know now, that I had needs that I couldn't really tell no one about, I didn't listen to what people who knew more than me said, and I wanted to do my own things without anyone bossing me around.

Gina felt the school made efforts to adequately support her, but she was not receptive to their attempts to properly address her varied needs. However, she reluctantly continued to participate in the alternative education program, until the



seemingly unimaginable happened. At age 14, Gina became pregnant again. This time, Gina's mother implored Gina to get an abortion. Her mother could not imagine being responsible for yet another unexpected responsibility. All of Gina's mother's begging could not convince Gina to undergo an abortion. In fact, Gina considered her mother to be thinking selfishly and failed to understand how her having another child was going to adversely affect the family. Gina imagined that she could get a good job while in school and that there would be more food stamps to benefit the family as a whole. Gina recalled her hope and trust:

This baby's daddy was really cute, so I knew that I was going to have a fine [good looking] child. The baby's daddy had promised me that he wasn't going to leave me like my first kid's daddy. He said that he wanted me to have his child, he was going to treat my first child like his own, we were goin' to stay together, and that he was going to man up [act responsibly], if I had his child.

Nearly all supporters felt that they were being sorely tested by Gina. Certain alternative education personnel recommended that Gina be referred for psychological testing by the school district's psychologist, and that she consult with a contracted community-based counselor. Gina didn't think that she was doing anything that created a need for her to speak to an adult who was just going to agree with her mother. Although Gina was tired of the battles between her and her mother; she thought that their issues could be resolved without her seeing someone who wanted to manipulate her mind. However, counseling surprised and changed her in ways that she could not have imagined.

It did me good to talk to people who I think really knew how to help me and let me talk without interrupting me. It was good to be able to tell them about how I and my mother weren't getting along. I told them about how my mother even told me that I was disgusting to her. My mother said none of my other kids are hurting me like you! I was able to tell them how bad I felt about myself and about my low self esteem. I told them that sometimes I thought my mother was jealous of me, because I was so young and had a tighter body [nicer figure], than her.

It was of great benefit to Gina that she received the psychological and counseling help that she apparently needed. Gina was holding in so much hurt and pain. It is the belief of the PI that Gina's mother and Gina were overwhelmed. It must not be overlooked that Gina's mother was also young. Gina's mother could relate to becoming a teen mother, and thought that she had done an adequate job in sharing her hardships with her daughter. Gina's mother had a hard time facing the consequences of becoming a grandmother of two while still in her early 30s.

Counseling also allowed Gina to disclose the one secret that she had promised not to divulge to anyone. Gina appeared to be a promiscuous child; however, her promiscuity was not without its own story, which affected her life immeasurably. What Gina had to share would relieve her from a lot of pain.

I had been molested when I was a little girl by one of my mother's boyfriends. I knew that if I had told her, she wouldn't believe me and go against me instead of him. I didn't think I was worthy of anyone caring

about me and that me being raped was my fault. Through counseling, I learned that it was not my fault that I was built different from most girls my age, and that regardless of my build, nobody should have touched me in a wrong way. Since I didn't care about myself, I let boys make a fool out of me. I learned that it was normal for someone who had been done like me to be angry. The counselors told me not to keep blaming myself, or my mother. Instead I should be reviewing my actions and why, as well as, what seems to have made me feel so unworthy of the very best. I was so happy that I had got counseling before I came back into the alternative education program. When I came back, I was more able to pay attention, follow directions and be more respectful.

Unfortunately, after about four months, Gina's second attempt at participation in the alternative education program had become too stressful for her. Gina had made what she thought to be every attempt at playing catch up, while trying to parent two babies without a great deal of familial or other support. At 15 years old, Gina made an independent decision she viewed as her only remaining option. Gina left both her mother's home (to stay with a relative) and the alternative education program. Gina deemed the alternative education program incapable of further helping her to address her particularly overwhelming needs.

Gina opted to quit school with a ninth-grade education and to singularly attempt parenting her two children. The second child's father abandoned his responsibilities, as had the father of her first child. Gina began to realize that she

had only herself to hold responsible for her children, since the fathers were not legally being held responsible.

I thought that what I needed to do was to stop going to school and do what I needed to do for my kids. My mother made me feel so uncomfortable at home, and she made it clear that she wasn't trying to raise anymore kids. I didn't want to hear anymore nagging from her, so I figured that I could always go back to school, since I was so young, and get a better education. Sometimes people from the alternative education program would call me, and I was surprised. A coupla' times, two teachers even came by one of my relative's house, trying to find me. They just wanted to see how me and my kids were getting along and whether I was going to come back to school or not. That was really kinda' nice and it made me feel like more people cared about me and my kids than I thought.

Several years after Gina's departure from the alternative education program, Gina actually kept her personal promise to return to school. Gina earned her GED. Currently, Gina works at a family-style restaurant as a hostess and maintains her own apartment with a young man she describes as really nice.

"I haven't had any more children," she said, smiling proudly. "My two *babies* are in elementary school now and doing way better than I did. My kids get good grades and they know that their mama supports them the best way she can."

I don't plan to stop school with just my GED. I know that I am going to go on and do better with my life than what I'm doing now. This is all just

temporary until I can do better. I'm going to be successful and maybe even rich.

Gina was always a student with a good degree of potential. The PI is not certain whether Gina realizes the actual benefits she received during her tenure in the alternative education program. It appears that Gina significantly benefited from the psychological and counseling services that were made available to her. Otherwise, she may not be as far along in recovering her true identity and abilities as she thought.

Since this interview session, Gina and her boyfriend have become engaged and are doing well. Gina's children continue to perform well in school, and Gina said, "I am determined to complete college and become more educated than I am." Gina has become a manager at her place of employment and continues her voyage toward self-improvement.

I finally hooked up with a man who wants to see me do my best. My fiancé is so supportive. He wants us to have a good life together and he keeps telling me that I can be anything I want to be. He is just simply wonderful!

I think that I am now on the path of correcting mistakes that I made in the past. I have learned a lot and I continue to try to prove to my mother that I am doing well. My mother acts like she thinks I'm doing better; but she acts like she's going to see if my fiancé and I can make it work before she really gets excited about my life. I hope my mother begins to feel like I'm getting my life together.

Gina has continued to act in a mature manner. Since our interview, she has maintained a desire to complete her educational goals and claims to take good care of her children. Gina credits the alternative education program with providing nonjudgmental advisement and counseling. She felt that the alternative education program provided her with the support and compassion that she would need to analyze and make better decisions about her life.

As a result of Gina's involvement in the alternative education program, she was referred to organizations which offer charitable services for both parent(s) and children. These services allowed Gina opportunities to meet her family's basic needs. Even though she did not graduate from high school in the traditional manner, she is still proud of herself and her achievements. She felt that the alternative education program was a good choice for her, and claims that she wishes she could have continued in the alternative education program through to completion of high school. The alternative education program made several attempts to help Gina in a variety of ways. Gina, who is in her 20s, is working toward success in her life because the alternative education program did not fail her and she did not fail herself.

**Case study #5—Elan.** Elan had long been ostracized by other students for demonstrating effeminate mannerisms. "I guess they thought I should not care about my appearance as much as I did," he said. No matter how other students viewed Elan, he seemed to be confident.

I was so different from almost all the other kids that I knew, but at an early age, I knew I wasn't going to worry about what other people thought about

me, because I have my own flair and swagga' [style]. Plus, I knew they was just jealous, because I *was* the answer!

Although Elan maintained his own style and independence, the taunting of other students began to evolve from verbal assaults directed toward Elan to being pushed and shoved around as he proceeded about his school day. In the beginning, Elan took the bullying without retaliation. After a while, Elan let his feelings be known and began to change his manner of dealing with the aggressive behaviors of some other students.

Yes, I did become an angry student. Nobody deserved to be treated like I was. I was supposed to be able to come to school, do my *thang* and just be left alone. A lot of kids was so mean to me; when I didn't do nothing to bother them. I started out in school acting so quiet, and well-behaved, because that's the way my daddy had raised me. My daddy had also raised me to believe in myself too. I am so proud of what my father instilled in me, because he let me know that you first have to be true to yourself. My father understood me. My father told me that, even a dog will start attacking if you keep on picking on it.

The bullying continued, even as Elan tried to fend off those students who wronged him. Elan withstood the bullying and teasing for as long as he thought that he could. Elan began to fight back constantly, with his father's approval. He was sent from one administrator's office to another for fighting, posturing to fight, and disruptive behaviors.

I was not one of those students who was afraid to tell an adult at school that I was being bothered. I kept telling PIs and teachers what I was going through, but they didn't act like they gave a damn. I think that I was a joke to them, because of the way I carried myself and the way that I dressed. It seemed like they kinda' agreed with the students for bullying me. They acted like I deserved to be picked on or something.

Elan was sure at the time, in Grade 9, that he was nothing more than another misunderstood heterosexual student with a great sense of individual chic and finesse. He said, "I didn't understand why I kept being called a faggot, a b#\$@\*, and a lot of other bad names. How could anyone expect me to keep taking all that abuse and not react?"

Elan could not believe that after all of the abuse he had suffered, *he* was the one who'd earned a reputation as a disruptive and defiant student. Elan thought that this placement was extremely unfair, and that the general education teachers and administrators appeared desirous to be rid of him. "I think that they thought I was too unique to be tolerated".

Elan was assigned to the alternative education program shortly after a fight that administrators deemed to be of such viciousness that they felt the alternative education center would be the right placement for him. While school administrators viewed the fight as the impetus for their decision to send Elan for further assistance at the alternative education center, Elan had gained a reputation as a continuous detractor during most of the instructional processes. Elan viewed



staff professionals as individuals who desired to cause him harm and to protect the bullies who often antagonized him.

That was not right, that they chose to send me away and let these other kids stay in regular school. They were the ones doing me wrong and most of the time they weren't even getting into trouble for attacking me! But, I thought about it, and maybe I needed a change. Maybe it would be a good thing for me to leave the regular school and try to fit in somewhere else.

Elan had high hopes for the alternative education program. "Maybe kids who knew what it was like to be different would act different and be nicer." Elan could not have been more surprised by the lines of similarity between the alternative and traditional school settings.

The alternative education program started out as a nightmare. If kids had messed with me before, they really started messing with me in the alternative program. I was constantly bullied, called names and hated by the other students. I began to hate going to school. I would use some of the best excuses in the world to get out of going to school if I could help it, because now since I was at the alternative education center, I was in there with a lot of kids who thought that they were bad ass gang bangers. A lot of the guys who were in there, thought that they were bigger and badder than me. They pushed and shoved on me while I was just trying to walk down the hall, and called me some really bad names that I hadn't even heard of before.

A very special teacher began to notice the bullying directed toward Elan and extended a listening ear, and a great deal of concern about his well-being. Elan began to establish both an encouraging and nurturing relationship with this particular female teacher. The special teacher filled a void in Élan's life and thoroughly convinced him that there are teachers who really care.

Elan was able to share a great deal of personal information with this special teacher, as well as to count upon her for encouragement. Typically, the special teacher would take time away from her schedule to work with Elan and to help him through more difficult times. Elan had a winning personality which endeared him to those professional staff members who were more liberal thinking.

I could tell Mrs. Y. about anything. She listened to me when I talked to her about how my mother had basically abandoned me. Mrs. Y. and I became really tight [close], and talked so many times. Since a lot of the bulling took place in the cafeteria, Mrs. Y. would let me eat lunch with her. Me and her talked about how much my mother leaving me had had a lot to do with why I was really so angry. Sometimes, when Mrs. Y. and I was talkin' and she was tellin' me 'bout her own kids, I would wish that Mrs. Y. was my mother and then maybe I wouldn't be so mad or feeling like I was missing out on something.

Elan's earliest years with his mother had been spent tortuously. Elan's mother had been addicted to two things that overrode her ability to love Elan as many mothers do; drugs and men controlled her emotions, while her son paid the price of a child damaged by relationships that adults forced him to withstand.

Elan felt that the only individual he could trust was his father, but understood that his father was not all powerful. His father couldn't always be there to protect him.

My mother would be anybody's woman, as long as they were able to pay for what she wanted. My mother neglected me so much, that when I was five years old, my father decided that he had to take me in for my own good. I can truly say that my father was good to me.

Fortunately, Elan's father became an emotional safe haven for him once his mother completely terminated any responsibilities and/or care giving of Elan. "My daddy was my best friend and hero", he said. Elan's father assumed the sole parenting responsibilities of Elan and became involved in every aspect of good parenting, including quality school participation by the time Elan was approximately seven years old. Elan loved his father, and felt that any time he needed his father to support him, his father would be there.

Once Elan had reached his teen years, Elan's father, however, could not protect his son from the consistent bullying he continued to receive, even while in the alternative education setting. Elan's father contacted the school often in order to assure the school staff that he was committed to the well-being of his son. Elan's father realized that he could not be present to observe his son throughout the entire school day; however, he hoped that by showing the professional staff that he was an involved parent, they would make his son's needs a priority.

The teachers or administrators said that they were going to help me and said that they were doing all they could do, but what they did was not ever

enough. Whenever they talked to my father, they always acted real friendly to him and made my father feel like he didn't have nothin' to worry 'bout. They made my father feel like they were helping me to work on doing better in school. I felt like they were lying to my father, but now that I'm 26 years old, I understand that they couldn't keep their eyes on me, by myself, all the time and that they were probably doin' the best that they could for me. I don't think that anybody could have stopped me from what happened to me in the th<sup>th</sup> grade. I had took all that I was goin' to take from anybody!

One student, who was particularly bothersome toward Elan, pushed him to the point of breaking. The student had been persistent about bullying Elan. The student bullied Elan into a handle-it-now-or-never situation.

I wanted to let other students know that, while I was different from most other students, I wasn't going to be pushed around anymore by anybody. One teacher was standing in the hallway watching students move through the hall. Me and this other student, who had been bothering me all the time, were alone in the classroom. While we were in the room alone, this student kept callin' me some really nasty names. This was a kid who was always pushing and shoving me, and making fun of me; usually while a lot of other kids were watching, but this was goin' to be for the last time! Elan grabbed a pencil and literally blinded the other student in one eye. After I stabbed the other kid in his eye, the alternative education school tried to expel me from school, but my father still supported me. I told my

father what had happened and even though my daddy wasn't happy about what I had did, he still took up for me. Me and my daddy were upset when we found out that we were goin' to have to go to court to try to keep me in school. My father didn't have a whole lot of money, but, he still got a good lawyer to try to protect me and get me back in school. My daddy didn't want to see my life wasted by this situation.

Were it not for the fact that Élan's father found ways to hire a seasoned attorney to represent his legally minor son, Elan would have most assuredly received criminal charges of a much more severe nature. Instead, Elan was accused of assault and battery related to self-defense. Elan was happy that he suffered no real legal consequences; however, he vowed that nothing like this situation would ever happen again.

About six months after my fight, they let me come back to the alternative education center and I want to thank them, too, for supporting me. I felt bad after what happened, but at that age, I didn't want to keep thinkin' 'bout what happened. I was jus' so happy to be back in school and tryin' to get my life back together. I wasn't worried 'bout what happened to the other student, 'cause he shouldnah' teased me and messed with me the way he did. Believe it or not, there were those who thought I shouldnah' did what I did, but there were also a lot of people who supported me at that time. A lot of people knew that I was being bullied and teased more than a lot of other kids. Probably, they knew more about myself than I was willing to share with myself. Now that I am older, I can appreciate all

of the help that I got at the alternative education center. When I was down, I could always talk to Mrs. Y. and she would talk to me and listen to me talk about whatever I was going through. Even though I had a lot to be down about a lot of times, I still thought that I was goin' to be successful. They helped me in the alternative education program with schoolwork, and we had different people talk to us about different kinds of jobs. I decided that I was going to be a hairstylist and I'm workin' on that dream. I'm good at doin' hair and I believe that one day I will have my own salon in "Cali" [California] because I'm determined to be successful.

My father wanted more than anybody for me to be successful. I couldn't believe it when he died without any kind of warning. My father wasn't old and I thought I would have him for a long time. I cried for so long, because he didn't get a chance to see me make it big, like I know I'm goin' to do. Also, I didn't get a chance to tell my father what he probably knew all the time. I am gay and I'm okay with that. Since I didn't tell my father everything about me before he died, I stay in touch with Mrs. Y. and she continues to support me.

Elan progressed from the alternative education program during the middle of his 11th-grade year. He returned to the general education population with a greater sense of confidence and the ability to get along better with others.

"Sometimes I was still teased, but I didn't let it get to me. Now that I have accepted myself for real, I'm sure my dad is proud of me".

I rarely think about my time in the alternative education program. As a matter of fact, I don't tell many people about it. It was a mostly hurtful time, when I thought that I was dumb and a problem to most of the teachers and other people at the school. What brought the alternative education center back to mind was when one day I was listening to the radio in the shop where I work. The show was about people hooking up [getting together], for dates. This dude came on the radio and he was talking about how hard it is to find somebody when you are blind in one eye. I listened to the voice and couldn't believe that it was the dude whose eye I had put out a long time ago. I was so ashamed. I felt like calling him, but I jus' couldn't. I'm sorry for so many things, but I know that a lot of times I was pushed to do most of the bad things that I did. I guess the alternative education program helped me. I know that Mrs. Y. helped me like a mother. Also, I believe that I wouldn't have graduated if they hadn't let me back into the alternative education program. Since they did, I can say that I graduated from high school instead of havin' to get a GED. I'm proud of getting a diploma, because my father was so proud of me.

Elan is now a hairstylist to some lesser-known celebrities in Los Angeles and claims to be enjoying his life tremendously. Elan credits his father and some of the special adults in the alternative education program for believing in him. Elan values his experiences in the alternative education program, mostly due to the adults who listened, praised, and supported him through a tumultuous period in his life.

The staff members Elan appreciated the most were those who looked beyond his exterior and were able to uncover a talented young man. In addition, Elan was fortunate to have had a father who always admonished him to believe in himself and demonstrated his unconditional love until the end. Elan is a very proud and successful young man.

**Case study #6—Nikita.** Nikita ended up in the alternative education program as a result of defiant behaviors and a lack of interest in her academic studies. Nikita elected to begin socializing with girls who derived great pleasure from teasing and taunting other girls. Nikita and her girlfriends chose to create their own social, personal, and authority-free rules. Nikita and some of her friends lied to their parents about nearly everything that pertained to their schooling and social activities.

I lied to my mother all the time and I guess she always wanted to believe me, because I'm her only child. I used to not only leave school without permission, but I ran away from home, and got involved with a lot of boys. I didn't do most of what the school, or my mother wanted me to do. I was into pleasing my friends, and having fun.

Initially, the alternative education program was another opportunity for Nikita to continue her prankish ways. She enjoyed the company of those friends who were also transitioned into the alternative education program. Nikita and her friends abided by a philosophy of defiance, disobedience, and contempt for authority figures and rules.



I wanted to act right, but I also wanted to please my friends. I wanted to be cool and be a part of the cool kids. I had the right clothes, went to the right parties, and I thought I had the right friends, even though we all kept getting into trouble and became labeled by other kids as troublemakers. Once I got to the student support center, the adults figured me out pretty quickly. They acted like they already knew that I was a wanna' be bad kid. Mostly, they were right, but there were some things about me that were real. I enjoyed lying to my mother, because she was so easy to fool. It was a game that I played with my mother, because I basically couldn't understand how she just could just accept anything that I said. My mother knew what it was like to do things that were different from what your parents wanted for you and I think that she just wanted me to know that she was going to support me while I was going through this *period*.

My mother is a white woman, who got pregnant with me in her last year of high school. My father was not only older, but black. My mother said that her parents had high hopes for her, but when she got pregnant, especially by a black man five years older than her, her parents were so mad at her! My mother said that even though her parents were mad at her, her parents loved her more than they hated her situation. Since my mother knew how tough life could be as a teenager, I thought that she could probably see through my lies and lead me toward the right path. Instead, she bought into everything I said, supported me when I was wrong and was so easy to get "over on" [deceive].

The personnel in the alternative education program were not so easily deceived by Nikita. In fact, they were inclined to see right through her. They quickly recognized that Nikita was overall a good child and student, and that Nikita had an overwhelming desire to fit in. Unfortunately, Nikita desired to fit in with the wrong students and made significant efforts to align her with the students she considered popular. In Nikita's mind, her quest for popularity was enhanced when she demonstrated that she was tough enough to be referred to the alternative education program.

I received a lot of assistance from the people in the alternative education school, but I still wanted to keep up my reputation as a bad kid in front of the other kids I knew from the traditional school. I wanted to prove, mostly when I was in front of people I knew, that I was still tough. I didn't think that there was anybody in the alternative education program who could break me down. It was so important to me that in public I acted like I was still tough and disrespectful.

While attempting to continue pleasing her cohorts, Nikita continued to defy her very involved mother, as well as school rules, in her stalwart efforts to belong. As a result of Nikita looking far older than her biological age, she began getting tattoos, piercings, and anything else that she felt her peers would condone. Nikita wanted to make it clear that she wasn't initially offered parental support and that she was by this time, raising herself and following her self-created rules.

My biggest obstacles to doing well in the alternative education program had to do with me trying to be accepted by the people I hung with, by

fighting, having a smart mouth, lying, stealing from other students and the school, and disrespecting adults. Probably though, *I* was the biggest obstacle to my success. I thought being cool and being accepted by my group was everything I wanted to happen, but I guess I ended up just being a follower. Even though I tried to fit in with my friends, I knew when I started in the alternative education program that I had the ability to be someone who could do well in school. I am intelligent, and I think that I am well-spoken. My problem, which a lot of kids face, is that I wanted to please my friends, more than I wanted to do the right things to be successful in alternative ed. or anywhere else. During the time I spent in alternative education, the teachers, counselor and administrators tried to help me. The only thing that they didn't seem to understand is that you can't help people who don't want to help themselves. One minute I was doing the right things, and the next minute I was falling back into my old habits. I don't see how they could have helped me more, when I didn't understand how to help myself sometimes.

Nikita's mother continued to work diligently with the school. Her mother attempted to entice her daughter to permanently extract herself from the peers who were certainly escorting her in the least positive directions. Nikita, however, had other plans at the time. She enjoyed the prankishness of her friends and fun they derived from both hanging out and deceiving their parents.

At this point, Nikita could often be found having run away with her abusive boyfriend. Nikita's mother was so frightened for her daughter that she

found it difficult to maintain a life of her own, considering her daughter's lifestyle had become so all consuming. Regretfully, after intermittent spurts of progress, Nikita seemed to regress into old habits. "I spent 1½ years in the alternative education program. While I was in the program, I still did things like run away from home from time to time."

I started skipping school so often that my mother's job was affected because she took off so often. I felt sorta guilty, but the guilt was not enough for me to stop doing what I was doing. I didn't want my mother to lose her job, because I wouldn't be able to get the things that I wanted, but I just seemed to be out of control *and* having fun at the same time. My needs seemed to matter more to me than anybody else. I stopped skipping school for awhile when I moved in with my boyfriend. We were happy for a short time, but, my boyfriend also knew how to play on my low self esteem when he thought I might go back to my mom's house. My boyfriend kept telling me things like you're fat and nobody is gonna' want you but me. He also kept reminding me how he had graduated from high school, and that I must have been too dumb to graduate. Even though my jealous boyfriend talked about how I hadn't graduated from high school, he made me feel like I needed him more than I needed an education. I can't believe that I was stupid enough to believe what he said, and that I didn't do what I knew was the right things to do.

Shortly thereafter, to the dismay of both her mother and some staff members at the alternative education program, Nikita dropped out of school

altogether. Overwhelmingly, Nikita had many academic abilities had she chosen to display them. Nikita was a very smart young lady; however, she often followed a path of destruction.

I guess I just enjoyed acting like I was an adult by living with my boyfriend. I didn't have to do what my mother told me anymore. It was really important to me that I could do what I wanted to do while I lived away from home. My boyfriend and I were drinking, smoking weed, and having people over all the time. Living on my own also made me feel like I was popular. My mother was so mad at me, and she told me that I was a serious disappointment to her. My mother believed that my boyfriend had a lot to do with my decision to dropout, and to this day she hates him. My mother has never seemed able to hold me responsible for anything that I did then, or do now. She preferred to blame my boyfriend, but I knew that I was doing wrong as well. Perhaps my mother was choosing to believe me because she's young also. My mom is only 38 years old.

