A Multi-Case Study of Professional Ethics in Alternative Education: Exploring Perspectives of Alternative School Administrators

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AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT DISSERTATION

This dissertation of Richard T. Duke IV, submitted for the degree of Doctorate of Education with a Major in Education and titled "**A Multi-Case Study of Professional Ethics in Alternative Education: Exploring Perspectives of Alternative School Administrators,**" has been reviewed in final form. Permission, as indicated by the signatures and dates below, is now granted to submit final copies to the College of Graduate Studies for approval.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explored perspectives of alternative school leaders regarding professional ethics and standards. The study researched two components of alternative school leadership: effective alternative school characteristics based on professional standards and making decisions around the best interests of students. This study reviewed the Exemplary Practices 2.0 from the National Alternative Education Association, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, and relevant literature to understand of effective leadership in alternative schools. Additionally, the study examined the ethic of the profession designed by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) to determine the appearance and practicality of the model in alternative school leadership within the framework of the aforementioned standards. Using qualitative research and case study methods, the research contributed to ethical leadership literature and alternative school leadership. As a narrative case study, this research interviewed alternative school administrators, observed them in their schools, reviewed school and district documents, and examined the contexts of each school to develop a broader understanding of alternative school leadership. All findings were reported as themes emerged among the participants of the study.

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DEDICATION

To the friends and family who helped motivate me through this process, thank you. You helped me work through ideas, challenged some of my thoughts, and most importantly, took care of my family while I needed to work. With your help, I was able to still balance my life as a father and as a husband without losing too much sleep or sanity.

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CHAPTER 1: ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS AND LEADERSHIP

Alternative schools serve unique populations of diverse students (Aron, 2006). Districts with alternative schools attempt to ensure that all of their students have an opportunity to succeed by creating environments in which at-risk or nontraditional students can thrive. In essence, these environments seek to protect the needs of vulnerable students. Wagner and Simpson's (2009) claim that "sometimes an administrator must act courageously and alone on behalf of others, especially minority populations of all types, particularly those most unempowered in a given situation" (p. 85) ring true for alternative school leaders nationwide. As smaller, more targeted schools, alternative programs in this study serve these "unempowered" students.

On the road to earning my doctorate, I earned my Education Specialist degree, and I completed an internship for that degree. My former supervisor—a staunch supporter of doing whatever necessary to help each student individually—took me on as her intern. Her new role was to supervise the special education program and the alternative education system in my district. She felt I would benefit by investigating other alternative school programs to find ideas that we could use in our district. My interest in this topic was encouraged by this recommendation and by my own interest for alternative settings. During that internship, it became evident that creating an effective alternative program following the national guidelines was extremely challenging.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore perspectives of alternative school leaders regarding professional ethics and standards. First, this study reviews standards of alternative schools and professional standards for administrators. After this review, the research

examines the processes that alternative school administrators use to make decisions in their schools with the best interests of the nontraditional—or alternative student—in mind. Examining multiple facets of decision-making provides practical examples about what works and what obstacles remain in the field of alternative school leadership. The findings of this research provide theory-based conclusions to understand professional standards and ethics in real-world settings. The definition of professional ethics for the purpose of this study is related to the democratic processes that administrators utilize to ensure the best interests of the students in their schools.

Research Questions

Three main questions guide this research, which attempts to illuminate how professional standards influence administrators' decisions and the applicability of Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) ethic of the profession. Thus, the three driving questions of this study are:

1. How do alternative school administrators make decisions, and in their perspectives, how do they rely on ethical principles?
2. What factors do alternative school administrators consider when making decisions about personnel?
3. What factors do alternative school administrators consider when making decisions for or about students?

Significance of the Study

Alternative schools provide students a chance to succeed beyond traditional school environments, where many at-risk students do not succeeded (Aron, 2006). Mottaz (2002) explained, "alternative education, like traditional education, is based on the belief that all

children can learn. However, in alternative schools, it is assumed that not all students are able to learn in all school environments…" (p. viii). Since their inception, alternative schools have attempted to provide a support system for the nontraditional students who come to those schools to, with hope, help students stay in school. Bland, Church, Neil and Terry (2008) examined several factors that contribute to at-risk students dropping out of school: "assuming adult roles, such as pregnancy and employment, along with substance abuse and peer pressure. The family reasons…were parental divorce, economic stress, and lack of student's family holding education in high esteem" (p. 34). The students in these scenarios, then, typically thrive in nontraditional schools because alternative schools are designed to provide nurturing, flexible, student-centered environments that allow students to work at their own pace (Bland et al., 2008, p. 37). Overall, many of the factors listed above define the typical, at-risk, alternative student for this study. Roberson (2011) attributed much of the disenfranchisement of some students to traditional models of educating, which could encompass alternative students as well. In response, districts have recognized a need for another option for these students; doing so established schools that work outside of traditional schooling norms to help nontraditional students.