While Nikita's mother is young, she was also productive and a well-educated woman who happened to have become a mother when she was 17. Nikita's mother was convinced that her daughter possessed qualities similar to her own. Although her mother had also become a teen parent, her mother felt that she had more than adequately raised Nikita alone. Nikita's mother wanted desperately to believe that Nikita could progress in the same manner as she had done 21 years prior.

Nikita's mother was quite distraught after her daughter dropped out of school; however, she remained undeterred in her belief that her daughter could be successful. Nikita's mother enrolled her into a private school; however, Nikita's mother's efforts yielded disappointing results. Nikita began to skip school again, in order to maintain a relationship with her boyfriend. "My mother tried so hard to help me, even though my boyfriend kept abusing me, and I kept staying with him. Right now, I have been in this relationship off and on for more than four years."

Nikita's mother has maintained unwavering support for her daughter, even after her daughter made her a young grandmother. Numerous parental warnings later, Nikita has been knocked unconscious by her boyfriend, had her eyes blackened while pregnant, and endured considerable assaults against her person. Nikita could not explain why she felt the need to continue having love for this young man, as opposed to loving herself more.

After I became pregnant, I thought things would change between me and my boyfriend, but that haven't. I am so sad that I haven't listened to people who care about me; mostly my mother. My mother has stayed on my case to finish school. She tries to have me go back to school and finish the one semester that I need before I could have graduate from high school, but I still don't listen. Now, I'm 21 and can't graduate from high school, so I guess I'm going to do what I usually do and finish things the hard way. I have no choice now but to get my GED. I can say that I have one of the most beautiful little girls in the world, but right now, I am so

ashamed that I didn't listen to my mother and the people in the alternative education program. I know that they all really care about me. My mother doesn't seem to believe that I will do what I need to do anytime soon, but I do think that I am going to make something of myself one day. While I was involved in the alternative education program, I was told that I could accomplish anything that I wanted to achieve. I can't get mad at anybody but myself. I'm older, and have to tell a lie about me graduating from high school just to get a low paying job like Bob Evans, I really feel depressed sometimes. I had all the chances in the world to do better. My mother was a role model and I chose to listen to my so-called friends instead of her.

In spite of Nikita's mother having been a teen mother, Nikita's mother has earned both baccalaureate and master's degrees. Nikita's mother is a mid-level executive in the insurance business who sustained herself and her daughter without asking for or obtaining a great deal of help from her parents, or from Nikita's father. Nikita's mother eventually purchased a very nice home and raised Nikita in a wholesome environment and an excellent school district.

Nikita's mother shared her disappointment with the PI.

I did everything that I could for her. She was given every opportunity to succeed, but chose not to do so. I can only hope that she will get herself together enough to successfully raise her daughter and become the young woman that I know that she can be. Nikita needs to believe in herself,

display more confidence and realize that I will always be there to support her and my granddaughter.

Nikita disagreed by stating,

I sort of believed that I could be a successful student. I don't think that I liked the alternative education program any more than I liked the traditional school; because I really didn't like school. I liked learning, but not the way that school was being taught. I was bored and uninterested in what any of my teachers had to say. If they could have showed me how anything that they were teaching me could be used later on in my life, and made learning more fun, then maybe I would have stayed in school.

Teachers need to realize that they have to make school interesting. If they don't, then they are going to continue to have students like me, who are not dumb, drop out.

Nikita often regrets that she did not take full benefit of the wisdom she was offered while a participant in the alternative education program. The alternative education program offered her modified instruction, more extensive counseling, and home visits. However, Nikita failed to recognize the achievable profits of those services until she dropped out of school.

Once Nikita was on her own, she began to realize that the advice previously offered to her by various and caring alternative education staff members was based upon some advisors' real life situations, and that their goal was to help Nikita become the best that she could be. Presently, Nikita is completing her GED studies, maintaining a job, and is doing the most that she can



(as a single parent), in order to care for her four-year-old daughter. Nikita relies heavily upon the kindness of others (all grandparents and other family members). Without the care and concern offered to her, the PI believes that Nikita would have a difficult time raising her daughter and self-maturation.

**Case study #7—Quincy.** According to Quincy,

It's real easy to say why I ended up in the alternative education program when I was in the seventh grade. Mostly, it was 'cause I brought a weapon to school. Somebody snitched on me an' told the school about it. The other reasons why I got sent to the alternative education program was 'cause, I hung out with some gang members, even though I wasn't doin' all the things that they was doin'. Me and this other dude got caught smoking weed and cigarettes at school, *and* because I wasn't gonna' let nobody tell me what to do if I didn't want to do it.

Quincy failed to mention that he often displayed violent behaviors toward other students, as well as staff members. "I really didn't respect nobody, 'cause I didn't have real respect for most people." Quincy was a loner who wished not to be bothered. When other students delved into his personal zone of comfort, he tended to lash out against them.

'Cause I didn't care about learning, I jus' played 'round in class; actin' silly and botherin' other students. Sometimes, I would make fun of the teachers in their face, or say everything that they were saying out loud. My teachers would get so pissed at me and usually told me to go to the office. I didn't care 'bout goin' to the office, 'cause I would jus' mess

with the people who worked in the office. Plus, when I went to the office, I didn't have to do no schoolwork. Most of the time, they jus' sent me to another teacher's room and I would either lay my head down and sleep, or mess with the kids in they room too.

Following a tremendous amount of tolerance, patience, and interventions, Quincy left the traditional school setting with the singular choice of going to the alternative education program. School personnel thought this facility might be in a better position to handle Quincy's significant needs. Once Quincy entered the alternative education program, he presented himself as a student in need of very deliberate boundaries. He was defiant, obnoxious, ran away from school, and disobeyed almost every school rule. District security personnel and/or the local police were summoned to pick up or arrest Quincy on numerous occasions.

When I came into the alternative education center, I acted so bad and I knew it. I just didn't want nobody to tell me what to do, 'cause didn't nobody know how hard my life was and what me and my sister and brother was goin' through. What we went through had a lot to do with why I acted the way that I did.

The director decidedly refused to give up on Quincy. The director envisioned him becoming a lost soul without intervention from him and other alternative education personnel. The director felt that Quincy would surely become a statistical victim, destined to enter the penal system—or worse, die—as a result of his lifestyle and life choices.

My greatest obstacles to success in alternative education had to do with things that had to do with my mother, or the neighborhoods where we lived. My mother is mental to this day. Other people thought that they knew what was happenin' in our house and so other people kept callin' in on my mother, and sayin' that we were being neglected. We really was neglected, but I didn't know that back then. As a matter of fact, I didn't even know what neglected meant. I just knew that we were nasty most of the time. Our clothes and body were usually filthy. Plus, we could stay out 'til we got ready to come home and my mother didn't seem to care. Since we was roaming the streets, day and night, I guess other people thought that my mother didn't care 'bout us. Another problem was that we always had some drug dealers who crashed [stayed over] at our house. A lot of times, these people crashed in our house overnight, or worked [sold drugs] all through the night. Most of the time, these guys mostly high school dropouts, brought their girlfriends and sometimes they babies to stay at our house too. Me and my brother and sister tried to sleep, 'cause we knew that we had to go to school the next day, but sometimes we couldn't sleep, 'cause the police was raiding our house looking for dealin' [drug transactions]. Letting dealers "work" from our house was a way for my mother to get high *and* to get some money from them dealin' out our house. I know it sounds crazy now, but we was always glad when we had to go to court. We was kids, you know? We was jus' glad to get out of goin' to school and to be gettin' some new clothes to wear. When

we got new clothes and wore 'em to school, then other kids kind of left us alone 'bout being dirty and stuff. I know that I'm actin' like I was hard [tough], but my life was not good, and there were times that I was scared; especially when we thought that we may get taken from our mother. I got so tired of moving from one rent house to another rent house. We were put in and out of one of those raggedy Section 8 rent houses. Sometimes one house was right next door to the other house, but they made us move anyway.

In addition to Quincy's mother being addicted to drugs, she is also a schizophrenic. "When my mother was going through one of her changes, she acted like a baby," he said. While "acting out," Quincy's mother would threaten to commit suicide and spend numerous days in bed sucking her thumb while lying in the fetal position. Whenever Quincy's mother was experiencing an episode, she was completely oblivious to the needs of her children.

One of the good things about the alternative education center was that they had good food. I came to school so hungry, so many times, and they fed me. I was embarrassed, too; 'cause my family was always one of the *charity families* who got food and clothes at Thanksgiving and Christmas. We shoulda' been use to it though, 'cause we was also picked to get food and clothes when we were in elementary school.

Rapidly, the schools concluded that Quincy's mother was allowing her children to keep most of the food; however, her visitors often helped themselves to food, and she always sold the donated clothing. The adults who were familiar

with this family's dynamics were often appalled by the circumstances. In spite of their disdain, most refused to take a chance in making further non-edible donations to the family, because they were always disappointed by the same results.

The schools got tired of my mother. They knew that they had gave us clothes, supplies and stuff, but we didn't get to use them. It didn't take too long for them to figure out that my mother was selling the stuff for drugs.

Although the school as a whole tired of Quincy's mother's antics, they continued to support the family, for the sake of the children. Quincy did not feel that any other students could possibly have endured the drama that enveloped his life. While his upbringing was harsh, Quincy wondered if there would ever be any relief to the drama he and his siblings endured. For some years, he maintained some sort of hope. Hope eventually gave in to despair as long as they were presented with the same environmental circumstances.

My greatest assets had to be the director and one particular teacher. The director didn't give up on me. The director saw somethin' in me I guess, that I didn't see in myself. The special teacher kept telling me that I could be somebody good. The teacher even took me to her house. She lived on a farm in Illinois and had all these animals. Even though I didn't see no other black people, she didn't care and I didn't care either. I had a good time and felt like somebody really cared about me. I feel really good about the year an' a half that I spent in the alternative education program. I came in so angry and I didn't trust nobody. I didn't want nobody to get

too close to me, but they still kept trying to help me. The director said, “You aint new. I’ve seen so many like you and I aint going to lose you.”

Quincy was not prepared for the director’s persistence and desire to save him from both the streets and himself. However, Quincy had been let down by adults so many times before. “These people talked like, and sometimes acted like, they cared about me. Most though, the people I hung out with were the ones who seemed to care about me for real”. Additionally, Quincy’s gang affiliations allowed him to procure marijuana often. As a result, he smoked marijuana frequently, and felt able to relieve himself of the core reasons why he was so self-destructive.

Whether he liked it or not, the director and the special teacher were able to begin penetrating Quincy’s cold exterior. Quincy, who had not previously allowed any emotional visitors, was beginning to feel that there were adults who actually troubled themselves enough to care about him and were not going to give up on him. Quincy was relieved; however, he knew that he had plans that he felt he could not allow himself to share, or they would be barriers to their success.

I wanted to do right, but, I still didn’t act right as much as I should have. I still wanted to keep up my reputation with the people I hung out with. I didn’t want to act like I liked the alternative education program, but they really were good people. They did right by me and I appreciate that.

Those kind words having been spoken, unfortunately, Quincy began to slip more and more into his old patterns of behavior. He was several times arrested and sent to juvenile detention. Subsequently, Quincy was also assigned a

delinquent juvenile officer (DJO); however, he continued to get into trouble and was “drop dirty” (drugs in urine).

The DJO would check in on Quincy often; however, Quincy still dropped out of the alternative education program for a short period of time, in order to spend time in a juvenile correction facility after he and some of his associates were caught stealing and vandalizing neighbors, as well as for intention to distribute drugs. At this point Quincy was very relaxed about his behaviors. He didn't seem to care about how he hurt himself or others.

When I got out of “juvie” [juvenile detention], I was so ashamed to return to the student support center. I felt like the people who had believed in me before, wasn't goin' to believe in me now.

The alternative education staff was disappointed in Quincy, but they stood by him, and felt that he had made noteworthy progress. Quincy's success seemed all but fingertips away from becoming a reality. “I kinda felt like a sell-out to my boyz (friends), when I acted like I cared a whole lot about school and stuff,” he said.

“I just knew that I wasn't goin' to let them down again, but I did get out of hand again. I don't know what the hell I was thinking, but I got back in the ‘game‘ [streets]”. It seems that the only thing that reeled Quincy back into the alternative education program was reaching a personal bottom. “I got tired of being arrested, pulled over, and selling drugs along with using them.”

Quincy decided to return to the alternative education program in a last-ditch effort to salvage any sort of credibility he may have remaining and/or

another opportunity to strive toward academic success. Quincy wanted to do the right things, but his environment held other plans for him. Other young men were telling Quincy that school was a waste of time for fools. After all, they could make more in one day than some grownups made in a week, and Quincy would be better prepared to help out his family.

I was surprised that the director, the special teacher, and others who I didn't know cared about me, were really glad that I came back to the alternative education program. This time, I had my mind made up that I was gonna' do good.

Quincy did perform well upon his return. Sadly, Quincy's mother lost the final home the family rented in the area. Consequently, Quincy and his family were forced to move from the school district's boundaries. Quincy and his brother had participated in the alternative education program. Both decided after the move to drop out of school.

Presently, 19-year-old Quincy is enrolled in an adult education program. "I am going to be a success. I work hard to stay out of trouble an' I'm doing pretty good". While Quincy does not envision himself as a university-bound student, he does feel that he is ready to learn a vocational trade.

Yeah, I want to make up for the time I lost in alternative education.

Those people believed in me, even when I thought they didn't. They told me that I could do whatever I wanted to do and I'm trying my best to get my GED so I can go on to do better with my life. In the beginning, I didn't see myself as bein' anybody who could be successful. My mama



was all messed up, so, me, my sister and brother were messed up, too. My mother didn't support us at all, because she was messed up most of the time herself. My mother didn't even know who my father was. Maybe, if I knew who my father was, and if he was good enough to be a part of life, I could have learned how to believe in myself more. I can say, though, that I did have the support of some people in the alternative education program. Some of them were like family to me and I'm gonna' show them that they didn't waste their time on me. When I am successful, I'm gonna' come back and visit them. Then they gonna' know that I was worth all they did for me.

Quincy and his twin sister are really trying to pull their lives together through education. However, Quincy must let go of his obligatory feelings toward his older brother. The older brother appears to be entrapped by the street life and dropped out of school in the ninth grade. If Quincy is able to let go of those things that are not within his power to control, he should be able to accomplish the goals he has outlined for his self-improvement.

On a positive note, Quincy says that he is determined to obtain his GED. He appears to have defeated the most interfering obstacles before him, due to those adults in the alternative education program who tried very deliberately to assist his sister, brother, mother, and him. Quincy so often wondered why he was born into a life so difficult, while many people seemed to live such an easy existence.

Quincy has gotten into some minor incidents with the criminal justice system since the investigator interviewed him; however, he remains close to the director who has helped him out of many potentially hazardous situations. He has gotten into some minor trouble now and then, but he does not stray too far from the norm for fear of the director's disapproval.

Quincy's mother continues to suffer from mental problems; however, Quincy has accepted that he cannot parent his mother anymore. Quincy knew that his mother's problems could lead to his detriment, so he has chosen to take better care of the one life he can control.

**Case study #8—Kristen.** Kristen stated that she ended up in the alternative education program because she became "one of those little bad-assed kids who probably needed their ass kicked!". Kristen was making sure that she did not appear weak to the PI. Kristen wanted to feel that she was in charge of the interview, because she appeared to have a need to be in control.

I had some problems in elementary school, but, once I got to middle school, it seemed like I didn't feel anything for anybody. I didn't care if I hurt people's feelings, disrespected them, fought them, or whatever. Since I didn't care about myself, how could I be expected to care about other people? What's so crazy is that I expected everybody to respect me, but I didn't respect anybody else. I didn't seem to have any feelings of compassion for other people, and wasn't anybody gonna' tell me what to do, unless it was something that I wanted to do anyway.

Kristen often attacked other students and teachers either verbally and/or physically. She said, “The school had taken as much from me as they were willing to take, but I didn’t care.” Kristen would often defy authority figures: not following most directions, creating classroom disruptions, and not participating in the learning process generally.

Once I got to the student support center, I continued to do all the things that I had done in the traditional school. As a matter of fact, when I first got there, I think that I did worse than before matter of fact, I know I did worse. I was determined that other kids would think that I wasn’t scared of nobody. I started to dress like a dude who *banged* [belonged to a gang]. I always wore big baggy clothes and I *had* to have matching tennis shoes. Students weren’t supposed to wear caps. I would wear a cap anyway, and when they told me to take it off, I would take the cap and turn it sideways or backwards and dare anybody to tell me different.

Kristen’s teachers and other staff members tried very deliberately to help her. Kristen was offered tutoring, counseling, mentoring, and other services that the alternative education program could provide. Kristen was not considered by the professional staff members as a lost cause; however, she was considered a difficult child to address, in terms of her demeanor, attitude, and behaviors.

I was so happy that they tried to help me, but my problems were bigger than what they could do for me at the alternative education center. I was so depressed. I was depressed enough that I had tried to kill myself at least two times. Finally, they found out about some of my problems.

Immediate attention was offered to Kristen by counselors contracted through the school district. Kristen received psychiatric evaluation and treatment; however,

I didn't open up to the counselors while I was in the alternative education program. I didn't want to tell most people what I was thinking or going through. I thought that what I was going through was private and I wanted to keep it that way.

In my case, I can't believe how much those people in the alternative education program tried to help me. I practiced trying to be somebody that they couldn't *read*, [figure out] much less, get to know. But, they tried so hard to *break* me down and get me to be a better person.

Kristen entered the alternative education program in Grade 9. She appeared to have a unique resistance to authority. While Kristen appeared to despise authority figures and rules, she began to respect the few authority figures that seemed interested in her and/or caring for her.

Kristen continued to defy any school rules that were not implemented by one of the few authority figures that she respected. A number of the teachers got very little respect from Kristen if she did not respect them. Gaining respect from authority figures was one of Kristen's personal criteria.

During the same time that the alternative education staff was trying to implement school rules, Kristen was absolutely challenging the rules of her mother, a religious woman. Kristen's mother was finding it difficult to maintain her strong faith while her daughter sinned without conscience.

Kristen was stealing frequently most of the clothes and shoes she wore, doing drugs (primarily marijuana), as well as selling drugs to many of the other students.

I felt like my mother didn't understand me at all, she wasn't listening to me and she thought that church could solve everything that she thought was wrong with me. So I ran away from home a lot. When I ran away, it was usually with some boy who I knew didn't really want to be with me; especially in public, but I would go with whoever the boy was anyway.

I can look back now and say that I was the biggest obstacle to my success. I looked at myself as fat and unattractive. Matter of fact, people had been teasing me for so many years, that I did things like not eating in front of people. When I was by myself, I would make up for everything that I didn't eat around other people. I think that I was angry with other people because I was angry about myself. I didn't accept myself, so I took everything that I hated about myself out on other people. By the time I got to middle school, I had had enough teasing and hurt feelings. I wasn't gonna' take any more abuse. I was gonna' hurt other people before they got a chance to hurt me and I wasn't gonna' let anybody get in my head [bother her mentally]. I knew that there were people who cared about me also, but it was hard for me to accept any kind of help.

Although Kristen was not the most readily accepting, her greatest assets were several staff members, counselors, and her mother. "I just wasn't able to

accept how good these people were to me at the time. They really stood by me, when I didn't really like myself."

Kristen's mother tolerated Kristen's behaviors, though she did not understand them. "I was so bad and put my mother through so much heartache," said Kristen. Kristen failed to understand just how much her mother was ever present in her child's education.

Kristen's mother could always be counted upon to keep an open line of communication between her and the schools; however, Kristen could not at the time appreciate her mother's dedication to her daughter's receiving a quality education.

At the time, I thought that my mother wasn't listening to me and took church more serious than she took me. My mother thought praying was the answer to everything.

I believed in God, but I didn't think God had been good to me. Why was I so fat, confused and disappointed in myself? I didn't think that God could make somebody like me and expect for them to be a happy person.

The school supported Kristen to the fullest of its abilities. She was offered, and compelled by her mother, to take advantage of the services presented to her. Kristen was counseled, tutored, underwent peer mentoring and anger management classes, and spoke with teachers who were especially interested in helping her to work toward self-improvement.

I dealt with a lot of anger for more years than I should have let myself. I was so angry that I thought that God had forgotten me. Did I get over my anger? Well, I'm still working on that now. I'm a lot better than I used to be. I can talk to my mother, I listen better to people who are trying to help me and I have more peace within me. It took a lot work from all the people that I talked about before.

Prior to reaching an age of understanding and personal maturity, Kristen was pulled away from the alternative education program by involving herself in activities that rejected all of her faith-based beliefs. Kristen's diminished self-image had lasted for so many years that Kristen periodically lost her self-identity and self-confidence. As a result, Kristen undeservedly lashed out at others.

When I started school, I knew that I could do schoolwork. It wasn't the schoolwork, because I knew that I was pretty smart. I just had a really hard time dealing with the hurt that I got from other people. They hurt and embarrassed me so bad that a lot of times I felt like I couldn't go on. I guess my mother really prayed for me, because when I got to the 11th grade I really began to change.

Fortunately, Kristen reconstructed herself and began to appreciate the opportunities she has been afforded. Kristen has gone on to complete a two-year college degree in education. Kristen is presently a continuing student who works as a teacher's assistant. She is a single mother of one and manages to take good care of her young son, with some help from her mother.

I am a very blessed person. I have gone from an angry young girl to a 30-year-old mother. I am so glad that there were people who hung in there and believed in me. The alternative education program could not have been a better experience for me. They seemed to understand that you can't change a person until they are ready. When I was ready, they were there to help me when I was falling.

Kristen has acknowledged that during her time spent in the alternative education program, she was supported by some wonderful and caring adults. Kristen was not readily receptive to the help that was being offered to her and did not appreciate all the efforts made on her behalf; however, as time passed and she matured, she grew to appreciate the care and concern that she so drastically needed, but had previously refused to admit.

As a direct result of Kristen's participation in the alternative education program, she was afforded counseling (which she sorely needed, primarily for self-loathing), suicide prevention awareness (Kristen made mention of at least three attempts), anger management, and social workers who made home visits. The alternative program made sure that Kristen was referred to the proper service agencies and attempted to assure Kristen that they were actually concerned about her welfare.

As previously mentioned, Kristen was able to matriculate from high school and is on track to become a college graduate. Kristen seemingly could not have made as much progress without the support of the alternative education program.



**Case study #9—Jeremy.** Jeremy was a very forthcoming and amazingly intelligent young man, who was anxious to share information about himself and his experiences in the alternative education program.

I have nothing to hide, and if I can help somebody else by telling my story, then I'm all for it. I hope that those things which made me stronger in my younger life will help me to benefit someone else. I'm here to discuss some of my life experiences, upbringing, the problems I had throughout my middle and high school years, my run-ins with the law, and my experiences in the alternative education program.

Jeremy is currently 29 years old and has endured a great many life-altering challenges. Jeremy is a testament to the power of perseverance, tenacity, and resilience in the midst of hardship. Jeremy's capacity to transform adversities into advantages is quite impressive.

I was abandoned by my birth mother when I was two months old.

Following my birth mother's abandonment; I was adopted by a family in Pulaski, Tennessee. The parents, who adopted me, ran a very strict, old-fashioned kind of household. My father was the breadwinner and *required* that my mother remain the caretaker of the home. I enjoyed living with my parents, even though Pulaski was kind of country and there was very little to do. It was important though, that I felt safe and comfortable.

My life changed drastically at the age of 13. My mother was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. After she and my father received the news that she was terminally ill, my father knew that he could not be fully

responsible for a child, so my dying mother made the decision that it would be better for me to go live with my adult sister in St. Louis, Missouri.

Jeremy did not want to leave his familiar settings, but his father made it clear that child-rearing was not something that men were biologically equipped to handle. The caretaking of children was most certainly a woman's job, as far as his father was concerned. Therefore, his father appeared not to experience any misgivings about deferring supervisory responsibilities of Jeremy to his sister.