This project contributes to the body of research on ethical decision-making in alternative schools by exploring the presence and the influence of professional standards and the ethic of the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011) on alternative school administrators' decisions. Additionally, the project expands the body of research on ethical school leadership by providing anecdotal evidence about the process creating student-centered alternative schools. While studies (Laguna-Riordan et al., 2011; Quinn et al., 2006; Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011) have reported effective alternative school characteristics, questions remain

as to how administrators establish these qualities within schools. This study offers an in-depth view of alternative school leadership and how alternative school leaders make decisions. Overall, the findings in this project offer resources for administrators to serve "the best interests of students" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 26). Alternative schools are intended to provide effective environments for students who have not succeed in traditional schools (Aron, 2006), so understanding the decision-making process of administrators could reveal key considerations for alternative school administrators and other educational stakeholders.

Background

According to the recently adopted Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL, 2015), "cuts in school funding loom everywhere, even as schools are being subjected to increasingly competitive market pressures and held to higher levels of accountability for student achievement" (2015, p. 1). As public policy changes the mandates and expectations on schools, new challenges arise for public educators. As an example, a "simpleminded and singular focus on test scores distorts and degrades the meaning and practice of education" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 29). Wagner and Simpson (2009) further described significant challenges as "the host of insidious elements that compromise student educational growth" (p. 49). These challenges, according to Wagner and Simpson (2009), are comprised of political pressures associated with state and federal mandates.

As a result of the changing field of school administration, Wagner and Simpson (2009) outlined some of the ethical dilemmas that administrators face: "ethical issues such as accommodating high-stakes testing…discouraging cheating and violence of every sort are examples of common morally laden assignments for school administrators" (p. 1). While

these examples define a broad view of new challenges for administrators, it is evident that as our society changes, and more groups continue to require equal access to education, administrators' jobs will become more complex. Because of these changes, educational leaders have encountered an array of dilemmas that complicate their roles as school leaders.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) outlined a complex challenge for administrators: "in the 21st Century, as society becomes even more demographically diverse, educators will, more than ever, need to be able to develop, foster, and lead tolerant and democratic schools" (p. 4). Increasingly diverse schools paired with testing benchmarks, low funds, and constricting mandates challenge school leaders to adapt themselves and their schools to new demands. To address these challenges, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) offered a solution to the shifting educational landscape: "through the study of ethics, educational leaders of tomorrow will be better prepared to recognize, reflect on, and appreciate differences" (p. 4) to manage schools effectively, regardless of the obstacles.

Perhaps in response to these emerging demands on administrators, new professional standards have materialized. The PSEL (2015) standards were developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration. PSEL (2015) further defines what an effective school leader should do to help each student in his or her school: "educational leaders exert influence on student achievement by creating challenging but also caring and supportive conditions conducive to each student's learning" (p. 1). PSEL (2015) highlights the importance of educational leaders as advocates of all students in their schools, and each decision requires a return to one question: "how will this help our students excel as learners?" (p. 3). In other words, administrators need to make decisions to keep the best interests of *all* students at the forefront of every decision. Doing so, Wagner and Simpson (2009) stated,

would "protect the soul of educating and yet still initiate practices that modify student behavior and accommodate it to the surrounding community" (p. 61). Standard 2 of PSEL (2015) defines ethical leadership for effective leaders. In this standard, leaders should "act ethically and according to professional norms to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being" (PSEL, 2015, p. 10). Educating all students within the school, while meeting mandates with increasingly smaller budgets, is an ethical imperative, according to PSEL (2015). The problem is, however, that although the PSEL (2015) standards provide focused expectations for administrators, applying these codes of ethics in every situation has historically been challenging.