I went from a very strict household to a very free living environment. My sister did the best that she could to provide for me; however, my sister was a single parent, with three kids of her own that she was responsible for raising. So, even though my sister did her best to help me and watch after me, she wasn't able to monitor a lot of my misbehaviors during my middle school years. I needed discipline and probably a male role model to show me how to act like a man. Since I didn't have that male influence, I decided to take advantage of my new independence.

Since I had discovered freedom, I began hanging out with people who were bad influences. I started getting into a lot of trouble. I started stealing, skipping school, fighting, and challenging authority. I ended up having to do community service because I was caught stealing. At first, I was never involved in drugs in any kind of way. The majority of my problems had to do with stealing and reselling whatever we stole to make money. Of course I thought I would not get caught, but I got into really

big trouble twice. The first time I was let off, the second time I had to do community service and I was sent to the alternative education program. I was sent to alternative ed. because I was in need of help.

Jeremy's sister was very instrumental in getting him involved in his school district's alternative education program.

My sister was getting concerned about me, because I was experiencing difficulty at home, school *and* in the neighborhood. My sister wanted so badly for me to do well, so that she could fulfill our dying mother's wishes for me.

Unfortunately, their mother died one year after he moved from Pulaski. In spite of a great deal of pain and apprehension, Jeremy entered the alternative education program. He was not fully convinced that his sister had made the right decision for him, since he was still very much into the fun he was having with his "street friends" and the money he was making in order to "take care of" his own wants and needs.

Jeremy did not believe that he deserved to be placed in such a program. After all, he was not involved in any violent behaviors.

I had just started to sell and do a little weed and steal to make a little side money. I didn't think that I was hurting anybody, even though I wasn't doing my best in school either. I didn't understand why my sister thought that I needed so much help. I wasn't the worst kinda' kid out there. At that time, I couldn't believe that my sister acted like I was a menace to society.

As far as whether Jeremy considered his time in alternative education a success, Jeremy felt that the combination of assistance he received from the alternative education program's staff, as well as his participation in reaching out to the community through community service, greatly enhanced his alternative education experiences.

I responded positively to all the teachers at the alternative education center. They encouraged me and believed in me. Because of them, I began to embrace my intelligence and accept all of the possibilities that were before me.

Jeremy began to put his considerable skills to good use while in the alternative education program. Finally, he was being recognized for something positive that was based upon his considerable skills and intellect. Jeremy knew that he was a good communicator who also possessed the ability to convince others to follow his lead.

I was really good with technology and they geared me into that direction. However, I still did not behave properly from time-to-time and continued to get into some of the usual teenaged trouble.

I must admit that my teachers and counselors played a big part in helping me to believe in myself. I began to change my life around in about the ninth grade, but I still hung around with some of the same kids who were bad influences. It took me awhile to realize that they were people I didn't need to hang around with anymore.

Jeremy fell into the same trap as many other teenagers. Jeremy chose to associate with those age mates who appeared to be the most welcoming. He soon found out why they were so welcoming. These so-called fast friends derived a good deal of pleasure from behaving badly and were commonly known as troublemakers. Jeremy sought the popularity and acceptance that was shown to these seemingly popular “friends.” These “friends” seemed to have plenty of both. Jeremy was impressed by how other students reacted to them, and he was particularly impressed by the respect and/or fear the other students appeared to demonstrate.

I can thank the teachers in the alternative education program for that.

They told me so many times that I was better than what I was achieving. After a while, I truly believed them. Once they showed me the positives of getting good grades, I was really glad. I got to the point that when I saw A’s, instead of D’s and F’s, I really believed that I was capable of doing great things.

I received alternative education from Grade 8 through 9. I returned to the regular school I had attended and ended up graduating from high school. My sister and I both thought that it would be better if I moved to Memphis to live with other relatives in order to completely get myself together and move away from all the bad influences.

Once I moved to Memphis, I didn’t know anyone other than my relatives. That was really good for me so I didn’t make any of the mistakes that I made in the past. So from there, I got accepted into the

University of Evansville, and went there for four and a half years. The old ways started catching back up with me and I started selling drugs in college, but I never got in trouble from it, I didn't get caught, but I was still doing wrong things. It took me my last year, my senior year, in order for me to realize that I needed to quit acting stupidly. Even though it was late, things definitely worked out for me.

Jeremy returned to St. Louis after having completed college and has maintained a good job as a software programmer for the last six years.

While I was no longer selling drugs, I was still doing drugs; marijuana and sometimes cocaine. I did some things that I should not have done, learned from my mistakes and at this point, things are looking very well for me. I have finished my M.B.A. and I'm going for another Master's after that.

Jeremy has been married for three years. Jeremy's wife has been instrumental in helping Jeremy to deal with any residual problematic behaviors and/or dependencies. Once free of all other vices, Jeremy struggles to free himself of cigars. "I mean, I've got to have something".

Jeremy is now liberated from selling any drugs and has maintained his job at a large, well-known company. Jeremy is happily married and has recently become the father of a son. He and his wife are homeowners and are "living the typical American dream."

My life now includes being a good father, fishing, hunting, and living life as best I know how. I have reasons to believe that I will be a better father

because of my experiences. If anyone had told me that I would have been this successful, I would have thought they were lying!

Alternative education helped me to realize a lot of dreams. At first I did not believe in alternative education. When I look back, those teachers and one counselor in particular, helped me to better understand myself. I didn't think that I felt very much pain about my mother abandoning me and my sister. However, through some counseling as an adult, I realized that my mother's *and* father's abandonment had led to a lot of hurt and painful feelings. Those feelings made me think that I was not worthy of love. I look at myself and wonder who am I? I am brown, but do not have many of the features of a black person. Did my mother give me up because she was white and maybe my daddy was black? Was my mother ashamed of me and my sister and didn't want to be bothered with us? Was my daddy some trifling [petty], dude who didn't want to handle his responsibilities? I still haven't been provided information about my biological parents, but I'm trying to deal with and ultimately accept getting over a past life that I cannot change.

I had a lot of things that bothered me. It helped me to get the opportunities to discuss my problems with someone or another in the alternative education program. They let me know that they couldn't answer lingering questions about my parents, but that life will surely go on and that I should make the best of it. They told me that I had a lot of

potential, I believed them, and I believe that they are at least partially responsible for the person that I am today.

Jeremy is an outstanding young man who found the alternative education program to be of unparalleled importance during his earlier life. While a student in the alternative education program, Jeremy discovered much more about himself than the adults who understood him and invested in him originally thought. Jeremy found both male and female mentors while he was a mentee in the program.

Jeremy was given a sizeable number of opportunities to improve upon his behaviors and academic prowess while participating in the alternative education program. He will readily admit that he would not have been in a position to overcome a number of obstacles had he not been provided with the tremendous academic and behavioral support he received while an alternative education student. One of the primary credits that Jeremy gave to the alternative education personnel is that they filled him with a confidence he'd never felt before.

Jeremy now attempts to reach back and help other struggling students. He tries to always be involved in a mentoring program, and in any other way that his schedule allows. Jeremy would certainly be viewed as a student who is now experiencing a successful life.

**Case study #10—Carl.** Carl described himself:

I aint lying, I was a f#@\*&# up little kid! My parents were f#@\*&# up so what did anybody expect? My mama and daddy was both crack heads who used drugs all the time.



I was bad. I didn't think nothin 'bout going to no school. I hated school, I hated the PI, I hated my teachers and they hated me. I stole from teachers and anybody else who had something that I wanted. I would fight anybody who wanted to fight me and I didn't care if I was suspended or nothin'. If I was pissed off, I reacted to anybody. I wasn't scared of no @#\*damn nobody! I didn't care about nobody, 'cause nobody cared about me. Plus, I knew I was going to end up like my mother@#%^\*#@ mama and daddy anyway.

Following many inappropriate behaviors and Carl's unwillingness to follow most school rules, he was sent to the alternative education center in Grade 7. Carl participated in the alternative education program for about four months before he committed a crime that caused his initial incarceration into a juvenile detention center. Carl's first experience in juvenile detention lasted for two months. "Me and some of my boys [friends] were stealing from people in the neighborhood and got caught".

Pursuant to Carl's initial incarceration, he returned to the alternative education program. "There wasn't a f@#%&\*^ teacher who meant anything to me, but in my own way, I did try to get along with them som' b\*%\$#@\* anyway."

Those teachers in the support center could not break me dude 'cause I had it like that. I don't know why they kept on tryin' to make me somebody that I wasn't. I'm street man. I wasn't gon' never be what they wanted

me to be 'cause I'm *hood* [street]. That's me and that's what I want to be. I'm addicted to the streets and that's it, man.

I talked to teachers and counselors, but what they said didn't mean s@#\* to me 'cause they didn't live in my world. They was always talkin' 'bout school, school, school. They acted like school was everything. That aint my world! My world is about survivin'; it's about how you make it to see another day. I can't get that from no book, or somebody tellin' me 'bout my future if I stay in school.

Carl resisted any help and was noticeably unsuccessful in the alternative education program. He realized little more success in the alternative education program than the traditional school setting. Carl was unknowingly self-destructive, as well as seemingly not aware that he was in drastic need of support. Carl appeared to lean more toward obtaining his knowledge and training from the streets, rather than the learning he might have gathered from the public school system.

From an interview with one of Carl's previous alternative education teachers, the PI learned there were a number of teachers who found Carl to be an incorrigible student. Carl was markedly defiant and resentful toward following directions and adhering to rules and regulations. Carl seemed not to be interested in learning anything academic, and disrupted other students by taunting and threatening them. Carl seemed to give extra attention to bothering those students who were trying to better themselves.

I really wanted to mess with those kids who acted like they were better than me because they were doin' good in school. They tried to act like they were better than me or somethin'.

It was clear to the PI that Carl's parents lacked both the skills and maturity necessary to help him to be a successful student. Carl's parents gave him the freedom to do whatever he wanted and set no boundaries due to their own personal demons.

My parents didn't care what I did in school. I don't even remember them knowin' what my teachers' names was and they didn't worry 'bout checking my report card or meeting with any teachers.

Carl suffered difficulty with the structure of the alternative education program and subsequently was remanded once again to juvenile detention. The alternative education program teacher stated that "each incarceration seemed to harden Carl, making it more difficult to work with him."

The biggest obstacles to me doing well at the alternative education center had to do with me not seeing any good in me going to school. If I didn't go to school, I could do what I wanted to do. I love weed and hanging with "bammass" [backwards thinking females], who ain't worried 'bout bein' in school either.

My moms and pops weren't no examples for me to follow, hell, they didn't finish school either, what could they tell me? Them teachers didn't know what they were talkin' 'bout so they didn't know anything either. They don't know my life!

Carl agreed that the teachers tried very hard to help him; however, he was reluctant to have anything to do with academic progression. Carl did not want to have anything to do with school, alternative education or otherwise.

I didn't see no assets to me being in the alternative education program.

They tried to talk to me about my situations and what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, because I didn't think I had a whole lot of choices.

Hell, to the yes, I had to deal with a lot of things that pulled me away from school. I had a crack head momma and daddy who didn't care nothin' 'bout whether I came to school clean, or had any food to eat.

Matter of fact, they didn't care if I even went to school. All they cared about was their next *hit* [dose of drugs].

Carl was one of the residual damages of his parents' dysfunctional relationship. Carl seemed to have very little motivation to improve upon his academic and/or behavioral skills. After all, it was not going to affect either one of his parents whether he did well in school or failed miserably. Carl was one of the few interviewees who tried very deliberately to say something that he thought would get a rise from the PI. It did not work, as the PI has quite possibly heard every known curse word. The PI must admit, however, that there were some situational problems that Carl endured which surely were unsettling. As an aside, Carl's upbringing heightened the PI's opinion regarding No Child Left Behind (NCLB). What were Carl's chances of becoming a standout proficient and/or

advanced student? Carl did not seem to have parents who appreciated one way or another how Carl performed in school.

I didn't have to answer to nobody at home. Why was those people at school trying to treat me like a kid? They knew I didn't have no real rules nowhere. Them people were just stupid. If I didn't follow my parent's rules, why they think I was gon' follow their rules? Damn, they was jus' ignert [ignorant].

Carl knew that he was not very well liked by teachers or other students in either the traditional environment or the alternative education program. If only they could imagine living in the same conditions as Carl, and surviving to tell his story. Carl's story demonstrates one of the weaknesses of this school district's alternative education program. It is the opinion of the PI, that in situations such as Carl's, there should be (as much as possible) relationships built among the school, counselors, and home visits. Had Carl's home life been investigated, there might not have been the disconnection in his schooling that ultimately occurred. Additionally, the school may have acted in a surrogate family position, with the goal that whoever else had failed Carl, the school system would have been there to support and encourage him. The school district provided a number of interventions meant to help Carl. Carl did not feel the alternative education program benefited him academically and emotionally. As a result, Carl felt that since he was an academically weak student who was not good at learning, he might as well continue his acting-out behaviors as a pastime. Carl knew that he

had become a school-wide nuisance; however, he deemed being a nuisance better than being bored.

My parents wasn't no kind of help to me at the regular school, and they wasn't no kind of help at the support center either. They just didn't care 'bout me, or my sisters, or my brothers. They didn't come to nothin' at school and they didn't even know my teachers' names.

My teachers' were always calling my house to tell my parents what I was doin' bad at school. My mama and daddy got to where they told me not to give out our phone numbers, 'cause we was always getting new phone numbers. They said they was tired of hearing 'bout me and talked 'bout how the teachers should do they job and make me mine [obey] on their own.

Carl lived a life that no child should ever have to experience. During the interview, Carl tried to maintain a tough exterior; however, his vulnerability was all too familiar to the PI.

I show [sure] was difficult for the teachers cause I didn't care an I didn't want to learn nothin' too much. I was very angry 'cause I felt dumb and I thought school was dumb. I wanted *my boys* to think that I was *hard* [tough] so I did a lot of fightin'. What was really happenin' though was that I didn't understand most of the work and I felt bad that my parents didn't even get my hair cut.

I thought that when Ms. A. nem' and others sent me to the support center, that it wasn't 'gon be hard to be there and that maybe I

could do better. The alternative education program was so boring. They didn't have nuthin' to tell me that I hadn't already heard from other teachers. I don't know why they thought it was gon' make any difference to hear it from them.

They gave me homework and I didn't do it. They gave me work in school and I didn't care whether I finished it or not. They tried to talk to me and I wasn't tryin' to listen. I didn't think that alternative education or any other kind of education was goin' to do me any good. I jus' wasn't feelin' it. Now that I look back on things, I think that I was afraid to admit that I felt like I was dumb. Learnin' was hard for me, but I wasn't goin' to admit that to nobody. In my mind, I thought that everybody was better than me. If you ain't ever felt like the dumbest person, you don't know what it feels like.

Carl attempted to approach the interview from the standpoint of a person who could not be emotionally penetrated. Yet, the PI felt as if she was speaking with a wounded individual who was too proud to admit some of his true feelings. Carl acknowledged that he did not do well in either the traditional or alternative school environments and that the older he became, the more "acting out" occurred. As a result of Carl's feelings of academic inadequacies, he felt that he had nothing to occupy his time while in school other than gaining attention for clowning around, walking out of class without permission, and getting into an assortment of other trouble, which often led to negative consequences.

Since Carl felt so inadequate, he began to slip back into his typical pattern of getting into trouble with the police and ultimately dropped out of school during his ninth-grade year. He admits to substance abuse; however, he said, “my main drug is hanging out with my boys and street life.” Carl continues to recidivate within the criminal justice system.

Man, I’m addicted to the hood [hanging in the neighborhood]. School wasn’t for me; because I wasn’t no good at it. School is probably good for some people, but it just ain’t for me. I don’t know what I’m gon’ do with my life, but hey, if I die, I die. If I get locked up again, then I get locked up. That’s just the way it is if you comin’ from where I’m from. I know that if I go to prison ain’t nobody gon’ mess with me! Maybe that’s the kind of alternative education I need. Well, that’s it you know. Whatever!

Carl eventually dropped out of school for a final time. He appears to continue following along on a path of self-destruction. Carl wishes that he could have been a better student and son; however, he also feels that he has done enough to prove that he is trying to do the best he knows how and that life as he knows it is unfair.

Carl firmly believes that he should have been born under different circumstances in order to have had more opportunities. Carl desired to have been born into an intact, productive, and happy family. The PI mentioned to Carl that “we don’t get to pick our families.” Carl looked down and said, “Yeah, I know what you mean.” Hopefully, Carl will work more diligently to embrace and become more assured about his future.



The alternative education program was not able to satisfactorily help Carl. Carl was offered extensive counseling (although he failed to attend most outside sessions). He was also offered a number of services, which were designed to help him to succeed both intellectually and behaviorally.

It was apparent that Carl was not capable of making short-term or long-term decisions about his future. Carl seemed to prefer to live in the moment. Carl was not clearly aware of what it would take for him to be inspired enough to follow the right path. Following the interview, Carl was once again arrested.

**Case study #11—Richie.** Richie appeared to be a people pleaser, as well as a genuinely pleasant young man who was for the most part comfortable in revisiting his past. Richie was very direct, and spoke openly about all of the questions, except those that involved his mother. His level of discomfort was obvious; therefore, the PI only presented questions about his mother for as long as he felt comfortable.

My mother was in prison for a whole lot of years. She wasn't like anybody else's mama that I knew of. She had made me so ashamed to tell anybody 'bout her, and I never told people that she had something to do with somebody bein' killed.

A lot of kids had mother's who did bad things, but I didn't think that anybody's mother could be as bad as my mother. My mother is somebody who didn't let her children get to know her 'cause of her incarceration. My mother was in prison from the time I was in 'bout first grade, until I was 18.

Richie's mannerisms and personality readily came to the attention of the PI. Richie's exterior seemed to represent that of a wounded person who was trying very deliberately not to completely expose his pain. It appeared obvious to the investigator that Richie continues to be pain-stricken by both the absence of, and the embarrassment created by his mother.

I guess I didn't know at the time how much pain I was in. My mother and father had kinda' deserted they kids, 'cause my father kept getting locked up, too. Even though my daddy kept getting locked up in prison off an' on, it wasn't the same as havin' your mother locked up. I thought that if I didn't talk 'bout my mother and pretended that everything was alright, that I could fit in with everybody else.

Richie's visible pain was more than any child might be expected to handle. Richie was able to conceal much of his pain, for many years; however, by the time he reached the fifth grade, Richie began to act out in ways that caused his teachers and others a great deal of concern. Richie had even begun to tell some others that his mother was actually dead.

I just kept getting into trouble. My teachers didn't seem to like me and I didn't like them either. I kept getting blamed for things that I didn't do, or things that I did with other people, but the other people didn't get into trouble, they always kept saying that it was me who did whatever was wrong.

I made my friends think that I liked gettin' into trouble, but I really didn't. I wanted to be good, but I wanted to get along with my friends,

too. I had street cred (street credibility), because both my mama and daddy had been caught up in the system (jail/prison). *Plus*, everybody knows about how my grandmama's got mad crazy (angry) behavior.

Richie's associates were well aware of both his personal situations and his familiarity with the police department. Richie and his associates had all either been arrested or remanded to juvenile detention lockup. Although their transgressions were for petty criminal behaviors, they had all been troubled since their intermediate years in elementary school.

The PI spoke with a representative of the police department who stated that Richie and his alleged friends were well known to them. Richie and his cohorts were fond of playing a part in gang-related activities, smoking marijuana and cigarettes, fighting, stealing, and destruction of property. The friends did not seem to care whether they destroyed commercial or home properties. "Man, the neighbors hated seein' us comin', but we didn't care. We wanted to play like we was straight (authentic) gangstas."

My experience in the alternative education program was bad. How I'm gonna' do good when most of my dawgs (friends) was in that place too? Me and my "crew" (friends) ran it (were in charge)! Plus, I wasn't never no good at school. I was always put in this or that to help me get better at learnin'. They acted like they didn't understand that some kids like I was, wasn't gon' never be good at readin', or writin' or math; no matter how much extra help they tried to give me.

It was quite clear that Richie did not possess a belief in his academic skills, and did not adequately appreciate the value of a quality education. “I jus’ wasn’t no good at school and I didn’t know why they kept tryin’ to make me out to be somebody that I wasn’t.”

“I learned most of what I know from the OG’s (old gangsters). The OG’s accepted me and my pawtnas (friends) for who we was, and they looked after us on the streets too.” Richie was encouraged to value street ethics.

The OG’s taught us that you had to be a sucka’ not to sell drugs; cause ‘round our neighborhood that was easy money. OG’s didn’t have any respect for goin’ to any school. They made me believe that there wasn’t no value to school, ‘cause we was jus’ gonna end up with some no payin’ job anyway. I could learn more on the streets in one day, than what I was so called learnin’ in school in a whole year.

It seemed clear that if Richie’s father had opted to participate more significantly and positively in his life, perhaps Richie could have realized a higher understanding of the actualities of true life. The PI inquired about the lessons Richie *had* learned from his father.

My father kept most of his life a secret. He never told me why he kept goin’ to jail, but I found out later why he kept goin’ to jail. My father was addicted, mostly to crack and kept gettin’ busted for possession. One of the things that the OG’s didn’t say, but I think my father shoulda’ told me, is that street life ain’t never long; if you stay in the game. I usta’ ask my father what prison was like? He would never say that it was bad or

whether he suffered while he was in there. He wouldn't tell me what really goes on in there. I had to get locked myself to find out it wasn't no place to be.

Based upon descriptions provided by Richie, his father acted as if he was a veteran of war. Richie's described his father as someone who had seen, heard, and experienced a great deal of tragedy while in prison. However, discussions with his dad, which may have been of great benefit to Richie, were not forthcoming.

Sometimes, I feel like if my father had jus' told me how you lose your freedom in prison, and some of the other bad stuff that happens, maybe *I* woulda' never gone.

Maybe if I woulda' known what I know now, I would have done better at the alternative education center. I had a bad attitude, but the people in that program talked to me nice and kept tellin' me that I could do better. Some of the teachers would pull me to the side an' let me know that they had grown up in the same kinda' neighborhood as me. They let me know that I couldn't use where I grew up as any kinda' excuse. They kept sayin' that if they could make it, I could too. I listened to what they had to say, but 'cause they had degrees and stuff, I didn't totally believe in what they were sayin'. I felt like they was smart and that's how they made it so good. Since I wasn't smart, the same things probably weren't gonna' happen to me. I guess I didn't ever believe in myself far as school was concerned.

My family didn't make it no better. My father or my grandmother only came up to our schools when me or my brother and sistah got into trouble. When I got into the alternative education program, it wasn't any different. They still only came up to my school when I got into trouble. They didn't help me with no homework or act like they had good sense 'round the teachers. They was so ghetto an' embarrassing.

The investigator asked Richie if his family life was an obstacle to his performing better in the alternative education program.

My grandmama was a big problem, especially since we always had to live with her. Since my daddy was always in an' out of jail, an' he didn't never have a place for us to stay, so we stayed with our grandmama. It was hard for us to live with our grandmama!

Their grandmother had worked for the majority of her life. She had finally reached retirement age and had big plans for herself. Unfortunately, her plans did not involve the caretaking of her grandchildren. As far as their grandmother was concerned, the children had been thrust upon her. The grandmother's choices were to either take the children into her home or allow them to become wards of the state. "Our grandmother kept reminding us that if she hadn't took us, ain't no tellin' where we woulda' been." Sadly, the grandmother caused them all to feel as if they were burdensome and frequently reminded them as to how grateful they should feel. Since Richie felt overwhelming constraints at home, he tended to view school as a place where he could derive attention by acting out.

I got to school and acted a fool. I acted a fool at the regular school and at the student support center. I jus' made myself the class clown. I wouldn't follow directions, I fought a lot; usually with little kids, and had a lot of fun when other kids laughed at me, and I was able to get the teachers mad. After awhile, they got tired of me and sent me to the alternative education program.

When I went to the alternative education program, I was really scared, but I couldn't let nobody know. Since I wasn't a good student, and it just seemed like I couldn't learn very good, I just kept doin' things to irritate other people. The more they tried to help me, the more I tried to cover up how bad I felt 'bout not bein' able to learn like most of the other kids. Some of the kids didn't know a whole lot, but nobody seemed like they was as dumb as me."

Feelings of insecurity resulted in Richie verbally and physically assaulting other students, teachers, and administrators. "I got into one fight that was so bad that they had to put me out of the program for a while. I think I was out for about four months before school was over (for the school year)." Richie's significant absences from school caused him to miss out on a great deal of his seventh-grade year. As a result, Richie was assigned to repeat that particular grade. "I didn't feel that I had nothin' to lose, so I just did what I wanted to do."

He took the opportunity away from the alternative education program to aimlessly roam the streets; however, Richie was always hoping that one of his

cohorts would be suspended, which they often were, in order to get into some kind of trouble.

I spent a lot of my time off just tryin' to stay away from my grandmama's house. As far as I was concerned, it didn't do them any good to put me out for that long, 'cause all I did was to get into more and more trouble. I thought that was what the student support center was for. Wasn't they supposed to help me with my problems?

While I was off, I hung out with some older dudes, who had dropped out of school, I smoked a whole lot of weed, and I was *always* stealing. Matter of fact, 'cause I was off for so long, I got better and better at stealing, breakin' into people's houses, and just plain f@#\$%\*# around. I would jus' say that them kickin' me out, made me worse.

Well, they let me come back at the beginning of the next school year and I was a total a##@%!\* . I'm sure that people in the neighborhood was glad that I was back in school; since they acted like I was a terrorist or somethin'.

“While I was off, I got to know the police real good. They was always messin' with me and my friends and accusin' us of doing somethin' wrong.”

Richie returned to the alternative education program for a period of about three months. He was angry about having been retained, and continued to wreak havoc upon many people in the alternative education program.

Shortly after his return, Richie and some of his cohorts were accused of a crime that caused Richie and three of his friends to be remanded to a juvenile



detention facility for approximately four months. "I didn't care, 'cause I didn't want to be in school noway."

I didn't want nobody to know, but when I came back to school I was embarrassed, but I wasn't 'bout to let anybody know how I was feeling. I had flunked *and* I had been in juvie (juvenile detention). Kids made fun of me and I wasn't laughin' this time.

All while I was being made fun of, my grandmamma was at home tellin' me that I wasn't gon' be s@#%! She said I was gonna end up jus' like my no good a#\* mama and daddy. I hope I fooled her, 'cause I stayed at the student support center longer than I had the first time.

Richie was able to remain at the alternative education center for the remainder of the school year. During his second attempt at alternative education, Richie received intensive counseling, tutorial services, and a mentor. Additionally, Richie discovered a very nurturing and caring teacher. The special teacher decidedly spent as much of her free time with Richie as possible.

Mrs. H. was there for me. She started makin' me feel like she was a second mother or somethin'. I felt 'bout Mrs. H. like I never felt 'bout my own mother. She showed me what it felt like to be cared 'bout. She still call me from time-to-time to see how I'm doing. Sometimes I feel embarrassed 'cause she wanted me to do so good and I haven't.

The only thing Mrs. H. couldn't do was to keep me in school. A lot of people don't realize how hard it is to stay in school when you don't understand what's goin' on. As far as I'm concerned, all my teachers may

as well been speakin' another language. I didn't understand most of the stuff I was 'sposed (supposed) to be learnin' in school. I just didn't understand school like most kids did.

Richie had been tested in order to discern whether or not he qualified as learning disabled; however, after the results determined that Richie did not meet the necessary requirements to be labeled as a learning disabled student. Rather, tests determined that Richie was performing to the best of his abilities. Unfortunately, his levels of functioning were considered significantly subpar, yet Richie failed to meet (at the time), the necessary 15-point discrepancy (15 points between performance and verbal intelligence quotient) needed to qualify.

After they did the testing, I kinda felt better, because it let my father and grandmother know that I *was* doin' my best, I just wasn't fakin' stupid, I *was* kinda' stupid. I know that people don't want to hear that, but hey, I knew it all the time. That's the reason I acted so bad in school, because I didn't have nothin' else to do with my time.

Over time, Richie has spent 3.5 years wavering between home schooling, the alternative education program, and the traditional school. He ultimately dropped out in the middle of 10th grade. Richie admits, "I don't know what I wanna' do. I ain't too good at nothing, but I'm tired of gettin' into trouble. Do you know what I'm 'sposed to do?"

The alternative education staff made several attempts to rescue Richie from his environmental circumstances (both home and school). Richie was offered counseling (for himself and some of his family), tutoring, mentoring,

supplemental help in reading and mathematics, special privileges for optimal behaviors and demonstrations of appropriate behaviors.

Richie continues to be a people pleaser; he wanted to please both his friends from the neighborhood and those adults from the alternative education program. Sadly, his environmental circumstances won over and Richie did not beat the streets.

Richie has spent a good deal of time in juvenile detention and claims to have numerous warrants for his arrest. Richie is not certain as to where his life is headed; however, one may deduce that Richie is standing on shaky ground. Given all of the assistance that the alternative education program provided for Richie, he keeps making one misstep after another. Hopefully, Richie will restructure his life, and remember all of the lessons he received while a juvenile in the alternative education program.

### **Case study #12—Sam.**

I ended up in the alternative education program because I did a lot of things to get there. I lied all the time, I was a thief, I fought all the time, I skipped school and I didn't take school seriously. One of my main problems was that I thought I had the ability to con anybody. I think a lot of people would have considered me a sneaky kid and I thought that I was really good at always sneaking under the radar.

Sam is a 30-year-old who appeared to be smart, well-mannered, and straightforward. Yet, he also seemed to be of a somewhat nervous nature. Sam looked well worn by street life. He was continuously holding or pulling up his

too-large, not completely clean denim jeans while attempting to walk properly. There were numerous scars and/or permanent cuts about his body (in particular his face), which seemed to support an involvement in a life too well worn for his benefit.

Basically, my experiences in the alternative education program were mostly good. The teachers I worked with were nice and helpful. The problem was, that at the time they were trying to help me, I wasn't willing to listen to them most of the time, because I thought I knew it all. I didn't think that there was anything new that they could tell me about living my life.

Sam had to admit that he didn't understand the amount of interest that the alternative education staff members felt for him. No one before had ever treated him as though he was so special. Initially, Sam was too reluctant and distrusting to accept this amount of care and nurturing from people he barely knew.

Now that I'm grown up, I know that they were extra special people, who were trying to do what was best for me. I also know that there wasn't too much that they could do for me if I wasn't willing to cooperate to the fullest. It was not enough that I did do most of my schoolwork, but I can admit now that I didn't always do the best I could do.

Sam acknowledged that he could have been a better son and student. As a result of there being few boundaries in the home environment, Sam found school to be more recreational than a serious investment toward his future. As a result, he did not follow many school rules, and found the school's consequences to be a

joke. In fact, he thought that he was so smooth he could talk himself out of any situation. If Sam was cognizant of rules, he would often test them. If he got away with misbehavior it provided him with stimulation. Sam definitely pushed school limits, and at the time, didn't care about the consequences, as he was not concerned about what would happen once his parents became aware of the infraction.

I was often told that I had a lot of potential. My teachers kept telling me that I could really do a lot better, but I didn't want to. The teachers tried to help me with my studies and the counselors helped me to try to work out my problems, but mostly I didn't listen.

What I couldn't stand at the alternative education center was when I got teachers who were boring. Those kinds of teachers made me feel like they didn't care about whether I learned or not. When I had boring teachers who acted like they didn't care, I acted like I didn't care either.

Sam participated in the alternative education program for a portion of eighth grade, completed the ninth-grade school year and a small portion of Grade 10. It appeared that Sam did not possess a concern during this period of time about how gaining a quality education affects one's future. As far as Sam was concerned, his parents were capable of taking care of him (by one means or another) for the rest of his life. Some of Sam's problematic issues seem to have been promoted by parents who have spent a significant period of time enabling their son. Sam's parents have allowed him to be lazy and have helped to provide excuses for his lack of effort regarding a quality education.

I did okay for most of the time I was in the program, but, I kept stealing, lying, and fighting. That's why I had to stay there so long. I think they were trying to teach me a lesson. Most of the lessons they were trying to teach me, went right over my head. You have to understand, that at the time, I thought that I was smarter than them. I thought that teachers were in a loser kind of job. You know how they say *those who can't do, teach?* Well, that's kind of the way I felt about most teachers. I felt like they were mostly stupid for going to school so much and they don't even make any money!

I had it all figured out. I thought I knew what I was going to do with my life, but I dreamed the same dream that so many boys do. I just knew that I was going to going to do something that made me a lot of money. That was my thing; make a lot of money! I wasn't going to let nobody or nothing stop me from reaching my dreams. When I didn't get along with others in the program, I wasn't going to let them get in the way of me being successful.

You know, while I was there, other kids acted like they wanted to be my friends and I thought they were my friends, but after a while they kept *dis'in* [disrespecting] me whenever anything came up missing, or if there was any kind of trouble whenever I was around. I was always being told that I took something or lied about something and then they stopped being friends with me.

Sam actually paid for friendship. As a child without siblings, Sam knew how much his parents' money meant to him. He thought that maintaining or establishing friendships could be purchased as well. Often, when Sam spent stolen money, the money was used to buy something that another student wanted. Sam desired friends, but he mistakenly thought that the best method of finding loyal friends was to buy them. Sam ultimately found out that loyalty could not be purchased. Sadly, Sam learned that friendships could not be bought until he was older.

Even though I was treated the way I was by a whole lot of other kids, I don't believe that I was an angry kid. I dealt with a lot of things, but, I didn't think that anger was one of them. I admit that I had issues, but mostly, I just lied and thought that I could get away with different things that other people couldn't. I mostly stayed in my own world, because I always knew that I had my parents to depend on.

My parents and some of my good teachers were my greatest assets. I am my parents' only child, who had me after they thought they couldn't have any kids. I always looked at my parents as old, because all the other kids seemed like they had parents who were a whole lot younger than my parents.

My parents were so glad to have a baby, that they really kinda' spoiled me a lot. I ain't blaming them or nothing, but because they let me have my way most of the time, I did a lot of devious things, just to *get over* on them. I got away with doing a lot of bad stuff because my parents

believed just about everything that I said. My parents stuck up for me, even when I was doing wrong, which was most of the time. I don't know if they believed all my lies, but they acted like they did.

Sam came across as a very sad individual who was attempting to present himself as a more confident young man. Sam seemed immature and was clear about his continued reliance upon his parents, although he's a parent himself. Sam's parents continue to subsidize a good deal of his monetary needs; however, they remain enablers to a second generation. Sam's parents currently spend a fair amount of money helping to support their grandchildren, as well as helping Sam from time to time.

After a while, things got really bad for me. I started smoking weed all the time. I was so buzzed [high], that going to school was just a mellow experience. I didn't pay much attention to learning, and I didn't think about what anybody thought about me.

Sam was obviously less than self-assured, and repeatedly mentioned what a disappointment he was to his parents. Sam mentioned that he was often the source of his mother's tears and felt badly about that, but couldn't stop himself (at the time) from displaying some of the behaviors that he'd never witnessed in his home environment. He knew right from wrong, but he seemed to think that doing wrong would make him seem more popular. In fact, Sam received the opposite reaction. Other students, as well as their parents, seemed to be repelled by him. Sam could not remember any of his alleged friends, or their parents, who didn't eventually make him aware that he was no longer welcome in their home. He had



stolen at least once from each home. Sam experienced a major problem when he was allowed to stay at one fellow student's home. He had stolen over \$800 from this home during a period of time when the parents were absent. The parents were furious; however, they simply could not prove that Sam was the culprit. From Sam's perspective, if he took money from others, they didn't need it as much as he did. After all, he had a habit to feed and he wasn't the one with a job.

In order to feed my habit, I stole money from my parents and other people all the time. All I worried about was making sure that I felt better. I guess most people would say that I was selfish and I probably was. But, whenever I was accused of taking things from other people, my parents always acted like they didn't believe other people. Even when there were times that I knew that I had stolen from others, my parents would get mad at the other people for accusing me, and take up for me.

Sam's parents were devoted to their only child. They did not wish to believe that their child was capable of actually committing the numerous allegations of wrongdoing assigned to him by others. However, there were times when Sam's parents paid sizeable amounts of money to others when they were able to prove that Sam had stolen from them. Unbelievably, Sam's parents continued to believe in their son's innocence.

As far as Sam's parents were concerned, Sam was their blessed child, and they could not conceive that he would do anything to hurt them or others. In spite of Sam's parents' desires, his drug habit was intensifying. Yet, Sam's parents' support was unwavering. Their denial, during this difficult time, was strong.

Sam's parents had difficulty believing that the one child they were able to produce could be such a disappointment to them. After all, they had provided Sam with every need/want that they could possibly fulfill.

“My parents gave me everything that I needed. We had a really nice house; I had nice clean clothes and a good environment.” Sam was also provided with a good deal more than the basic essentials. His parents listened to and supported him; they attended school functions and/or were always available to school personnel.

It was me who chose not to be grateful for the things that I had. My parents could have had me looking like some of those other kids in the alternative education program, all raggy and stuff, but, I had the best. If I asked for certain kinds of shoes or clothes, my parents got them for me. I would say that all the other kids had whatever and they would get me what I wanted.

Instead of gratitude, Sam chose to take advantage of his parents' naiveté, love, age differences, and support.

One of the things that I did right was to go ahead and do better in school. I did good enough to convince the people at the alternative education center that I had changed. I brought up my grades, stopped fighting and stealing for awhile, and acted like I was the perfect student. They *bought* my act, and decided that I was on the right track to come back to the traditional school.

“My parents were so proud of me. They thought that I had really changed and was going to make them proud.” Sam’s parents gladly embraced the notion that his troublesome years were behind them. His parents wanted to trust that their son, who had been in and out of trouble since his elementary school years, was potentially aiming toward success.

After I got out of the alternative education program, in the 10th grade, I felt weird going back to the regular school. The kids acted strange toward me. They acted like I was this bad kid who was still bad. I didn’t think I was still that bad, but they treated me like I was.

Sam was soon to suffer an even more severe setback than reacting to how other students thought/felt about him. Not long after his return to the traditional setting, a female class member left the classroom to go to the restroom. Shortly thereafter, Sam and his classmates discovered that the female student had been killed in the restroom by a seriously mentally challenged fellow student.

I was totally messed up! I couldn’t believe that I was supposed to be a bad kid and here this kid killed somebody but wasn’t ever in the alternative education program. He totally killed somebody in the restroom man!

Sam, as well as many others, were saddened and shaken by this overwhelming tragedy. Sam felt additionally burdened by the fact that the murdered young lady was a classmate. “I just couldn’t handle her death for a long time, *and* I knew the guy who killed her, *too!*”

The grown people should have known that he was crazy. He always acted crazy! I was hurt and didn't know what to do. I know that I didn't do my best work in school after C.S. was killed. This was the kind of stuff that you read about happening somewhere else, but not at your own school.

Shortly thereafter, Sam turned to more frequent drug use and continued to lie, steal, and deceive.

I just could not imagine that I had been sitting in the classroom while this girl was being killed! I couldn't focus on nothing else for awhile. I had brought up my grades, and was acting better in the alternative education program. Then, I came back to the regular school and somebody gets killed. It was all too much.

"I really struggled with C.S.'s death. I admit that I took her death hard and began to go back to some of my old ways." Sam attributed his reluctance to comply with proper student conduct and further academic success to the murder.

Shortly after the murder, Sam was arrested on charges of drug possession. Once again, Sam's parents came to the rescue. Sam's parents paid a considerable amount of money in an attempt to keep him from serving prison time; however, their efforts were to minimal avail. Sam had had a number of drug-related misdemeanor charges brought against him from the past, which factored into his charges and ultimate sentencing.

Consequently, Sam served over one year in prison for possession of a controlled substance. However, Sam's incarceration did lead to some success.

Sam was able to complete his GED and is currently working in a “blue collar” job.

My kids’ mama and me have three children and we are doing sorta’ alright. I hope I’ll do better in the future and I hope that my mother and father will finally see that I’m really going to try to do better in the future.

I don’t lie too much anymore, and I don’t steal at all. I’m trying to be a good father to my kids and I’m trying to finally make my parents proud of me, since my parents seem really old now and I don’t want them to die without knowing that I became a better person.

Alternative education did help me. I don’t smoke weed nearly like most people, but I do smoke. Matter of fact, I don’t think that they should put people in jail for weed, but, hey, I do what I do because I feel a whole lot better when I’m mellowed out with weed.

I’m smart and I know it. I’ve just got to really learn how to make the right decisions for me and my family. I’ve got to learn to use my intelligence in the right way and have more confidence in myself. I’m trying to get my life together right now and get other people, especially my mom and dad to believe in me.

When I tell my parents that they raised me right, I want them to understand that all the mistakes that I made had nothing to do with them. I want them to know that I just messed up on my own. I guess that I was one of those kids who took advantage of my situation and matured slowly. I wish my parents knew how much I thank them for all that they have

done for me, and that it took me losing so much, to find out how much I had.

Sam appears to be on the road to reinventing himself; however, it seems like he must first discover how to handle problems on his own and rid himself of excuses when he makes a mistake. Considering that Sam is a bright person, the PI feels that Sam does have the ability to make positive changes in order to rectify some of the hardships he has created to this point.

I know that I did a lot of people wrong, but I did my time in both the alternative ed. program and jail. I'm all about proving myself now. I'm 'going to try to go to college and take care of my kids. People just need to give me another chance. At least I didn't kill nobody.

Sam seemingly appreciated the help he received from the alternative education program; however, Sam has admittedly fallen short of the lessons he learned while a student under their care.

Sam had favorite teachers and he liked the director. Sam felt comfortable while he was present in the alternative education program. However, Sam seemed to have needed long-term intervention (beyond what the alternative education program could provide) in order for him to have made the most wise decisions about his life.

Relative to the student who killed another student while in the school's restroom, the PI did not mention to Sam that she remembered the incident and that the student was receiving Special School District (SSD) services. Obviously, the student killer needed more services than SSD could provide exclusively.

**Case study #13—Michelle.** The investigator’s immediate impression of Michelle was that she might be capable of being somewhat of a “loose cannon.” Michelle was initially abrupt, conversationally difficult, and responded to the interview questions in a manner which seemingly signaled deliberate attempts at toughness.

I ended up in the alternative education program ‘cause they kept saying that I was doing the wrong stuff. Yes, I did ‘cuss out anyone who bothered me, and I would fight anybody who messed with me. Kids kep’ [kept] callin’ me ugly, stinky, and ghetto. They was always talking about my clothes and me being dirty. So when they made me mad, I just straight [directly] snapped or stole on [fought] them!

Damn, I was dealin’ with so much anger! I was mad that people kep’ on pickin’ on me. People picked on me when I was in elementary school a lot. They was always calling me *Shrek*, which I didn’t like at all. I wanted so bad to be one of the pretty girls. I wanted boys to like me and call me on the phone like they did the other girls. I was always *hatin’* [jealous of] on the girls that the guys called pretty. Sometimes the boys would say who the prettiest girls were in the class was and I always knew that they was gonna leave me out. I would be so hurt, so the pretty girls and the boys, who liked them, were the ones that I usually would start stuff with the most.

It appears that Michelle’s school experiences continue to be open wounds. Although she displays a rough exterior, the turmoil of her past resonates deeply.

I don't remember goin' to school without other kids pickin' on me. I couldn't help the way I looked or the way I dressed. I won't say that I wasn't bad and that I didn't have a bad attitude, but I didn't have to be teased so much.

Michelle's constant fighting and insubordination caused her school administrator and other adults to feel that the alternative education program might be a good intervention for her. The traditional school had given Michelle more opportunities than most other students to make attempts at improving her behaviors. However, it became clear that Michelle needed more stringent methods of interventions than the traditional school was able to offer her.

Michelle was often the target of ridicule from other students. The only way Michelle figured that she could manage her time at school was to try to personally defend herself against her attackers. Sometimes, Michelle's anger and hurt feelings overtook her ability to reason well with others. As a result, Michelle began to be viewed as an aggressor (by teachers and students alike), who was well known to be a fighter. Subsequently, Michelle was often suspended from school; creating a domino effect. Although she was capable of achieving at an above-average level of proficiency, her grades began to deteriorate due to frequent absences from the traditional school.

Michelle is an example of the prototypical bullied child. Michelle claimed that she often shared her dilemmas with authority figures but the adults (from her perspective) were mainly disinterested about whatever was happening to her. In Michelle's mind, some of the teachers talked badly about her also,



when they thought that she wasn't listening. After she faced so many obstacles in the traditional school environment, Michelle began to feel as though there was but one person willing to protect her. She was going to have to personally defend herself from her tormentors. Michelle seemed devoid of the ability to understand that her malicious jousting, threats upon others, and numerous fights had led to her placement in the alternative education program.

I was hurt, and I didn't see anything wrong with hurtin' people who worked hard at hurtin' me. Instead of actin' like they cared 'bout me, the teachers in the traditional school seemed like they was gonna let the other kids tease me as much as they wanted to.

Michelle was easy prey for many students. She required a good deal of counseling and the ability to confide in an adult with whom she was comfortable sharing some of her innermost feelings. Sadly, Michelle did not receive assistance that was directly related to her needs.

Michelle was aware that some of the teachers shared the sentiments of the students regarding her appearance. Sometimes, Michelle overheard not only students but also teachers commenting about her in a negative manner. In spite of Michelle's rough exterior, she wished so badly that her home environment was different, and that her mother would understand that she deserved to live in a stable and secure home. Michelle wanted to have clean and stylish hair, wear clean clothes, get to bed on time in order to be prepared for school, and have good wholesome foods.

Unfortunately, Michelle does not actually meet the typical standards of beauty, and knew that some of the adults in the program demonstrated their agreement with the students. The PI is well aware of how demeaning some students can be toward others. Michelle was such easy prey for many students.

I didn't think that I was too much worse than a lot of the other kids in the regular school, but I guess they thought I was. At first, it seemed like they were jus' pickin' on me. It seemed like they jus' wanted to get rid of me, so that I could go to another place and leave them alone.

I didn't start out in the alternative education program being a successful student, but there was some teachers who liked me, and they kep' tellin' me things that made me feel kinda' good 'bout myself. They kep' tellin' me that I was smart and stuff and I just reacted good to what they were saying. The alternative education teachers made me feel so much better about myself. A lot of times they were tellin' me that I should be more confident in myself, and they would tell me that I was a pretty girl, but I knew that they was jus' tryin' to be nice. I didn't believe them 'bout how I looked, but I did kinda believe them when they said that I was smart and so I tried to get better at learnin'.

I started to read more. I use to hate chapter books, but I began to read them. I found out that I was better at math than I thought, and I jus' began to like school more. The kids there didn't tease me as much as they did in the regular school, but I still got teased. The grownups at the alternative education center tried to protect me more, but they couldn't

stop all the teasin' that I took. Since I didn't have the kids pickin' on me as much, I started to care about school more for awhile.

My mama was not a really big help. My mama didn't seem to care too much 'bout how I did in school. She didn't get involved in whatever I was doin' in school unless I told her that one of the grown people had done me wrong. Since they didn't do nothin' wrong to me at the alternative education center, then she didn't have nothin' to say 'bout me an' school. My mama was more concerned 'bout havin' fun and doin' her own thang at home.

While Michelle wished to have been born into another family, she would have been proud of her mother if her mom had ever shown any interest in her schooling. Michelle's mother seemed to take her relationships with others more seriously than her family. Michelle's mother never seemed to care about how Michelle dressed for school (which was often inappropriate) or the grades that she had earned, never knew the name of even one of her teachers without having to be told by the office staff, and never seemed to act in any way responsibly.

My mama let a lot of people into our house who kep' bringin' us down. They was people who wanted to do drugs and stuff. A lot of times our house was shot into, or putting us in positions that were wrong. My mama just thought it was good enough to put some ole' chest in front of the door to keep it shut.

It's hard to study, or think about school when you have all them things goin' on in your house. People was shoutin', fightin' and actin'

ignert (ignorant) all night long. A lot of times, I fell asleep in school. My teachers acted like I was just some lazy kid who didn't want to learn.

They didn't know that I was goin' through so much. I couldn't learn so much, 'cause I was always interrupted by the people who were at our house. I would be so sleepy 'cause I didn't get a good night's sleep.

Although Michelle was beginning to recognize more noticeable success in the alternative education program, the primary barrier to Michelle's realizing even greater success was as a result of her lack of self-confidence.

There wasn't no way that the adults in the alternative education program made me feel what I wasn't feelin' 'bout myself. I wasn't stupid, I knew that I didn't look like the kind of girl that boys liked, and they jus' wasn't interested in me.

The barrage of teasing endured by Michelle created a lower level of self-assurance and led Michelle to become both sexually irresponsible and sexually promiscuous. Michelle stated, "I jus' wanted boys to like me."

A lot of boys and girls had always said that I was ugly, but I still had sex with a lot of the boys. I did some things with these boys that I am so 'shamed of now. The boys I had sex with, told me that I looked okay and that my body turned them on.

When they told me 'bout how good I looked, I didn't feel nasty no more. I felt like somebody wanted me, but really they didn't. They jus' wanted some sex. My mama even knew that I was havin' sex, but she said that's what boys do if they ain't gay. I did some sexual things that was

even in front of other people, but I didn't care. Havin' sex with different people made me feel like somebody wanted me for real.

Michelle clearly suffers from the residual effects of her earlier years. She does not appear confident about her appearance and/or her intellectual abilities, in spite of the confidence building she received (sometime later) in the alternative education program.

I didn't let nobody know, but I was so embarrassed to be me. Boys can really be mean too. They didn't know how much they was hurtin' me when they was always leavin' me out, or callin' me really bad names. I didn't know of no other way to deal with kids making fun of me excep' for fightin'. Anybody who was *jonin* (making fun of someone) on me got stole on, or I joned (trash talked), back on 'nem (them).

It appeared to the investigator that Michelle was sorely lacking in the areas of personal and academic confidence. As a result, she overplayed herself to others in many ways. Michelle laughed and acted out too loudly, she tried too hard to please others, and her vocabulary was splashed with vulgarities. Michelle often displayed leanings toward the overdramatic, seemingly in order to become more noticeable as well as to stand out in a crowd. Michelle mistakenly thought that the attention she so desperately craved would be received and reciprocated in a positive manner.

Rather than garner the respect that Michelle so earnestly desired, she earned instead a broadly recognized negative reputation. "A lot of kids called me

a *ho* [whore]. But I just wanted to get accepted and be liked by the boys who liked the other girls.”

Alternative education faculty and staff members were well aware of Michelle’s lifestyle and attempted to help her in many different ways. Michelle often spoke to qualified adults about her feelings of inadequacy, insecurities, environmental circumstances, and other issues. In spite of the assistance she received, a number of Michelle’s circumstances pulled her away from accomplishing her very best during her stay at the alternative education center.

When I first started the alternative education program, I didn’t think I could do too much of anything, ‘cause I didn’t believe I was good at anything ‘cep (except) actin’ a fool. Hadn’t nobody acted like I *was* a good student, or could be one when I was in the regular school. I did learn to think more for myself after I was in the alternative education program and I am thankful for what they tried to do for me.

Michelle intermittently spent a total of 2.5 years in alternative education, from Grades 6 through 10.

One minute I was doin’ good, and the next minute I was going back into my old ways. I seemed to get into trouble every time kids made fun of me. I wasn’t no joke, but they acted like I was.

“I dropped out of school, but I can’t believe that I am successful now.”

Michelle has become successful primarily because after having dropped out, she obtained her GED while enrolled in the Job Corps program.

I needed to totally get away from my environment in order to do better. When I was in Job Corps, I met a lot of students who was like me. They had rough lives and could relate to what I was goin' through. I met some other girls who had situations like mine, and I could talk to them. They really did help me.

I am 20 years old, and I don't have any kids. That already makes me feel better 'bout myself, 'cause a lot of those girls who were the so called *pretty girls*, got kids, baby daddies *and* not a whole lot of education. I ended up doin' better than a lot of them and I am so proud of myself.

Michelle seems like she is well on her way to a successful lifestyle.

Michelle has been able to maintain a job, she has obtained her own apartment, and looks forward to entering community college in the fall of 2009.

I am working hard on believing in myself. I want to be the only judge of myself and I don't want to worry about what other people think of me.

The alternative education program did help me to believe more in myself and I think I am better for going there. One day, I want to work with kids and help them to feel better 'bout themselves too.

While it would be nice to say that Michelle met with overwhelming success from the alternative education program she attended, the alternative education program for Michelle seems to have been only a good start.

Michelle met with and listened to a number of adults who were good listeners and people who tried to help her. However, she listened to her peers

more often and began skipping school. Michelle apparently needed a residential facility in order to thrive.

Although Michelle's educational agenda may appear unusual and does not give more credit to the alternative education program, the investigator feels that Michelle met with more kindred spirits in the Job Corps than in the alternative education program.

**Case study #14—Xavier.** I ended up in the alternative education program for the first time when I was in seventh grade, because I had threatened to kill another kid. This kid had kept teasing and bothering me so, I had brought this big kitchen knife to school.

At the time, I felt like I could really hurt him, or kill him. It wouldn't have mattered to me then, because he would deserve whatever happened to him. I was going to stab him and he was going to know that you shouldn't mess with people the way he had kept messing with me.

What I was going through was not in my control. I depended on the help of others caring about me. This kid didn't know the anger that was inside of me and he didn't know how much pain I was going through in my situation. He's the reason why I can't stand bullies to this day!

Xavier, who is a 28-year-old married father of two, appeared to be a very sensitive, thoughtful, and caring young man. Xavier did not mind sharing his story.

Maybe someday a kid might get to know my story. My story speaks to how you can achieve anything that you want; if you want it bad enough



and you are willing to work hard enough to get it. I had some terrible things to happen to me; however, I made it and I'm looking forward to becoming even more of a success.

My parents caused me the most pain. Sometimes, I felt both helpless and hopeless because of my parents' lack of understanding, selfishness and inability to play the role of parents. I would never be able to say that they led by example, like I try to do with my children. There are times, when I both love and resent my parents. They had a helluva lot to do with my difficult upbringing.

My parents were in and out of my life for about the first 11 years of my life. My mother was a mentally disturbed drug addict and my father was in and out of prison; usually for possession. My parents caused me to get caught up in the foster care system, because I was sometimes neglected or abused by them.

Sometimes, I was taken from whatever school I was going to at the time, because of them. When I was really young, I would be so scared of these strange people who would be taking me away from school and sending me to somebody's house who I didn't know.

Xavier knew from an early age that he was going to need to be an extra-strong individual in order to survive, and vowed that he would never become a reflection of his parents' misguided and immature behaviors. Xavier had become certain that no one sincerely loved or cared about him. He presumed that if both of his parents decided to take parenting less than seriously, he would not waste

much of his emotions on anyone else, since he felt that that level of emotionality should be reciprocal.

I know that I was sent to at least seven different foster homes from the time I was born, until I was 11. Usually, I stayed in a foster home for about seven months each time. Most of the homes were okay, which means that I was at least treated fairly. However, one of the homes was horrible and left me with a permanent mental scar. In this one home, I was handled [molested], by this ladies' 20 something year old son. This man made me do things that I don't believe any man should do to a little boy!

It was obvious to the PI that Xavier was traumatized by the blatant abuses he endured and that these abuses played a dynamic role in Xavier's subsequent placement into the alternative education program.

I did not resent being placed in the alternative education program. I knew that I had done wrong and I was willing to face the consequences of what I had done. I felt that I was going to this program because they could help me deal with at least some of my feelings.

They did not just help me to deal with my feelings at the alternative education center; they showed me that they cared about helping me to be the best that I could be. I was sent to the alternative education program when I was in the eighth grade. I knew that I was a smart kid, but I also knew that I needed help in dealing with the angry feelings that

caused me to do things that were not good for me, or for anybody who was around me.

The alternative education program was a good fit for Xavier. He could not imagine that he had met adults who were honestly good people and wanted to protect him to the utmost degree. Xavier's past experiences with adults had obviously not been good; therefore, it was difficult for him to trust the sincerity of these adults. Every sign of affection directed toward him afforded Xavier an opportunity to open up emotionally. Eventually, Xavier allowed himself to begin reciprocating the kindnesses that were being offered and showed some acceptance that there was goodness to be found in some adults and that sometimes the people who are most kind to you and have your best interests in mind are not your blood relatives.

I was very successful in the alternative education program, because I had a focus and a special teacher. I knew that I had done some things wrong to get into the program, but I was going to make sure that I made the best of my time while I was there. I wanted to be so much better than my parents and I thought that the only way to do that was to stay focused and to suffer the consequences of my actions and try to change for the better.

I had always been interested in music and music production since I was a little kid. I played in the band, even while I was in the alternative education program, and I was told by a lot of people that I was really good. I knew that I was good also; but a very special teacher realized that music might be just what I needed to work through some of my pain.

An exception was made on Xavier's behalf in order to continue with the school band. His special teacher was responsible for handling this particular exception, and eventually for a good deal of the positive situations that have happened thus far in Xavier's life.

It's not as though the special teacher did not have a life of his own. The special teacher and his wife were still parenting their teenage children. The special teacher wanted to save a life. He saw something so honest and pure in Xavier that he wanted to help him with a diversion as healthy as music. Thankfully, Xavier's special teacher had been in the school district long enough to have familiarized himself with numerous allies.

This teacher made me feel I could go very far in music. I believed him because he showed me that he believed in me and the talent that I had been blessed with. It was because of this teacher that I began to work harder at my craft. I kept playing the guitar and I even began writing songs about my pain.

Since I had been handled by a man, I guess you can figure out that I was scared to trust what this teacher was doing for me at first. I did not want to be in a room with him alone, and I really didn't want him to touch me too much, but he showed me that a man can believe in you and not abuse you.

Mr. J. introduced me to professional musicians he knew, took me to concerts, listened to me play for other musicians and most important, he introduced me to his family, who embraced me almost right away.

Mr. J. happens to be the kind of teacher that most any student would desire to have in his/her life. Mr. J. often spoke to Xavier about his own humble beginnings, and how he maintained hope for the future in spite of negative comments made by others about him and toward him. Mr. J. also spoke personally to Xavier, and revealed a number of things that were very hurtful and/or demeaning throughout his life.

Mr. J. hung in there with me, even when I still continued to show quite a few signs of anger. Mr. J. worked with me to try and get rid of my anger through writing and performing my music. When I worked with Mr. J., I was not feeling a lot of pain. I would often forget about a lot of the pain in my life, because I was busy writing and playing music. He showed me how to get so caught up in what I was doing, that I didn't have time to focus on all of the negatives in my life. He didn't try to get me to act like certain things in my life didn't happen; he just tried to show me how to rise above my pain.

Xavier spent the majority of his eighth-grade year and half of his ninth-grade year in the alternative education program. Once authorities in the alternative education program felt that Xavier had achieved an acceptable amount of progress, they sent him back into the traditional school setting.

Although he was excited about having made progress, Xavier also experienced a significant amount of apprehension about leaving an environment where he felt he was nurtured and protected.

While some kids looked at alternative education as a bad place for bad kids, it was actually a very good experience for me. I can say that they truly brought out some of the best in me.

I didn't feel that there were many people, other than the band teacher and a few other teachers, who cared about me, or appreciated my love of music. Just to be fair, a lot of teachers didn't know a whole lot about me and what I had gone through in my life.

Shortly thereafter, Xavier began to slip back into his old patterns of behaviors.

I didn't have a safety net anymore. There was no place for me to land if I fell. I felt so much more mature than other kids my age. I didn't enjoy being around too many kids, in the same ways that I enjoyed being around adults. The kids were just not on my level. What they thought was funny, I mostly found immature and insulting.

I just didn't feel the same in the traditional school as I did in the alternative education program. I didn't feel the same secure feelings. I felt like I was just another kid; nobody special or worth investing in. Besides, there weren't any special teachers who went out of their way to offer me support as I continued to struggle.

I was still an angry student, but they didn't seem to pay me very much attention. I was wrong to think that I was more special than anyone else, but the teachers in the traditional school seemed to be more tolerant of kids picking on other kids. I got tired of being teased and bothered by

other students and I wanted to get them off my back. The only way I saw to get the other kids off my back was to react.

From Grade 7 through a portion of Grade 9, Xavier had lived in a foster care home that he referred to as “tolerable.” Xavier was at a crossroad in his life, wherein he had to make a decision regarding which path was actually right or wrong for him. At this particular time, Xavier elected to engage in behaviors that caused him to meet with some undesirable consequences.

The foster care family did not treat me like family, but they weren’t mean either. The foster care family that I was staying with had a lot of kids and they seemed like they didn’t have time to listen to any one kid in particular. They never seemed to care what I was going through or what any of the other kids were going through. They seemed to be interested in getting the money that came with us, in order to take care of their own needs.

Sometime during Grade 9, Xavier’s case worker alerted him to facts that presented him with severely complicated and life-altering changes. Xavier was told that his mentally disturbed mother had committed suicide and that his biological father had surrendered all parental rights relative to Xavier’s continued upbringing. Xavier was devastated beyond imagination.

Why was I born into this world to be hurt so bad? At this point I was just numb, but my case worker had even more news for me. She told me that I was going to be moved to another foster home.

Since my reactions were not always the most proper, I began to start fighting again, and being disrespectful. I was sent back to where I wanted to be anyway. I know that it may not seem like the wisest thing, but the alternative education program seemed to be the best place for me.

Xavier felt comfortable in the alternative education program. The PI felt that Xavier may have helped to induce his reentry into the alternative education program. The alternative education program was where Xavier appeared to feel more comfortable.

My father had caught a third [third strike in prison] and was about to do a mandatory 15 to 20 [years in prison]. So I guess that was the reason that my father had turned over his rights to me. I guess he thought that he was doing the right thing, since my mother had died.

My case worker told me that this couple was interested in me. They wanted an older kid who might have some potential, and they had heard about my music thing. I will always think that Mr. J. had something to do with it, although he will never admit to it.

Xavier, who is Black, had always been placed in the foster care homes of other Blacks. At the time, most social service agencies felt it to be most prudent to place children with people who they deemed to be more compatible with the child's culture, religion, and/or other racial criteria they suspected to be relative.

I was absolutely shocked when I met this couple who desired to share their home with me. They were some white people. Man, I just couldn't



believe it! There just couldn't be any way that some white people wanted me to move into their house *and* take care of me.

Xavier couldn't have been more wrong. He was *just* the kind of child that this couple was looking forward to helping. The S. family desired to fill a considerable void within their own family. The S. family had lost their bright and talented teenaged son some years prior. Their son had died of an accidental drug overdose. They did not want their son's death to be in vain and were determined that they would save the life of another child.

The S. family actually preferred an older child. They desired to share their lives with a male child who needed them as much as they needed and wanted him.

I never thought that I would meet white people who seriously chose to take care of a black kid for real. My own family members had turned their back on me. None of them had taken me into their home and made me feel welcome. This family not only chose to take me in, but to love me like their own. I grew to feel so comfortable with them.

The family to which Xavier refers was wonderful to him. The S. family was also wonderful for him. Their expectations were high, in spite of Xavier's sometime unruliness; however, the S. family tempered their high level of expectations with affection and began to win over Xavier (sometimes against his wishes).

They were so kind and good to me that I couldn't believe it at first. I came into their home not expecting anything that resembled love or kindness.

By this time, I had learned to shut off my emotions to most people.

I'm sure that the S. family didn't find me easy to deal with at first. It's amazing to me that they hung in there with me. I came to them in a way where I didn't trust most people. I was so caught up into all the bad things that happened to me. I had a hard time believing that somebody wanted to keep me.

Xavier was initially skeptical of any efforts to assist him by the family with which he was now a part. Xavier had been a part of so much corruption—i.e. adults making promises they did not plan to keep, and/or adults who desired to take the money that came for him being a foster child. While a foster child (except with the S. family), Xavier had been abused, neglected, and subjected to things that he now cannot fathom.

What ended up happening was that the S. family needed me in some of the same ways that I needed them. We were all in pain and we needed healing. We didn't try to replace anybody, because we knew that we couldn't. They wanted a son and I wanted parents, but I don't think that we made comparisons, or tried to pretend that we could make each other out to be somebody that they weren't.

What the S. family did instead, was to guide me in the right directions. They encouraged me to write and play music. But, their help didn't stop there. They also encouraged me to finally get the counseling services that I needed and encouraged me to make good use of my God given talents in both music and academics.

The S. family also persuaded Xavier to involve himself in a number of extracurricular activities. The S. family's support enabled Xavier to feel a greater sense of belonging, and Xavier began to flourish, both behaviorally and academically, under their guidance.

White people weren't supposed to be this kind to black people. But, this family provided me with all the love and kindness that anyone could imagine. I just could not believe that these people were being so nice to me. I came to them in so much pain and grief. After a while, I figured out that maybe somebody could really care about me and all that I had gone through.

I became suspicious about my placement when I invited the S. family to meet Mr. J. Mr. J. was the only person I really trusted, and he seemed to know these people already. Until I picked up on the connection between Mr. J. and the S. family, I wasn't really sure whether they cared about me that much, or wanted to take on some kid as a project.

Mr. J. helped the S. family to really understand how much my music meant to me and how I was able to let go of a whole lot of pain through my music. I couldn't believe how blessed I really was. There are so many kids in foster care who want and need someone to care about them. I didn't just have a family who chose to care about me, but I had a teacher who went far above what was expected of him.

"I now know that the S. family is an example of extraordinary people.

The S. family has never failed to believe in me and have always made me feel like

I belonged in their family.” The S. family was so vested in Xavier that they eventually agreed to adopt him in his 10th-grade year.

The S. family helped Xavier to begin his lengthy journey toward his ongoing healing and recovery process. Mr. and Mrs. S are now “mom” and “dad.” Xavier appeared pleased to announce that “I am one of five children. My parents continue to support me. Because of their support, I was able to comfortably graduate from high school.”

They knew that I had gone through a lot, but they were willing to go the distance in trying to help me to be the best that I could be. I will forever be thankful to them for sharing their life with me. Due in large part to my adoptive parents, I am nearly finished with my undergraduate degree.

My parents are so proud of me and I am finally proud of myself. I hate so bad that my biological parents didn’t get to see me perform my music or see me invited to go to places outside of the United States.

Xavier is a prime example of surviving abandonment and heartache from people who are supposed to care for and protect a child. Instead, he was exposed to parents who were tortured individuals, ill prepared for parenthood and/or a normal life. Xavier felt like an intrusion upon his biological parents, as well as some of the foster care guardians.

It is hard to accept that they never got to see me play with some well known musical professionals who my biological parents thought were really good musicians. It is also hard to accept that my parents chose drugs and lives of crime over me (at least that’s the way I look at it).

I do wonder from time to time what my life would have been like without alternative education. The alternative education program introduced me to people who cared about me and a special teacher who treated me like his own.

Xavier would probably be the first to say that he was not simply a lucky kid; Xavier feels blessed to have gone through this particular alternative education program. Had Xavier not been assigned to this program, odds are that he might have met with some of the same experiences as other kids unfortunate enough to have remained in the “system.”

I started in the alternative education program knowing that I was a smart, but unhappy kid. I wasn't one of those kids who failed to be thankful. Had the S. family not taken me into their generous hearts, I probably would have ended up on drugs, in the streets, or worse.

When I started in the alternative education program, I did not see myself as someone who was very capable of doing schoolwork well, because I was carrying so much baggage. As I went along in the program, I began to know that success was possible. I am in such a great place right now. I am in that place, because of a loving family, a supportive alternative education teacher, and because I chose to work on my anger.

I forgave my biological parents a long time ago. Now, I strive each and every day to be a better person to my children than my biological parents were to me. I can now say out loud what I was frightened to say

before. My biological parents wasted their lives. They took life for granted and got played by the game of life.

I have a loving wife who supports me, and children who love and need me. My family provides me with more pleasure than I could have ever imagined. Mr. J. continues to play a large role in my life, and I am proud to call that my S. family loves me completely and unconditionally. Now I get a chance to be the protector of my own family. I hope that I am doing a reasonably good job at staying the course.

At some point, Xavier and his wife intend to adopt one or more children. Xavier wants to “pay it forward” and reciprocate the support that he received from people who never had to believe in him, especially as a result of his past experiences. They took a chance, and Xavier would like to duplicate their kindnesses. He recognizes that his life could have gone very differently without his adoptive family, his special teacher, and the alternative education program.

If I should ever become a famous blues guitarist, I will have a lot of people to thank. I know that it might sound strange, but I would thank my biological parents for giving me birth *and* giving me up, so that I would have a chance at a better life. They seemed so selfish to me at first, but now I can say that the most unselfish thing that they did was to realize that they could never have provided me with the love and protection that I needed the most from a family who has shown me love without limits. I am the person that I am today because my *true family* chose to make me one of their own.

Xavier is a very thankful person. He was at first taken under the wings of a wonderful teacher in the alternative program. The special teacher appears to have cared about Xavier as he would a biological son (for which Xavier will always be grateful).

While some former students may not have appreciated their time spent as a participant in the alternative education program, Xavier experienced a great deal of stability, counseling, and alternatives for experiencing success. He found the stricter environment at times bothersome; however, he discovered that he liked having clearly defined rules, in both the areas of learning and behavior. In addition, Xavier felt confident that he could always trust and share his feelings with someone at the alternative center.

Xavier is one of the “standout” former alternative education students. He now accepts that the rough years of his life were meant to prepare him for the type of music he now plays, how to appreciate the joys of his family and the importance of a good education.

Xavier’s adoptive parents were interested in and concerned about their son’s school progress. Xavier was elated that his parents could always be counted upon when he needed them. His parents made up for nearly all the hardships he had endured prior to them. Xavier’s parents have been instrumental in demonstrating what kind of father he is. Xavier’s parents showed him how better to structure his life in order to beat the odds.

**Case study #15—Patrick.**

I guess you could say that I ended up in the alternative education program because I was just a kid who had issues and I didn't think school rules were for me. I had a hard time with people telling me what to do then, and I have a hard time following rules now. I just don't think that other people should be up in your face all the time, trying to control your life.

After I talked back to a lot of adults, ran away from school, cursed out people and just didn't give a damn about following school rules, they were thinking about sending me to the alternative education program. I guess the last straw was when I decided to slap a teacher who was all up in my face. I mean as far as I'm concerned she deserved it because she shouldna' been all up in my face; spitting on me when she talked.

Patrick appeared to be a somewhat abrasive, strident, yet intelligent young man. It was obvious to the investigator that she should allow Patrick to expound upon information as he chose. If answering a question seemed to make him uncomfortable, the PI knew to tread lightly in her approach, so as not to be confrontational in any manner.

I guess I could say that my experiences in the alternative education program were mostly good. From the beginning, they tried to get me to follow their rules. I said to myself that I don't do that, unless they are rules that I think make sense. Asking me to follow rules like being on time for class was cool, but I didn't want nobody to tell me I couldn't go



to the bathroom when I really had to go. If I had to go, I was just gonna go whether the teacher thought I should go or not.

Patrick is well aware that he has issues regarding authority:

I just have to be myself; I can't let anyone control me. I just gotta be me.

When I got to the alternative education program, they started out trying to run me. Well, I ain't gonna be run by nobody and that's what they tried to do.

Patrick did acknowledge that some of the problems he experienced in both the traditional and the alternative education center had to do with his desire to do his own thing. "I was a white boy in a mostly black environment, but that didn't bother me at all, because I had been in a predominately black environment for most of my life."

There were white teachers who thought that I shouldn't associate with black kids in the ways that I did. I experienced some white teachers, who pulled me to the side and asked me if I realized that I was not one of them. I would let them know that I still felt like a brother of another color. The teachers who didn't understand me, the ones who didn't seem to understand that I was a free spirit, thought that I should pull away from the black kids in order to be more successful.

Black kids or any other kids didn't have nothing to do with how I did in school. The teachers who tried to tell me different pissed me off. I am who I am and that's the way it was. Since I liked a lot of things that the black kids did, it meant to me that I just respected all people.

Relative to learning, Patrick did well in the alternative education program. Patrick was fortunate to be a very smart student, who found learning easier for him than some other students. Because he did not have to study as hard as some others, he tended to take his gifts for granted.

I did well, because I was a good student who did not find learning very difficult. What they gave me to learn was kind of easy really. I didn't struggle with schoolwork, but I did struggle with behaving the way they wanted me to.

I was one of those kids who did better when I was on medication, but my mother didn't always want me to take it. When I took medication, it made me feel more normal; less active, and I got in less trouble. My mother was told by some people that hyperactive drugs made you lose your mind and so she would stop giving them to me from time-to-time.

Patrick felt like the alternative education program's staff was more patient with him than in his traditional school setting. During most of the time Patrick was in the traditional school environment, he felt like a misfit (especially without his medication).

I tried hard to get along with them in the alternative education center because they listened better and didn't freak out when I did some of the same things at the regular school. They would talk to me more and ask me more questions about why I had done what I did. They seemed to want to get to the root of my problems more. I guess it had a lot to do with the fact that they had much smaller classrooms.

I know that my time in the alternative education program was a success. I know it was a success because I worked better with fewer kids in the room. I didn't act like a clown as much, because I knew that I wasn't going to get as much attention. Also, some things that the other school teachers would have screamed and yelled at me about, the alternative teachers talked me through instead.

While Patrick acknowledged that he felt much better when he was medicated, he also stated that there were behaviors that he felt were within his control and he would use his taking or lack of having taken medication to his advantage. Sometimes, Patrick acted out simply because of his desire to fit in with a particular group. "Yeah, I wanted to be thought of as hard [tough]. I didn't want nobody to think I was a punk [sissy] or nothing. I wanted people to know that I could hold my own."

I had special teachers who made me feel comfortable being in the alternative education center. These special teachers talked to me, and understood when I just needed a break for awhile to get myself together. Those teachers seemed to understand that I was different from a lot of students, but cared for me anyway. They encouraged me instead of putting me down and sending me to the office for every little thing.

My mother was certainly into taking care of her three sons. She was available to the school anytime they had had a problem with me. My mother, who worked two jobs at the time, never missed an opportunity to meet with our teachers to discuss our progress or problems. My mother

has been so good to me and my brothers. I'm just now realizing the support and sacrifices my mother made. So many kids did not have some of the advantages that my mother gave to me.

For as much as Patrick felt successful in his two years of on-and-off-again stays in the alternative education center, he continued to feel successful, but there were also obstacles to Patrick's feeling completely successful in the alternative education program.

I would often imagine that my father had stayed in my life. Since my father didn't stay in my life, I didn't have a male role model and I think that was one of my obstacles to success. My mother tried to be both a male and a female role model. While I appreciate my mother's efforts, it did not work. I needed a man in order to teach me how to be a man, and an enforcer of rules and expectations.

My mother wasn't a consistent person when it came to making us behave, and we took advantage of that weakness. My mother would promise that if I did something wrong, she was going to take something away from me, for say a week. I would act right for about two days, and my mother would give me back whatever she had taken away for what she promised was gonna be a longer period of time.

Some people would say that my mother spoiled me in a lot of ways. My mother was known to defend me, even when I was wrong, because she just didn't want to believe that I could be as bad as the school was trying to make me out to be.

My mother would usually give us, *her children* whatever we wanted or needed. She still wanted my brothers and me to get a good education and to do better than her. My mother wanted us all to do well and sacrificed all that she had to help us to do well.

My mother was very involved in our education. My mother was there for parent conferences, boy scouts, and science fair, whatever. My mother supported us in everything that we did, even though she was probably tired from working, but she let us know that she was trying to do her best for us.

Patrick felt that his mother's involvement led to his trying to do better whether he was in the alternative education program or the traditional school setting. Patrick stated that he felt some remorse for causing his mother so much pain. However, he also acknowledged that his mother's pain was secondary to some of his misbehaviors. "At the time, I was more interested in what my friends thought about me, than whether my mother was struggling with any pain from my behaviors."

The alternative education program seemed to adequately support Patrick. They were not going to tolerate negative behaviors; however, they also took the time to listen more intently to Patrick and to support him by way of counseling and behavior modification. They wanted to know what was causing Patrick to act out in the ways that he did.

I guess I could say that I was an angry student. I didn't know at the time that my father's leaving us was a major source of my anger. Since my

father was not involved in my life, I felt like I had a parent who didn't care about me or my brothers. I was angry that my mother had to work so hard to take care of her kids.

Patrick admitted that some of his anger was not genuine. He was determined to prove that he belonged as a part of his crew. One of the requirements was that one must act like nothing fazed them.

Part of my anger was made up. I felt that I had to act hard-core in order to maintain my reputation with my friends. I wanted to act like when things bothered me, the answer was to react in a thug-like way.

Even though I tried to act hard, inside I was scared that I wasn't going to get along with some of the other kids. I knew that my mother needed help with my youngest brother and I also knew that I needed to get a job, like my oldest brother, to try to help with the household bills.

While Patrick was in the alternative education program, he felt that he had become a more successful student. Compared to his behaviors and attitude in the traditional school setting, Patrick took what he was taught and tried to use what he had learned to his benefit.

Eventually, I was able to return to the traditional school environment and do well enough to graduate from high school. My problem was that I still did things that irritated my teachers, but my grades were good enough for me to finish school.

After I graduated from high school, I decided to join the military. I lasted about one year out of the four years that I signed up for because I

kept getting NJPs (nonjudicial punishments: limited punishments which can be given for minor disciplinary offenses). After I got a few NJPs, I got a summary court martial (a simplified procedure for the resolution of charges involving minor incidents of misconduct).

I got a less than honorable discharge from the military because I had a hard time following directions and I was charged with harassment when I touched another basic trainee's breasts. We were all drunk, and she was drunk enough to begin opening up her shirt. She didn't get into trouble, but I did, and once again they took the woman's word. To me that said I was not going to let somebody yell directions at me, talk about me, and disrespect me in front of others. What gave them the right to treat me like they did? I know that a lot of it was practice for the real world, but they were not going to talk to me and treat me like they did.

I really thought that I was going to do good in the military, since I loved to fight anyway, but I guess that they didn't think that I would make a good soldier. I didn't act like it hurt me to be kicked out of the military, but it did bother me because a lot of people expected for me to fail at everything that I did.

Patrick reentered the civilian world as a somewhat changed man. A clear mindset and the ability to conduct himself appropriately continued to evade Patrick. However, during the interview period between him and the PI, he did not appear to have progressed at the rate that he seems to have determined.

I was more mature but, I still did some stupid things. I think that I still needed medication, but since I didn't get it, I started to medicate myself. I started smoking weed, got into some "X" [ecstasy], and began drinking a lot.

My life after the military began to get out of control. I was arrested for a DWI (driving while intoxicated) and I lost job after job. Right now, I'm considering moving out of the state so that I can start a new, fresh life. Maybe a new state will give me the chance to make my life over. There are just too many people who are not good for me in Missouri. I can't wait to start my life over. Maybe I'll be able to make money to send back to help my mom if I get myself together.

Patrick wishes that he could get himself together enough that he will become an asset to his mom and significant others in his life. It was/is Patrick's desire to prove his worthiness. He is no longer a self-destructive young man on a collision course headed for disaster.

When I first started in the alternative education program, I did see myself as someone capable of doing schoolwork. I knew that I was a smart kid, but I also knew that I was a troublesome student who gave all of my teachers a difficult time.

I'm happy for what I learned in the alternative education program and maybe one day I will have a job where I can work with kids who have problems like me. I just have to remember some of the lessons that I learned in the alternative ed. program, such as believing in myself and that



I'm worthy of good things happening to me, plus the lessons that life has already showed me.

I realize that I have a long way to go in order to be successful in life, but I also know that I'm going to do what I need to do to better my life. I'm down right now, but I don't expect to stay down always.

Patrick knew that he would have a long and tedious distance to travel in order to realize success. Initially, Patrick felt that the majority of the alternative education program's personnel were out to get him, because they were given information from previous teachers. Patrick's suspicions appeared to have been unfounded as he now acknowledges that as time passed, he actually had found a good deal of support from the adults at the alternative education center.

In addition to the assistance Patrick received during his stay at the alternative education center, he also gives a great deal of credit to his mother; however, he has not reconciled the hurt and pain of his father's disappearance from their family's life. Patrick's mother was integral in helping with Patrick's improvement. His mother was a part of the counseling services and behavior modification strategies that the alternative education program was able to provide. Counselors suggested his mother utilize these techniques at home, in order to complement the efforts used by the school, while making sure not to continue enabling her son. If her son made her feel guilty because he needed medication to support his overall well-being, his mother should not be fearful to force Patrick to ingest that which was meant to help him to feel more normal.

As previously stated, Patrick did matriculate from the high school setting; however, he remains an individual who continues to suffer from difficulty with authority. Given how bright Patrick is, it appears shameful that all of the interventions that he has received seem to have fallen upon deaf ears. Patrick seriously intends to leave the state of Missouri. He hopes to pursue moving to a different locale in order to make a significant difference in his life. Was Patrick a successful former student? Debatable.

### **Case Study #16—Connie.**

Where do I start with what caused me to be in the alternative education program? I guess I could say that I was one of those girls who thought it was fun to f&\*@ with other people. It was just funny to me to bother other people. I wasn't the one who fought all the time, but I was one of the ones who instigated fights between people. A lot of times, I was in the background when something bad was goin' down [happening].

Connie didn't seem to view her behaviors as negative. "I was in a bad school environment and a whole lot of kids were acting up. I didn't know why they picked me out of all those students who were acting up to go to the alternative education center." Connie was determined that she wasn't going to allow anyone (adults or not) to make decisions about her without her permission. Connie knew that she could be loud and abrasive (including the way in which she dressed). Connie said that she has always been pleased with herself, and did not care whether anyone understood her or not.

Connie appeared to be aggressive and blunt; however, she was very pointed about discussing her time in the alternative education program. Connie seemed to have fond memories of the time she spent in the program, as well as stories about her experiences there, that she willingly shared.

I had already been in the alternative education program for about six months, when I was in elementary school. I was told that I was sent there because I disrupted class, talked back to adults, and didn't respect authority. I guess that I was one of those bad girls who enjoyed being bad. I didn't think nothing about putting a razor blade in my mouth and being prepared to cut somebody if I had to. If people f\*\$#@! with me, I wanted them to know that I was on point [ready] to deal with them.

Connie did not just act the role of a tough young lady; it appeared that Connie *is* a tough young lady. Connie spoke in a manner which seemed to command respect and good listening ears. It became visibly clear that Connie wanted to commandeer the interview in order for her story to be told in accordance with her terms.

I know one thing; I wasn't scared when I went to the alternative education center. I wasn't scared of nobody or nothing. Whatever they wanted me to do, it was only going to be on my terms.

When I returned to the alternative education program as a teenager, I had my mind made up that I was gonna give them hell, because I didn't feel like I belonged there in the first place. As far as I'm concerned, I

wasn't the worst kid at the school, but they picked me to go for help anyway 'cause they had something against me in the first place.

I kept my promise to myself, that I was gonna just be myself and I wasn't gonna change for nobody. If they wanted to help me, they were gonna have to realize that I can't be nobody but me. If they wanted to see progress in me, they were gonna have to try real hard to break down barriers that I spent a long time building up.

As rough as Connie's exterior appeared to be, she could become very sensitive when it came to a difficult topic of conversation. Connie was very sensitive about her weight and how she dressed. Connie thought that there was nothing wrong with her style of clothing, and that if anyone had a problem with the way she dressed, that was their problem and not hers.

I had always been fat; I kinda learned to strike out towards others before they got a chance to get to me. I was determined that I wasn't gonna act like anything hurtful anybody said to me, actually bothered me. Inside my heart was breaking. I wanted so bad to be like the other girls. Since I wasn't like most of the girls, I wore big ol' baggy clothes and just tried to fit in.

My weight was an issue for as long as I can remember. I was at an average *woman's* weight by the time I was in second grade. I always teased the girls that a lot of boys liked; but really I was jealous of them. I hated things like physical education, because I would always be embarrassed and just play it off like I didn't want to do whatever we were

asked to do so, I would quit and call the activity stupid or something like that so I wouldn't have to participate.

Connie tried so hard to act tough, but the adults in the alternative education program were, for the most part, able to see right through her façade of insecurities. The PI was convinced that Connie continues to exude a good deal of personal confidence. Connie displayed her unique style of dress during the interview. The PI was caught somewhat off guard when Connie introduced herself. Connie had a different color of nail polish and a ring on each finger, the hair on her head looked more like an ice sculpture, and she was wearing clothing that could have been worn by someone about two sizes smaller.

I thought the alternative education program was full of s\*&# at first. I didn't think that anybody had anything to share with me that would help me to get along with other people better. I really didn't want to get along with some people any better than I was doing already. I just wanted to be left alone a whole lot of times, or hang with the people who seemed to understand me better.

My experiences in the alternative education program were not good at first. I still tried to intimidate other students, had a big mouth, and tried to instigate fights. If there was a fight or nearly a fight, the adults usually came looking for me to see what happened. Most of the time, I knew what had happened and could tell them what had took place, but I wouldn't tell them though, cause I wasn't no snitch.

After I had been in the alternative education program for awhile, I sorta began to understand that the people there were actually trying to help me and I began to try to do better and stay out of more trouble. I just needed to know that there were people out there who wanted to see me do my best.

Connie eventually found a special teacher in whom she felt she could confide, and someone who was aware of her predicament by virtue of shared experiences.

Since I had this teacher to support me and tell me about her personal experiences, I began to respond better to the environment that I found myself trying to deal with. Mrs. C. seemed like she understood everything that I told her. She knew how sad I often felt, and why I often lashed out at others.

I really didn't mean to hurt others; it had just become something that I was use to doing in order to protect my feelings. Sometimes I still do it to this day, because I am still a fat person and I don't always enjoy being in this body.

Connie pretended to be a spirited individual with a good deal of confidence. In reality, Connie was just as insecure as most teenagers. Connie's approach was to pick on the more attractive, vulnerable, and/or popular students before they had an opportunity to embarrass her. Connie created a sense of fear among other students. Since Connie had the ability to be a loudmouthed student with the ability to become confrontational at any time (primarily in the presence

of other students), many students ingratiated themselves to Connie so that she might allow them to stay underneath her radar. Many of the other students thought that Connie was a strong force to be reckoned with, and that the last thing any “wise” student would want to do is to negatively cross her path. Connie had earned a reputation as a bully, which caused many students to be fearful of her. The other students were unaware that Connie never planned to fight anyone; she was simply good at manipulation.

I considered my time in the alternative education program a success because I learned to enjoy doing the right things most of the time and getting praised for doing a good job. Since I have been so criticized in my life, mostly by my own family, it was nice to have people who would say good things to you when they didn’t have to do that.

While I was in alternative education, they helped me to see some of the reasons why I did some of the things that I did. Helping me to understand what I did made me feel proud, because I knew that I was embarrassing my parents. My parents were Pentecostal, and they raised us to do and say the right things. Even though I went to church often, I still didn’t do the things that I was taught to do all the time. My parents wanted to see all of their children do well and make them proud. My four sisters made my parents proud. As the youngest in the family, I guess my parents had gotten so much older and let me get away with a lot of things that they didn’t let my sisters get away with.

Since I felt free to do what I wanted at home, I guess I thought that I should be free to do what I wanted to do at school as well. I wanted teachers and other people to let me have my way or there were going to be problems.

My relationship with a special teacher made me feel so good about myself. The only thing was, was when she wasn't around, I started doing the same bad things all over again. It was like she had testified to me, but as soon as the sermon was over; I stopped believing in myself as much. I would go back to my old ways of handling things, which was almost always out of anger.

Connie felt that the biggest obstacles to her doing well in the alternative education program had a lot to do with her private struggles and inability to understand that she was not going to be an average-size "desirable" girl without a sizeable amount of intervention. However, if Connie did not become one of the "skinny girls" soon, she felt that she could taunt them and release some of the jealous feelings she harbored toward them.

I think that a great obstacle to my success had to do with most teachers in the alternative education program talking to me honestly about certain positive things about. Maybe they weren't supposed to talk to me about my weight, but I think they should have. Isn't that why they have nurses, counselors and stuff?

The more they didn't pay attention to my real issues, the longer I spent time doing stuff that I shouldn't have done. Maybe, if they had



given me information about getting skinny and I had saw progress, maybe I wouldn't have been so abusive to other people. It's like they failed to deal with all of my problems, so I took out my anger on other people who seemed weaker than me.

I was loud and ghetto acting. That scared some of the weak girls. All my friends were heavy too, so we had a lot of fun teasing those girls who thought that they were better than us. They had laughed at us for a lot of years, so I thought that us teasing them back was just what they deserved. I don't understand why the grownups didn't figure out that me and my girls (friends) had feelings also and they shoulda protected us too.

Connie didn't understand that the collective hands of the school were relatively tied. She was unaware (at that time) that it was not deemed appropriate for faculty members to flippantly engage in some confidential conversations with students. There were staff members who could have been of help to Connie. However, those staff members felt that they were restricted to general conversations about health and nutrition. They felt that they were in no position to speak with Connie on a personal basis about her weight.

My mother used to get on me about my weight all the time. I knew that she wanted the best for me, but she just made me eat more. I became a "closet eater" who ate very little around other people, but I ate a lot in my own bedroom, where I kept a lot of food. My father would say things about my weight also, but he was a little kinder and gentler about it. No matter which way my parents said it, I still felt awkward, ugly, and

unworthy of praise and that they were at least a little ashamed of me even though we talked often and my feelings were discussed a lot. I just felt like my parents were too old to understand what I was really going through. I needed someone in the alternative education program to counsel me, tell me the truth about myself and show me how to make better decisions about my life.

Although my parents teased me from time to time about my weight, they also tried to protect me and talked with the people they needed to at whatever school I was going to. I felt like they supported me on one hand, but they were ashamed of me on the other hand. Nobody else in my family was as short or fat as me.

I guess if I'm keeping it real, I was an obstacle to my own success too, mostly because of my jealousy toward other girls, especially if they seemed weak. I took the pain and pity I felt for myself and used them as weapons to cause other people pain. I would look at some girls and say to myself, God is not fair. Why did He give these girls everything? Why did He chose these girls to have beautiful bodies, allow them to have so much confidence and a whole lot of them were smart or talented on top of it? In my mind, that wasn't fair at all!

Although Connie expressed obstacles to her success, she still felt that there were great assets as well.

I really could say that my mother and father were assets, since they did support me in some ways that helped me. My mother and father would

listen to me when I told them that I had gotten into trouble and why. They would talk to me and listen too. I can thank them for that, since so many kids didn't have both their mom and their dad to support them.

Another asset to me being in the alternative education program was the support that I got from one special teacher. Mrs. C. wanted me to do better and she spent extra time with me to help me to do better. She listened to me when I needed someone to talk to about what was going on in my life and how I could better my life.

Connie felt that the alternative education program helped her as much as she allowed them to; however, she acknowledges that she still has a way to go in order to attain more noticeable success. Connie recognizes that her weight is still an issue that only she can address. If Connie is unwilling or unable to make deliberate attempts to alter her appearance and dress, she should try to adjust the way in which she deals with others. She remains, however, sensitive to anyone else discussing this topic. In spite of how her attire causes stares from others, she says that she is comfortable.

I realized that I needed to improve on certain actions and behaviors; but, I feel like there weren't things that were pulling me away from the alternative education program that were outside of my ability to handle if I had put forth the effort.

I knew that if I had done my all, I had the ability to do whatever I wanted to do at the alternative education center. I was a math whiz; I got as far as trigonometry in high school I wasn't no dummy by any means. I

didn't think that there was any subject that I couldn't tackle well, unless I didn't try. I am a smart person who now works as an accountant for the government and I have had this job for 10 years. I graduated from high school and did about one year in college. Maybe one day I will go back to school, but right now I'm not really worried about it.

As far as being in the alternative education program, I think the program is pretty good. I just think that some of the adults need to listen to the students more carefully. If they want to help, they should start by looking at the family and see if there are problems there. If there are problems in the family, then it just makes sense that there may be problems for the child; where they act out their problems at school. That child could be frustrated and then create problems for the school.

The alternative education program (singularly) was not of much help when it came to helping Connie to feel more comfortable about taking pride in her. Connie was then, and remains, a very stubborn person who (on a smaller scale) continues to bully and make fun of others. Connie seemed to feel that she needs to march to the beat of her own drum, and that some of the suggestions made by the program's staff members were unwarranted. Thankfully, there was a special alternative education teacher in her life, who was able to peel away some of the layers of distrust that Connie felt in sharing her feelings toward many innocent people.

It was important for Connie to look like the other girls. She had long ago found it unfair that her sisters were of an average weight and height. She

wondered why she was not as fortunate. Initially, Connie pretended that she was self-assured and that the name-calling and gags didn't hurt her.

A very special teacher allowed Connie to lean on her as she began to try and deal with the issues that caused her to misbehave in some of the ways in which she did. Not only did this special teacher extend a listening ear, but she protected Connie in many ways as well.

Connie turned to comedy as a means of embarrassing others and chose to get others before they had a chance to get her. Connie's lack of confidence before her interview with the PI remained the same during the interview (Connie was one of the PI's former students).

While Connie is successful as an accounting technician, she now lives in a state of delusional grandiosity that is believed to be her method of handling anything that hurts her. She dresses inappropriately for her weight, talks too loudly, and basically does a good deal to draw attention to her.

Connie remains in touch with the alternative education teacher who was so kind to her when there was no one else who seemed to understand her and/or who felt sympathetic toward her. Connie claims that all (or most) of the people she works with find her to be a very funny person who does not take life too seriously. What they don't know is that Connie is still a much-wounded person who wonders what she could do differently. As a result, Connie would be among the students who were not deemed successful. Connie continues to demonstrate virtually the same behaviors in the workplace. She has not seemed to understand that the same behaviors will lead to the same results.

**Case Study #17—Travis.**

I ended up in the alternative education program because I had trouble following rules and directions. Most of the time, I just didn't get what was going on with me that made me do some of the bad things that I did. I would often bully kids who I looked at as weak. Kids who let me bully them were stupid individuals as far as I was concerned. It seemed like they deserved what they got. Sometimes it seemed like I was spending more time in the PI's office than I did my classroom.

I heard teachers talking bad about me, even when they thought that I couldn't hear them. Teachers ought to watch what they say about students because you never know who is overhearing you and who you may be hurting. I knew that I was bad, but I also believe that it was their job to help me, not to talk badly about me.

Travis appeared to be a shy and quiet young man. Although somewhat reserved, Travis was delightfully open about his educational transgressions.

I knew that I was wrong for messing with [bothering] the kids that I did, but something wouldn't let me stop what I was doing. I hated weak kids. I couldn't stand to see them coming anywhere near me, because they just made me sick.

When I was sent to the alternative education center, I tried to do better; I tried to get over my *thing* about weak kids. Somehow, I couldn't shake how I felt about weak people. I shared my feelings about weakness with my teachers and the counselor. What I didn't share with them is how

strong I felt about my dislike for them. Mostly, I thought black people were weak. Every time I heard something about black kids it was bad. When we heard about test scores, the test scores were always worse because of black kids. Almost all of the fighting that went on happened between black kids. If they were honest, all of the kids I know of would agree with me. Black kids made the worst grades, and were always talking and acting really loud.

The PI admits that at this point, she asked Travis if he meant to say that all Blacks were inferior. The PI went further to reiterate that she is a doctoral candidate and that that's no small feat. Travis responded, "Maybe you did alright, but, I think that most blacks aren't like you. Maybe you had some white blood in you or something."

The PI went on to explain that her mother is Hispanic and her father African American. The PI asked if her mother's ethnicity could have played a part in her being an academic achiever. Travis replied, "Well, I think that Hispanic people do better than blacks. Maybe your father was one of the blacks who did good, even if your race does not usually do good in school."

Following the dialogue between Travis and the PI, Travis stated, "I did pretty good in the alternative education center until *they* started messing with me."

They wanted me to be a perfect student and I wasn't going to be. I had problems that I wasn't willing to share with them, even in the beginning. They wanted me to be around people I was uncomfortable being with. I

even became one of the kids who got bullied, but I would at least fight back. I wasn't some kid who was gonna let other people just f\*#@ with them.

I guess I would say that my time in the alternative education program was successful since there were some teachers who cared, and I had a counselor that I could talk to when I needed to. The alternative education experience was better than the regular school, since they really seemed to listen better and didn't make so many judgments about people.

Travis seemed to blame others, especially Black students, for almost every school-related problem he experienced. Therefore, it seemed almost unimaginable that Travis's favorite teacher in the alternative education program was a Black teacher.

Ms. A. was good to me, even though she had heard that I didn't get along with a lot of the black kids. She let me know that she didn't care what color I was, I was still one of her *babies*. Ms. A supported me a lot and she tried to get me to be involved in some things she called *cultural* so that I would learn about other people.

I told Ms. A. that I was just tired of black people having excuses for different things that happened to them. When were they going to let it go, and just live like everybody else? I just didn't understand them. Ms. A. tried to get me to understand that you have to judge people one-by-one, no matter what their race may be, but I just couldn't help but think that



some races of people are just too different for me to understand them and that I wasn't gonna try to learn about those people.

Travis expressed a good deal of affection whenever we discussed Ms. A.; however, he appeared to view her as an exception to the rules of a race, rather than to view her individually. At some point in their relationship, Travis offered Ms. A. the possible root cause of his anger and she began to try to help Travis overcome some of his issues.

One of the major problems I had at the alternative education center has to do with my stepfather. I was the only child for a long time. It was just me and my mother. Then, my mother decided to get hooked up [develop a relationship] with this black guy.

My mother then decided to marry this guy and have kids with him. It went from just me and my mother, to my mother, her husband and the two kids they have. Since their kids looked black, and my mother was accepting the black *culture*, I felt like me and her didn't have the same relationship anymore.

My mother started acting black and talking black. She started having my stepfather's relatives over to our house all the time, and she just wanted me to change and accept them like they were my family or something.

Whenever we were around my stepfather's relatives, they would be complementing my little sister and brother, but they wouldn't say much to me, or about me. I felt like I was invisible as far as they were concerned.

I also felt like my mother bought into the whole *black* thing and just let them treat me unfairly.

My mother and me had been so close before this man came into our life. My mother didn't even act like the kind who would *hook up* with a black guy. My mother use to say bad things about black people, just like my other relatives would. I couldn't believe that my mother, who had had these negative feelings about black people, was now married to, and was sharing her life with a black man. It seemed like my mother's feelings changed because she had gotten with this black guy and his family.

One time, my stepfather and I had got into it and the next thing I know, his relatives were kicking my ##\$. That let me know that his people didn't accept me, and my mother didn't seem to care.

When I was younger, my mother seemed to be interested in everything I was doing in school. When she got with my stepfather, she didn't seem to care too much. Everything seemed to be about my stepfather and their two kids. I really felt like an outsider who didn't have anybody to lean on anymore. As far as I was concerned, my mother had become a race trader. She didn't seem to care about me anymore, or how I was doing in school. It was all about her and her new little family.

I didn't know what kind of power he had over my mother, but he wasn't going to have that kind of power over me. I didn't care whether he had kids with my mom or not, I wasn't going to do most of the things he asked me to do.

Travis tended to view his relationship with Ms. A. as one of his greatest assets relative to positive participation in the alternative education program.

Ms. A. allowed me to talk about anything without her getting mad. When I would say nasty things about black people, she didn't get mad; she just tried to explain how I needed to think again about what I was saying.

I also considered some of the white teachers and white students as being assets. They let me know that they understood my feelings. Most of these people let me know that I was in a difficult situation and they let me know that they wouldn't know how to handle this situation either. Some comforting conversations later with these people, made me think that I needed to work on myself and not hold onto these negative feelings about my mother and the racism I was experiencing.

As I said before, my mother was very involved in my schooling from the beginning. My mother always checked my homework and report cards. My mother would come up to the school for parents' nights and volunteer to do stuff at the school. Anytime I told my mother I was having any kind of problem, she either called, or came up to the school.

I was so use to my mother being there for me and me alone, that I didn't know how to share her with others. When she didn't pay as much attention to me as she did before, I felt hurt and left out. I blamed my mother for my feelings then, and I still do.

My mother seemed to be more worried about her new children than she was worried about me. I wasn't use to that; I was use to it being

just my mother and me. I didn't know how to share her and I didn't want to share her either.

It was clear that Travis was going through an extremely difficult period and seemed to be involved in a situation that he was ill-prepared to handle. At this point, Travis seemed unsure about trusting anyone, especially Black people. Ironically, Travis continued to maintain a good relationship with Ms. A. "I don't know why Ms. A. was different to me than other black people. I just knew that I really liked her and she listened to me without judging me."

I couldn't believe that Ms. A. supported me even when I said a lot of negative things about black people. Ms. A. was the biggest supporter I had in the alternative education program.

I was a really angry 15, almost 16-year-old boy. I was so mad that my mother developed a relationship with this guy. I felt overlooked and deserted by my mother. I didn't know why she had to change our whole life. My mother made me have to deal with a culture that I wasn't use to and I didn't really want to know about. I had been comfortable with my life before my stepfather. I didn't really feel that black people where any different from white people until my stepfather came into my life.

I hated him and I thought that he was responsible for taking my mother away from me. As far as taking me away from school, my stepfather had such a power over my mother that I wanted to leave our house and never see him or my mother again.

I decided to leave home, dropout of school and become an independent person, since no one seemed like they cared. My mom said to me, if you can't accept him, then you cannot accept me, and you can leave.

Travis spoke with the school counselor and Ms. A. He shared some of his dilemmas with the two of them and told them that his mind was made up that he was not going to continue going to school.

It was just too much pressure going on, at home and at school. I wanted to drop out to prove that I could do some things on my own. I was going to make money, get my own apartment and live on my own. If my mom came to her senses, then we would be like a real family again.

My brother and sister weren't a problem; it was the ways of my stepfather that made me angry. He wanted to force the whole black thing on me. I wasn't gonna be no wigger [white "n" word]. I had to be me and live the way I had always lived. I wasn't gonna let my stepfather determine how I was gonna behave. I began to think that if I left home, I would be able to let my mother and her man lead the kind of life they wanted.

I wasn't sure about what I was doing, but I knew that I had to get away from that environment or somebody was gonna get hurt. My stepfather and I began to argue all the time. He would threaten to hurt me, or call the police and I didn't want any of that stuff to happen. I

wasn't trying to get a record or nothing, I just wanted to get away and be free to do my own thing.

A lot of times, I was given the responsibility of caring for my brother and sister, but I hated that I was asked a lot of times why my sister and brother did not look like me. I got tired of their questions and I began to focus on my role in this new family.

Travis began his personal odyssey into self-actualization when he felt like such an outsider within his family that he needed to fully remove himself from his family's situation. "I just felt so much like I didn't belong anymore. My mother was totally absorbed in her husband and new children that I didn't feel that there was a place for me."

My mother's new life had left little room for me. Since I didn't feel like my mother cared, I just dropped out of school in the 11th grade. I thought my mother would be angry and forbid me from leaving school, but she let it be my decision and wished me luck.

Travis seemed to feel very confident about what he was planning to do with his life; however, he still desired that his mother play a significant role in his life. In Travis's mind his mother betrayed him; he decided to live his life independently.

I realized that I could no longer depend upon my mother, because she had a life of her own. That life did not include me, in the ways that I was used to, so I had to create a life of my own.

I believed that I was capable of doing good schoolwork, but my circumstances prevented me from achieving at a level that I knew I felt comfortable.

I could have been a better student; however, the tensions in my family made me a student who didn't show what I was really capable of doing. On top of it, my family didn't support me in the way that they should have.

My mom didn't seem to be concerned that I dropped out of school and moved out. She just seemed to be concerned about her new family. I can admit that I grew more and more resistant toward anything that black people told me.

I now know that I shouldn't blame a whole race, but I still keep blaming the majority of black people for my situation. My mother put me in such a difficult situation; it's not just that I miss my mom so much and the relationship that we had before her new husband, it's that we aren't a family anymore.

Ms. A. continues to be an influential component in Travis's life; however, she realizes that Travis has a good deal of anger which he continues to harbor towards his mother and stepfather.

Simply stated, Travis did not feel much support or caring from the alternative education program as a whole. However, there was a special teacher who continues to believe in him, even to this day. The teacher who was special to

Travis during his time at the alternative education center happened to be a nonjudgmental person who was not bothered by Travis's biased dialogue.

In addition to the support Travis's special teacher provided, the alternative education program was instrumental in helping to route Travis and his family for appropriate counseling. Travis, however, resisted sharing much of his true self with the counseling service providers and therefore made little progress. Travis thought that whatever difficulties he suffered from could be best handled by him and not some strangers intruding into his life.

Travis did not complete his public school education, and he continues to struggle with his emotions toward his family and life in general.

#### **Case study #18—Douglas.**

I know exactly how I ended up in the alternative education program. I did some very bad things that I kept doing until the adults at my school couldn't take it no more. I think I did it all. I hit, cursed out and hurt other students, I destroyed school property, and I kept walking out of class or the whole school building. What finally got me thrown out was when I knocked the f\*\$# out of a teacher who got smart with me.

Douglas came across as a former participant who seemed totally delighted by the things that he had done wrong. "It was funny to me that they took me so seriously. It was like they didn't understand that some kids have extra energy that they have to burn up."

He also appeared to be quite handsome, boisterous, charming, and vociferous. Douglas appeared to be an intelligent young man who was more than



willing to share his experiences. “I like to tell people what I been through, ‘cause I been through a lot.”

The first thing that happened when they sent me to the student support center was that teachers and other people already seemed to know about me. I didn’t like that, and I didn’t think that it was fair for them to judge me before they got to know me. I think in my case, they didn’t seem like they wanted to try to get to know the person that I was and why I did some of the things that I did. I think my behavior wasn’t always my fault. It was like I didn’t have control over some things that I did.

Douglas went so far as to say:

I wasn’t even responsible for the first time I got this girl pregnant. Me and this girl from the alternative education program got together and she got pregnant when we were both 13 years old. I didn’t think that I had any responsibility ‘cause she knew that she could get pregnant and I show [sure] wasn’t ready to have no kids.

The girl dropped out of school, but I kept going ‘cause I wasn’t the one who got pregnant. She should have protected herself so that two kids wouldn’t have had a kid. Matter of fact, she told me that she had got a shot so she wouldn’t get pregnant. Since she lied, I just went on with my life ‘cause she shouldn’t have lied.

My first experience in the alternative education program had to do with how they knew so much about me before I came. I knew that they had some information on me that somebody gave them, by the way that

they treated me. These people were prejudiced about me from the time I came to the school. They had heard that I was a problem kid and they treated me like they knew that I was gonna be a program kid in the alternative education program also. I don't think that it was fair to judge me without knowing me.

When they found out that I was a father, they treated me even worse; like I wasn't being responsible or something. I thought I tried to do the best that I could. I wasn't expecting to become a father at such a young age. I didn't get her pregnant on purpose. She had control over her body and she didn't do what she was supposed to do.

Douglas thought that his behaviors were normal and acceptable. He had been brought up by his mother and two sisters to think that it was not a male's responsibility to either bear or rear children. Douglas's mother supported him and encouraged this level of thinking. "My mother let me know that that girl getting pregnant wasn't my fault. She should have taken care of herself and the pregnancy wouldn't have happened."

I was in eighth grade when that girl got pregnant. I returned to school for about four months, but my mother thought that I would do better by going away to stay with an uncle in Arkansas who she thought had a lot of money. She thought that he could be a good influence on me.

I went to that country a%# town, and felt so out of place. The only thing I liked was that there were some pretty girls there. I got so caught up in the ladies there, that when I left Arkansas six months later, I was

going to be a father again. This time, I found out that I had become the father of twins. Here I was, 14 and the father of three children. I couldn't believe my situation.

Douglas' mother and sisters seemed to defer any of his responsibilities toward the girl's family, since they felt comfortable in the belief that Douglas did not bear any fatherly responsibilities.

My mother and my sisters thought that it was this girl's fault that she didn't know how to keep her legs closed. After all, the girl is gonna be stuck with the baby anyway, unless the guy decides he wants to be with her.

I was so glad when I returned to St. Louis. Those was some of the most country a#\$ people I had ever met and I didn't have much in common with them. Even though I knew I was gonna return to the alternative education program, to me it seemed better than staying down there and being bored with these people who wasn't on the same level with me.

Douglas was raised in the type of matriarchal environment where the male was supposed to provide for his family only if he really wanted to be in a committed relationship. Douglas was not serious about either of the two girls he had impregnated, so he felt no obligations toward either.

Not only did Douglas feel that he shouldn't shoulder any responsibilities, his family agreed that the untimely pregnancies were the fault of the young girls

he decided to sleep with. As far as Douglas was concerned, the babies were the mothers' responsibilities.

These chicks made my life difficult, because they wanted to be with me. But, I was interested at the time in going to school and trying to do my best to make it during my second time around. I made up my mind that I was going to do better. I was going to listen better and follow directions better.

In the back of my mind, I kept thinking that I wanted to be successful; but, I kept focusing on girls and not the things that I should be learning.

Douglas felt that he was not as appropriately focused on learning as he should be. Thus, he did not feel that he was as successful a student as he could have been. "I just couldn't get girls off my mind. I enjoyed hearing them say how fine [good-looking] I was and how many girls said that they wanted to get pregnant by me."

I got so strung out on girls that it was like an addiction. I just liked to f\*#@# a lot and the girls I ran into wanted to give it to me because they thought I looked so good. I didn't have to do anything; they just looked at me and decided that they wanted to have babies with me.

Getting back to the alternative education program, I really did have teachers and other grown people who were trying to help me. When they found out that I was 14 and getting ready to have three kids, I got talked to a lot about protecting myself and how I could get into trouble doing some

of the things that I was doing. I saw their point, but it still didn't make me believe that I had real problems. As far as I was concerned the girls had problems. They was the ones who chose to have babies by me.

Even though the girls had problems, and I loved girls, they were one of my biggest obstacles to success in the alternative education program. I thought about sex more than I ever thought about school.

Girls just stayed on my mind. They seemed to be all that I could think about most of the time. Unfortunately, they were obstacles to my success since I stayed so focused on them rather than my schooling.

It was an obstacle for me to be in the program and look the way I do. I don't mean to brag, but almost everybody that I met just told me how good looking I am. They told me stuff like I have really dreamy eyes, beautiful black curly hair, my bone structure and stuff like that. I can't help looking good and girls wanting to have a kid by me, and I wasn't about to turn down them offering sex to me.

Another obstacle to Douglas's attaining the best possible results had to do with his mounting drug use.

I think that my family really enabled me with drugs. Whenever I would ask my mother or my sisters for money they gave it to me. After awhile, I got into trouble with drugs and spent six months in juvie [juvenile] detention for possession.

I returned to the alternative ed. program after I got released, but I started using drugs again and became a father again. I was disappointed

in myself, because I had promised myself that when I went back to the alternative ed. program I was gonna do a better job of getting my life together. I was gonna do what the teachers said that believed that I could do.

Well, all that happened was that I got disappointed in myself again. By the time that I was 15 1/2, I was the father of three kids with one more on the way. It makes me sad to say that I didn't do much for those kids, but that's what happened.

Although Douglas was disappointed in himself, he considered his mother and sisters as monetary assets who financially supported him even during his wrongdoing.

My mother and two older sisters have always been there for me. They have believed in me, when I didn't believe in myself. They are all strong people and it's sad that I'm the only male in our family, but I am the weakest one.

My mother didn't graduate from high school, but she almost did. My two sisters did really good in school. One of my sisters is a lawyer and the other one is an insurance executive. They all told me that they would stand by me and they also tried to keep me get on the right path, like getting a good education.

My mother and sisters kept in touch with the people at the alternative education center, and my mom and sisters tried to see how I could get some help for myself, so that I could be successful too. I can

truly say that my family tried to do their best with me, but I was the one who kept making mistakes.

I can also say that there were teachers who tried their best to talk to me, and at least *said* that I had the potential to do so much better. They had me talk to the nurse, counselor and mentor teachers, but I didn't listen. I really wish that I had listened, then maybe I wouldn't be in the position that I'm in now.

Douglas was able to continue in the alternative education program for approximately one full school year prior to this, his final stint. Since Douglas left the alternative education program, he has been incarcerated at least four times.

I can truly say that they tried to support me at the alternative education center, but I wasn't willing to listen to what they had to say at the time. The people at the alternative education program provided me with services to better myself, they even provided me with counseling services, but I didn't care about nothing they had to say at the time. I just wanted to have fun and I didn't take life very seriously at all.

Although Douglas did.

Now that I review it, I think I was angry about my father. My father had abandoned me, and now I was doing the same things to my kids. My father had kids all over the place, and here I was doing some of the same things that he did.

I would say that my mother, counseling and some teachers at the alternative education program helped me to realize that the things I was

doing in my life were wrong. I just couldn't seem to do the right things. Either drugs or girls kept getting in the way of my being more successful. I wanted to have it all. I felt like I deserved to be successful like my sisters, but I made myself think that my version of successful was gonna be found in the streets, not in school.

What pulled me away from school was that I kept getting caught up with women, babies, and drugs. It was my entire fault, I can't blame nobody else, but those girls didn't have to keep having babies by me.

When I started in the alternative education program, I really did think that I could be successful and capable of doing schoolwork. I knew that I began as a bad student who got into a lot of trouble, but I had no idea that I would end up doing some of the things that I did because I had the best of intentions. Supposedly, I had a lot of potential, but I guess that I didn't use common sense because the people in the alternative education program did try to help me.

Douglas began to feel hopeless about furthering his education. He began to feel that he had made nearly insurmountable and erroneous decisions relative to his educational status.

I just dropped out with the thought in mind that I was gonna work for awhile and then return to school. I was gonna get my life together and then get my GED. However, things didn't work out that way.

Since I dropped out, I have gone on to make some irresponsible decisions. I am now 33 years old. I have 15 children by eight different



baby mamas. I guess they're all my kids, but I have never asked for a DNA test on any of them, because they all look like me. They're all cute and got my features.

My kids are the kind of kids that you can spot them anywhere. I hate that their mamas have fights with each other, but hey, I can't do anything about that. Plus, none of the mamas ask me for child support or anything, so I just visit most of them from time to time.

I know that I don't do all that I'm supposed to do, but I am a proud father. Some of my kids are doing real good, but I can only say that their moms are responsible for them doing good.

Since dropping out of school, Douglas has met with a good deal of drama. Douglas has been in and out of prison several times. Nearly each time he returned, he became a father once more. Douglas has two set of twins, as well as 11 other single-birth children.

My life is so f@#\$\*% up that I was kicking it (associating with) this one girl, and the next thing I know, I'm messing with her mama. I can't believe that her mama ended up getting pregnant and having a baby by me.

I also can't believe that two of my babies' mamas live in the same apartment complex and are always getting into fights all the time. I try to talk to them, but it don't seem to do any good. Both of them think that I want to be with them. They are both good ladies but I'm not trying to be with either of them.

Sometimes I am able to help my kids' mothers when I'm out of prison and I'm working as a handyman; doing odd jobs. The problem is that, I still mess with drugs and alcohol a lot of times and that takes a lot of my money, but I try to give my kids as much as I have left over.

Several years ago, Douglas committed a drug-induced crime that landed him both in prison and a psychiatric facility. Douglas attempted to rob a savings and loan and was arrested on the premises. He received a lesser charge because he was only pretending to carry a weapon; he was also diagnosed with a number of psychological issues.

I knew that something was wrong with me, but I couldn't ever think about what it was. It hurt me really bad when one of my sisters put up \$20,000 dollars for me to get out of prison because she got some of her good lawyer friends. After about eight months I was arrested again, but not before I had gotten two women pregnant.

I was given everything to become a successful person. I guess I chose to live a more reckless life than my sisters. I know that I am a disappointment to almost everybody who ever believed in me and I feel sad about that.

I also feel sad that my children haven't had a good father. I know that I could have done better by my kids, and maybe I shouldn't have had so many kids. I don't know what happened to me, but I sorta *got off* on producing new kids.

Here I am at 33 years old and my life is not what it should be. I feel so ashamed for what I have done with my life and if I had it to do again, I just wouldn't have made all the mistakes that I have made.

Douglas was asked if the alternative education program had been of any use to him.

I can't blame them for real. I think I sorta' blame my mother and sisters for doing all kinds of things for me because I was the only male in the family. They always protected me, and stood up for me even when I was wrong.

Bottom line is that I shoulda been more serious about school. There was not too much the alternative education program could have done for me in the state of mind that I was in. I strived to do things that made me feel good. I didn't care too much about school and they couldn't make me care anymore because I wasn't in the same place as they wanted me to be.

I'm thankful for the alternative education program, but I think that a person needs to be willing to change in order to be successful there, or anywhere else for that matter. You've got to want to change or improve upon yourself in order for your time there to be effective. I didn't want to change at that time, so there wasn't very much that they could do for me.

Douglas is uncertain about what he is going to do with his life and/or relationships with his children. However, he states that he is positive that he will attempt to do his best.

I just hope that one day I will get my GED, learn a trade, and do better for all of my kids. Since I know that I haven't been the best father, maybe I can get a skilled trade and help out my children and myself.

Simply put, Douglas ingested very little from the alternative education program and/or the traditional school. Douglas just floats through life and does not seem to feel that he is responsible for anything or anyone, whether positive or negative.

Douglas was offered counseling and tutorial services while he participated in the program. Douglas was provided more resources than most students (mostly due to his fathering of children and lack of responsibility); he tended to listen, but failed to adhere to the voices of reason.

Douglas acknowledges that "you have to be willing to hear and do the things that are good for you if you want to make a change, and I wasn't willing to make any changes while I was in the alternative education program." The counseling and support he received while a student in the alternative education program had little to do with Douglas's attempts toward change. Unfortunately, Douglas has not changed and considers the alternative education program to have been a waste of time.

Yeah, I've been locked up a lot of times, but I had some benefits too. I always had girls who kept money on my book [monies for commissary items]. Hell, I had chicks who ran into each other while I was in jail and they still took care of me. Some of them were baby mamas, but not all of them were. Some of them were just trying to get with me.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

Following the assimilation of numerous research information, and fact-finding interviews, this chapter concludes with a discussion of findings, the implications, and conclusions.

### **Preparation for the Study**

The mere mention of alternative education can often generate negative connotations, since most general education faculty members know exactly how these students are referred to the program. Alternative education professional staff members (who agreed to speak with the PI), mentioned that dealing with these students was usually challenging, since most students were both academically and behaviorally challenged while they were a part of the regular classroom setting. However, it appeared to the professional staff that if the students made progress while participating in the alternative program, it was often short-lived. Therefore, general education teachers and the alternative education professional staff lacked the opportunity to carry out strategic plans for student success. In other words, there was no strategy in the strategic plan for back-sliding students – no plan to get them back on track.

### **Emerging Themes from Case Studies**

Analysis of the case study data revealed 10 emerging themes: anger, victim mentality, neglect, abandonment, apathy, self doubt, bullying, academic struggles, relationship with a special adult, and unequal prospects. Each is discussed in detail and related to the case studies.

**Emerging theme: Anger.** The majority of the former participants expressed varied degrees of anger. The anger was typically due to their environmental circumstances and the conditional difficulties they faced on a near daily basis. As stated by Sharon, case study participant #2, “I continue to be embarrassed and angry about my upbringing. My mother and father were so stupid!” Often times, these former participants were angry because they held no power to alter their negative circumstances. A number of these students were angry because they were innocent victims placed in a situation over which they felt no control.

**Emerging theme: Victim mentality.** Some of the former participants stated that they harbored deep resentments regarding their station in life. These same students felt that they had been picked upon by teachers, fellow students, and some professional staff. In the case of Nikita, case study participant # 6, “If they could have showed me how anything that they were teaching me could be used later on in my life, and made learning more fun, then maybe I would have stayed in school.”

Former participants also declared that they were not responsible for being poor, wearing charitable clothing, or their minimal (if any), parental support. The participants overwhelmingly agreed that life had handed them an unfair deal, and that they should not be held responsible for their unfortunate circumstances and having to survive repercussions; such as their mothers continuing to have children when they could not afford them or the negative or completely lacking relationship with their fathers.

**Emerging theme: Neglect.** The interviewed educational professionals expressed significant concerns relative to neglected students. How could these children be neglected by the very people who were supposed to protect them? Quincy, case study participant #7, could relate so well to the issue of neglect. As he mentioned,

My mother is mental to this day. Other people thought that they knew what was happenin' in our house and so other people kept callin' in on my mother, and sayin' that we were being neglected. We really was neglected, but I didn't know that back then. As a matter of fact, I didn't even know what neglected meant.

So often, these parents of neglected children deny any culpability relative to any shortcomings on their part. Those students who were being neglected were transparent to the educational professionals. Many of these students were easily agitated, lacking school supplies, hungry, unkempt, and often sleepy. The educational professionals found it difficult to remain objective toward these students, yet, realized that their hands were tied and that there was very little that they could do.

**Emerging theme: Abandonment.** The educational professionals reported that the majority of students experienced one or both parent(s) having been incarcerated. One of the former participants suffered the loss of her father due to the finality of his death penalty sentencing. Other students experienced the death of a parent or loved one (usually to some sort of violence). Jeremy said,

A lot of kids had mothers who did bad things, but I didn't think that anybody's mother could be as bad as my mother. My mother is somebody who didn't let her children get to know her 'cause of her incarceration. My mother was in prison from the time I was in 'bout first grade, until I was 18.

Often these students experienced unintentional triggers, which could make them oppositional, defiant, full of bravado and tended to cause them to respond negatively toward those who attempted to penetrate their personal space or exercised their idea of unnecessary authority.

**Emerging theme: Apathy.** Apathy can often develop when educational professionals feel that they have done all that they could, or are allowed to do, in order to help their students. The educational professionals mentioned that they have been shot down by mostly administrators. The educational professionals noted that when the administrators expressed a hands-off approach (often for legal reasons), they could not act as they desired.

**Emerging theme: Self doubt.** The interviewed former participants overwhelmingly agreed that they felt full of self-doubt. Most of the participants felt academically unsuccessful. In particular, Sharon lacked feelings of self-assurance. Since her family life was so tumultuous, she expressed feelings of insecurity, especially when in the company of those she wished to impress. As a result, they tended to compensate for their shortcomings by acting out. In their mind, it was better to be the class clown, constantly disruptive to the learning process, and other avoidances, in order to mask their insecurities. The former



participants agreed that their negative behaviors increased with the passing of each school year. The overwhelming reason for increased negative behaviors per school year was simply stated: the school work became harder.

**Emerging theme: Bullying.** Oftentimes, alternative education participants have been bullied, or become bullies, as a direct result of their unique position in the school dynamics. Those who were bullied stated that they tired of other students picking on them and chose to eventually fight back. According to Xavier,

At the time, I felt like I could really hurt him, or kill him. It wouldn't have mattered to me then, because he would deserve whatever happened to him. I was going to stab him and he was going to know that you shouldn't mess with people the way he had kept messing with me.

Those former student participants who became bullies, developed ways to torment the lives of other students, and upheld themselves as tough students who were a force to be reckoned with, should others decide to cross them. In the end, the former participants admitted that they often tried strategies to create problems in hopes that they would detract from the more smooth operation of a classroom.

**Emerging theme: Academic struggles.** As previously mentioned, the former participants felt that they were academically subpar relative to their peers. David mentioned during his interview that, "At least for me, when you're not school smart, you get so bored and embarrassed that you start doing things that you're not supposed to do and you can start getting into trouble." As a direct result of participants' feelings of academic inferiority such as David, many of the

students found themselves attempting to divert attention away from them by creating distractions which were typically manifested through creating noticeably negative behaviors.

**Emerging theme: Relationship with a special adult.** Throughout this research process, both the former participants and the interviewed professionals agreed that there were benefits to be gained from having a caring adult who believed in the student, and treated them in ways that demonstrated how much they mattered. So often, these students grew up in less than desirable circumstances. Some of this study's respondents were able to verbalize how a caring adult's input impacted them and allowed them any success that they may have realized. Sharon (case study #2), referred to an angel teacher and how this teacher supported her when she felt she had more obstacles than hope.

As previously mentioned, there were some students who were shown positive alternatives to their home life, given opportunities to meet accomplished people, exposed to venues they would have otherwise (perhaps) not experienced, given reasons to achieve, counseling, provided outside/inside of school tutorial services, and other necessary extensions of support.

**Emerging theme: Unequal prospects.** A common thread among all the individuals interviewed, was that the participants had feelings of inequality. The majority of the former students felt slighted by birth, and that they should be entitled to some of the enrichments that appeared basic for other, more fortunate students. Some students felt that through no fault of their own, they were

relegated to conditions no child should ever have to abide. Therefore, they should receive special treatment due to their unfortunate circumstances.

The educational and environmental scale was unbalanced, as was reported to the PI by the majority of the former participants. Additionally, some of the former students expressed a lack of understanding as to why the educational professionals seemed oblivious, or incapable of comprehending the burdens that they faced as such youngsters.

### **Analysis of the Results**

The majority of students reported that the counseling services were more intensive than the counseling services that they received while in a traditional school environment, and sometimes reached out into the community. The community often involved service providers such as social workers, psychological service facilitators, law enforcement personnel, and vocational education specialists, to name a few. A number of times, the counseling service providers held sessions with both the student and any adult family members or guardians (if possible). It was very important to these former students that the adults they spoke with, or allowed into their personal boundaries, be nonjudgmental in order for them to feel comfortable enough to speak more openly about many of their life circumstances. A few of the students stated that the sessions were good for them and that they were offered quite a few opportunities to share their feelings in ways that they had never experienced before.

Some of the students remained hesitant to share their feelings even now. As a matter of fact, those students who were not known to the PI from the past

communicated with her only if they were familiar with at least one of her former students. The PI was asked on several occasions about whether anonymity was absolute. A few of the former students asked the same question in the very same manner: “This ain’t gonna go no place where my PO [parole officer] can see it, is it? I got warrants!”

Considering that this school district refers students to the alternative education program as a result of negative behavioral issues, many of the students fall far behind their age mates academically. Consequently, the school district provided these students with tutorial studies geared to each student’s level of aptitude. It should be noted that some of the students are very bright; however, their inabilities to remain on task, intrusions upon the learning of others (mostly as a result of their lack of understanding the subject matter), and failures to comply with most authority figures’ directions were serious barriers for many of the interviewed students. The alternative education program (at least during the time of the interviewees’ attendance) provided additional resources such as preparation for the GED and Job Corps to help support in providing remediation services for those students deemed to be in need of a wide variety of assistance.

A significant number of students mentioned the importance of a special teacher or other adult who offered them some quality time in order for them to share special feelings. These special adults were also able to acknowledge and help these students through some adversities. The adults were well aware that they were conferring with students who required special attention, the kind of attention, which may be responsible for their negative behaviors.

A majority of the former students stated that they needed the kinds of support that were not being received in their personal environments. Listening, tough love, encouragement, and self-esteem building were priorities. A number of students felt deprived of positive adult/child relationships and felt that the alternative education program offered them hope for a better future.

Encouraging students to progress beyond their sometimes dire situations was one of the first issues addressed with a counselor, social worker, and/or concerned teacher/adult. A number of the students took advantage of the services provided by the more professionally trained advisors.

This particular school district recognized that young Black males were being referred to the alternative education program significantly more often than any other group. As a result, the school district began exclusively male mentoring programs in order to lower the number of Black male students who were being referred to the alternative education program. The mentors who met with the students were enthusiastically received by the students. A significant number of the boys were introduced to successful male role models as well, in hopes that the mentees would embrace the importance of getting a proper education.

The mentees were also introduced to successful young men who were well acquainted with rising above difficult circumstances. A number of mentors were able to share personal circumstances with the students. As a result, the goal was for the mentors to establish positive relationships and to instill within the male students a desire to understand the benefits of a quality education. Each student was made aware of some of life's obstacles and how they might be able to

overcome them if they demonstrated a true desire to better themselves. Hard work and perseverance were stressed in order to work toward achieving greatness.

Some law enforcement representatives have attempted to establish positive relationships with these students. The goal of the officers has been to challenge students to begin viewing them (the police) as service providers, rather than adversaries. A number of students stated to the PI that establishing relationships with the police allowed them to better understand the actions taken by the police after the officers took advantage of the opportunities to share their responsibilities.

Some students were distrustful of most adults and stubborn about following the directions of those with whom they had not developed a relationship. Many of the students met with a special adult who was willing to encourage them to strive toward excellence in spite of their environmental conditions. These special teachers/adults seem to have been able to peel back a few layers of these students' psyches and help them to work toward trusting those adults who obviously seemed to care deeply for them.

Most of the former students expressed a level of comfort while in the program. The former students quickly realized that they did not stand out in any particular ways. They were no longer the worst behaved (unless they were mentally/emotionally unstable) or least knowledgeable student in their class. The majority of interviewed students felt more at ease surrounded by other students who struggled from one or more challenges. All of the former students stated to the PI that they rarely seemed to get high degrees of attention for such behaviors

as outbursts, fighting, classroom disruptions, and threats to adult figures because these behaviors simply were not tolerated. If the police needed to be called in, they were either already in the facility or quickly on their way. As a result, the students knew that they must adhere to certain policies and procedures that were not in place in the general education program. In addition, failures to comply were typically handled by someone whose job it was to remove any noncompliant student(s). As a result, learning was a priority, due to the lack of tolerance and the ability to implement rules, which were commonly acceptable in the alternative program. It was clear that what was tolerated in the general education program was not going to be acceptable within the alternative education program.

### **Deficits of the Program**

Unfortunately, the deficits the students bring with them seemed to outweigh the number of assets this particular alternative education program was able to offer. Fortunately, this school district (under new leadership since this project) seems to feel that the new directorship may actually help this district to make noticeable progress overall, and to the alternative education program more specifically (according to follow up interviews with some of the professional staff members).

**Lack of preparedness.** Some of the students dropped out of school and/or stayed in school but realized only minimal progress after returning to the general education environment. Some of the former students felt that they benefitted from participation in the alternative education program; however, other

students stated that they felt comfortable in the alternative education program, but felt disconnected in the traditional school environment.

**Parental support.** There was definitely a lack of parent/guardian support as compared to parental attendance/involvement in the general education environment. Although this school's alternative education program makes efforts to work cooperatively with parents, the director reported that involving the parents in their child's school career is difficult. Most of these students' parents had long ago tired of being contacted by school employees who reminded them of what their child had done wrong. Being contacted by the school meant that the parent(s) would hear yet another thing that their child had done wrong. Some of the interviewees acknowledged that their parent(s) had given them strict instructions not to share their telephone number with the school. As a result, there were parents who either disengaged themselves from their child's school life, or who would not keep promises made to assist the school for the sake of their child.

**Seemingly incorrigible students.** Some students gained very little either academically or behaviorally from the alternative education program. These were former students who seemed to be incorrigible. Admittedly, these students sometimes listened to directions but only followed directions if they chose. A number of these same students ended up spending some time in jail (where they were given few choices but to follow directions or else). It became clear that some students needed to experience non-school-related discipline rather than to simply follow school rules.



**Further Alternative Strategies**

Not all students realized progress as a result of placement in the alternative education program. The more difficult students were considered stubborn, distrustful, and combative. Some of the students were even considered less than redeemable in that environment and required help beyond that which the alternative education program could provide. If a student became a serious threat to him or herself and/or to other students, the next alternative was usually for that student to be referred for special school district services, psychiatric hospitalization, and/or insistence that the student may not return without being under the influence of prescribed medication(s). Most of the students interviewed were from neighborhood schools (very little busing occurred). As a result, a number of the alternative education students felt as though they had bragging rights in their community. These allegedly tough students made certain that they shared their reputation with other children and usually terrorized the neighborhood as well. These students outwardly appeared to have a need for others to fear them in order for them to feel respected. The importance of follow-up services also became apparent. Some time ago there were after-program services for those students who had transitioned back into the general education environment as well as for dropouts. Those services involved random visits (home and school), and follow-up communication with the necessary personnel. Due to a lack of funding, after-care services were eventually discontinued, though they were helpful for as long as they lasted.

**Unsatisfactory home environments.** The home environments for several of the former students were very complicated and/or destructive. Consequently, helping these students to beat the odds was a very daunting task. The PI possessed little knowledge regarding some of the things these students' parents were capable of doing. It seemed unbelievable to the PI that there were destructive behaviors that these parents would engage in while there were children nearby. To the surprise of the PI (who could not note every detail within the case studies), there were former students who informed the PI that the first time they were introduced to alcohol or marijuana was when their parent(s) asked them if they wanted a drink and/or to take a hit of marijuana. The importance of stakeholders also became evident. The alternative education program did not always have the funding to incorporate the asset of combinations of concerns (parent, child, and school). As a result, the PI was scarcely able to share opinions from more than one or two of these significant investors. Most of the parents the PI asked to participate in this study were reluctant to speak openly for various reasons that obviously made sense to them. Presumptively, the PI thought the major reason for their reluctance was that the typical parent(s) seemed to think that they were being condemned for how they had raised their child. The PI did speak briefly to three of the former students' parents. Each of the parents who spoke with the PI primarily blamed the school system for their child(ren). One parent said, "The school started picking on my child from when they first started school. I think they looked down on us, because we didn't have some of the things they [teachers] did."

**Teachers versus students.** Several former students complained about the teachers in the alternative education program. Those former students who complained felt that the teachers were very mean-spirited, inflexible, and more punitive than those teachers in the general education program. As a result, those former students who complained about the teachers in the program had a tendency to perform academically and sometimes behaviorally in unacceptable manners. Those students who admitted to feeling like outcasts in the educational environment chose to live down to the negative expectations of others (faculty and staff).

**Effectiveness of transition.** Teachers interviewed by the PI stated that some students were returned to their general education environment before they were ready. These same teachers felt that they were not given a lot of latitude when it came to helping make transitional decisions about the students' return. The interviewed teachers felt that they spent more time with the students and that their opinions should carry more weight. The teachers appeared to be correct. Those students whom the teachers were the most concerned about returned to their home school just long enough to disrupt the overall functioning of their regular classroom. As a result, those students had a tendency to return to the student support system within a short span of time (if possible). Some students created a high rate of recidivism.

**Overcrowding.** The student support system, like most other school environments, had to take into account the issue of overcrowding. The alternative education environment program experienced overcrowding (usually for a

particular grade), similar to many other student support programs. Unfortunately, students could neither return to the general education environment nor attend the student support program.

**Lapses in services.** There were lapses when some students were suspended from the alternative program and were absolutely not prepared to return to the general education environment. During dismissals from school, the students typically roamed the neighborhood and found trouble, sometimes involving the police. Some of the former students made quite a name for themselves with law officials while waiting for placement.

There were some former students who were left to their own devices in order to raise themselves and sometimes younger siblings in order to survive. These were the interviewees who were willing to admit that they were responsible for their own upbringing. A small number admitted that their parents were irresponsible grown people who they were ashamed to have come into either of the school environments. A larger number admitted that their parents were strung out on drugs, incarcerated, and/or surrounded themselves with social misfits and other low achievers. In the minds of the former students, their parent(s) tended to gravitate toward people who appeared to want others to take care of them while they were free of responsibilities and were afforded the opportunity to just hang out.

It appears that all alternative education programs require mentally strong professionals who have the fortitude to withstand frequent insults, threats,

disobedience, are well-trained, and are compassionate (Raywid, 1981; Barr et al., 1977).

Relative to suggested strategies, the PI discovered from most of the former participants that it was desirable for them to experience boundaries, limitations, and consequences in the alternative education program. Very few former participants said that they did not appreciate the consistency and lack of out-of-control behaviors (such as screaming and yelling demands) from the adults who were trained to handle difficult or challenging students.

Some research has suggested that typical alternative education programs have demonstrated a need for improvements in the following areas: (a) professionally skilled educators who possess the necessary training to work with students who have special needs (special needs are typically emotional, behavioral, or both); (b) improved attention paid to appropriate social and environmental skills in spite of the student's upbringing; (c) assistance for the family as a whole (e.g. helping students to adjust to environmental situations which are beyond their control); (d) recognition that many students face adversities in the form of parents who are mentally challenged, drug addicted, irresponsible, and/or immature. These students need to be more adult than their parents and they become premature caretakers and/or enablers of their parents. Because most alternative education programs are unique and different, it is not possible to generalize these finding to any other program.

**Answering the Research Questions**

In what ways has the study alternative education program been meeting the needs of students, and in what ways may it be improved? Based upon the PI's findings, a considerable number of the former program participants stated that when there were patient, supportive, and caring adults; with whom they could shed some layers of their outwardly, hard-shelled exteriors; the typical response was favorable. Intrinsic rewards seemed to be effective, as most of the former participants felt that accolades directed toward them from the outside were few and far between. Therefore, compliments were rapidly absorbed. As stated by case study participant #2 (Sharon): "My alternative education teachers and one traditional teacher became my surrogate parents and caretakers. They bothered to ask questions and to determine how best they could help me." Some of the former participants were able to rise above their environmental circumstances because of one or a few caring adults at school or in their lives outside school.

Other students declared that they became more productive students as a result of the smaller class sizes. Former participant #1 (David), was an apprehensive student overall. David felt academically inferior, as well as, he felt that the hidden circumstances of his home environment (alcoholic parents) caused him to pull away from most adults. David was frightened that he and his sister might become wards of the state if his family secrets were divulged. The smaller class sizes allowed him to feel that he could ask a question without standing out among his peers. "The smaller classroom sizes and the chances to get along with students who had hard times in school just like me, made me feel better about

myself. I didn't feel like I was the only dumb kid in school who wasn't getting things right." David also mentioned to the PI that he felt less intimidated to ask various questions in the smaller group setting. He was no longer fearful of participating academically, and sometimes environmentally (most other students shared environmental challenges as well).

Examples of other favorable aspects of this program include: the opportunity for the students to interact with some members of the community who were sometimes able to mentor several students and were often able to relate to their circumstances, and the Elementary and Middle Schools Technical Assistance Center (EMSTAC, 2003) with "highly structured classrooms. Within this structure, self-management skills are taught, and high rates of positive reinforcement are used. This might lead to more time engaged in academic tasks and may teach them the self-monitoring skills they will need to succeed in less restrictive settings, and defined behavioral expectations" (p. 10).

Elements of the program that may improve the program include, but are not limited to: (a) mentors who are more knowledgeable about how to be a good mentor, or can relate to students' personal situations, such as former participants who rose above their circumstances and are willing to share how they dealt with overcoming the challenges of their lives; (b) trained and certified professional staff; (c) on-going professional development for teachers and professional staff; (d) increased funding for the special needs of students who may need professional assistance, (found outside of the program).

**Answering sub-research question #1.** Which aspects of this alternative education program are effective or ineffective and why, according to former participants?

*Effective aspects of the study's alternative education program.* The majority of the professional staff appeared to be sensitive and empathetic in attempting to meet student needs. As a result, many of these dedicated professionals were able to make lasting impressions upon their former students.

According to the Elementary and Middle Schools Technical Assistance Center (EMSTAC), effective, research-based alternative education strategies include the following:

- *Low ratio of students to teachers.* This allows for high quality instruction, more personal time for each student, and a greater chance of student behavioral gains.
- *Highly structured classroom.* Within this structure, self-management skills are taught, and high rates of positive reinforcement are used. This will lead to more time engaged in academic tasks and will teach them the self-monitoring skills they will need to succeed in less restrictive settings.
- *Adult mentors.* An adult mentor that takes a special interest in a student; tracks the student's behavior, attendance, attitude and grades, and uses positive reinforcement with the student can make a significant difference in both the academic and the personal life of a student with behavioral problems.



- *High-quality academic instruction.* Instruction that is direct and includes learning strategies; small, interactive groups, and directed responses and questioning of students keeps them engaged and focused on the material at hand. Difficulty of instruction must also be controlled for.
- *The American Federation of Teachers* has estimated that for the [\$1,750] additional spent on every disruptive student attending an alternative school, the public gains \$14,000 in student learning time that would have been lost, \$2,800 in reduced grade repetition costs, \$1,750 in reduced welfare costs, and \$1,500 in reduced prison costs. This is a total savings of \$18,300 per student.
- A 1995 study carried out by the Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center (OTAC) reported that Oklahoma students enrolled in state-sponsored alternative programs had generally improved their grade-point averages while lowering their rate of failure, truancy, and discipline referrals. In addition, 95% of seniors who had entered a program in September had either graduated or received a GED (1995).
- Shallcross, a remedial discipline school in Philadelphia founded in 1994, includes students age 11-21 in Grades 6-12. Most students referred to Shallcross, for weapons charges, assaults, or chronic behavioral problems, have already been in trouble many times. However, with the program's combination academic-discipline

approach, Shallcross has to date proven successful. It boasts a 65 to 70% success rate, meaning that students and their families have met all their goals.

*Ineffective aspects of the study's alternative education program.* Some professional staff members appeared unable to resist the temptation to stereotype students. There were professional staff members who appeared unable to restrain from, or be aware of, how much negativity they shared about many of the students and/or the program. These same professional staff members also vented about how the program lacked appropriate leadership from time-to-time. Other ineffective aspects of the program include, but are not limited to: (a) ever increasing overcrowding; (b) teacher burn-out; (c) oftentimes, a lack of sustained parental involvement; (d) long-term behavior modification; (e) unsatisfactory social skills instruction; and (f) a punitive emphasis in behavior management rather than positive reinforcement.

**Answering sub research question #2.** Which strategies utilized in the alternative education program may be useful in general education classrooms, according to the participants? Strategies which may have possibly led to greater success in both the alternative and traditional education programs include: (a) an emphasis on counseling for conflict resolution and anger management; (b) the availability of comprehensive support services; (c) placing students in a structured academic setting for a limited period of time to help them build skills to succeed in the general education setting; (d) program evaluations and adaptations are

made by a team; and (e) individual student support systems are integrated with school-wide discipline systems.

### **Further Studies**

Further studies might include (a) investigating how to engage the participants (teachers and students) more academically; (b) investigating how alternative education programs can utilize technology to assist in building relationships between and among students and teachers; and (c) investigating how faculty and staff may be better trained in order to deal with familial issues, such as incarcerated parents, greater accessibility to drugs and gangs, mental issues, foster care, grandparents attempting to fulfill parental responsibilities, etc., for alternative education troubled students are products of troubled homes.

### **Very Important People**

Extraordinary professional staff is a necessary component for a successful alternative education program. During research for this project, the PI came upon many of these people, and developed a great respect for them. Educational professionals who choose to venture into alternative education need to exhibit patience, consistency, and special skills. Although much knowledge can be gained from reading about special education, the most successful educators mentioned by the students within this study were those who were compelled to go beyond their job description. Overwhelmingly, the interviewed and observed teachers from both the alternative education program, and the general education environments stated that they often made themselves available to the students for both before and after school tutoring.

Given information that the former participants shared, the PI would be remiss if she failed to note the significant contributions made by caring teachers, professional staff (alternative education and general education), parents, and volunteers (usually senior citizens), who typically provide academic support. These devoted adults did not just demonstrate caring; they made lasting impressions upon these once-upon-a-time children. Some of the former participants seemed to actually have been saved from what might possibly have been less satisfying lives had it not been for a caring adult, usually a teacher.

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### Curriculum Vitae

Shirley Washington-Cobb is a reading specialist in an urban Midwestern school district. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Elementary and Special Education in 1987 from Harris-Stowe State College. She then proceeded to earn a Master's degree in Education with an emphasis in Reading Education in 1994 from the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Shirley has taught in the same school district for 24 years. She has taught reading in Grades K-6, and general education courses at Grades 3 and 5.

While in her home school district, Shirley has received several awards and honors, including (a) three times awarded *Who's Who Among America's Teachers* (editions 7, 8, and 10); (b) Apple for the Teacher Award; (c) *St. Louis American Salute to Excellence in Education Award*; (d) Resolution for Excellence in Education, Missouri House of Representatives; (e) Recognition, *Excellence in Education*, Kit Bond, Missouri State Senate; (f) Women of Achievement; and (g) two times awarded Excellence in Education from her home school district.

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