Creating new codes of ethics set a new bar for administrators, but codes and standards—however well intentioned—are not typically a comprehensive guide for administrators when faced with every day decisions. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) suggested that "ethical codes set forth by the states and professional associations tend to be limited in their responsiveness in that they are somewhat removed from the day-to-day personal and professional dilemmas which educational leaders face" (p. 21). Wagner and Simpson (2009) further framed the challenges administrators face:

> Educational leaders work in specific contexts that limit the range of goals and probably social dynamics. In the case of educational leaders, these limitations emanate primarily from their professional commitments, but other factors such as time, place, and general social dynamics all play a limiting role on what is apt and appropriate as well. (p. 8)

Wagner and Simpson (2009) and Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) suggest that any professional ethical codes—while well-intentioned—do not provide enough support for administrators in

their unique environments. In sum, the codes of ethics only address a broad set of ideals, but not those of the local school community. Considering these factors, school administrators face the pressures of meeting federal and state expectations, while also upholding what Shapiro & Stefkovich (2011) termed "the best interest of students" within the local school community.

To complicate the matter, recent policies have challenged the ethics of administrators, and codes of ethics are not always the best place to look when faced with ethically laden decisions (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). This principle was part of what Wagner and Simpson (2009) defined as the school's "moral architecture." According to Wagner and Simpson (2009), developing this architecture is critical to school success because "school leaders seeking a healthy, dynamic moral architecture centered on sustained service to others and on a vision of human betterment…" (p. 7), and administrators must instill this architecture throughout their school community. To lead the school then, leaders must be aware of ethical principles to reflect on how daily practices promote the best interests of *all* students (Wagner & Simpson, 2009, p. 7). Developing this moral architecture requires a community within the school where leaders and staff use ethical principles to make decisions that serve the best interests of their unique settings.

An additional complication is the purpose of the schools in which administrators work. Wagner and Simpson (2009) established a difference between two distinct missions of schools: schooling and educating. "Schools are intended to accommodate a wide range of responsibilities extending well beyond their educational mission" (Wagner & Simpson, 2009, p. 53). In other words, ethically minded leaders go beyond emphasizing retention of educational concepts. Instead, ethical leaders create schools that teach students to be open to the views of others and engaged in their own learning beyond subject material (Wagner &

Simpson, 2009, p. 53). Stressing the importance of educating students beyond passing tests or getting good grades is an ethical imperative for Wagner and Simpson (2009), and they used the term the "Great Conversation" to describe this imperative. Wagner and Simpson (2009) explained that the Great Conversation focuses on the search for truth in education. This truth, they claimed, comes from "commitments to respect the voice of others, share understanding, and promote human well-being through the search for truth" (p. 13). In sum, the Great Conversation is the goal of education, and administrators have to make decisions to liven that Conversation within the school community. Leaders who focus on educating rather than schooling students create a foundation of ethically responsible school environments (Wagner & Simpson, 2009).

While schools each face diverse challenges based on the setting and purpose of their schools, many alternative schools deserve further investigation because they generally have unique populations. Alternative schools are defined by the Urban Institute as "schools or programs that are set up by states, school districts, or other entities to serve young people who are not succeeding in a traditional public school environment" (Aron, 2006, p. 6). Aron (2006) specified the definition of alternative education as, "programs [that] offer students who are failing academically or may have learning disabilities, behavioral problems, or poor attendance an opportunity to achieve in a different setting and use different and innovative learning methods" (p. 6). The definition of alternative schools for this study reflects Aron's (2006) definition.

Collectively, the definitions above specified the type of school in which the administrators of this study worked. The populations of these schools were students who needed another school setting in which to succeed, while remaining in the public realm. In

these settings, this study examines the application of professional ethics and the appearance of the ethic of the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011).

Research Problem

PSEL (2015) recently emphasized the need to create a student-centered school. In fact, alternative schools were traditionally supposed to exemplify this mission. However, Roberson (2011, p. 887) argued that schools in general have failed to change with the times, characterizing this failure as remaining stuck in the "default culture," which "is based on the industrial model and its archetypical mode of operation—the assembly line" (Roberson, 2011, p. 887). The main problem with this default culture, Roberson (2011) explained, is that "the goal of the work process is not creation or innovation or initiation or differentiation. The goal is control, compliance, conformity, and completion" (p. 888). In this default culture, students on the low and high end of the bell-curve have lower success rates, and because of this, Roberson (2011) expressed a need to change schools to a "culture of possibility," or a shift toward "student-directed exploration of ideas" (p. 889). Four years later, PSEL (2015) emerged, perhaps in response to calls for more student-centered schools. While PSEL (2015) does not specifically reference the term culture of possibility, the focus on learners is evident, and the standards emphasize each student's learning to reframe schools from control and compliance to student-centered. However, as discussed previously, the professional standards have historically only provided a framework of broad ideals and not a set of specific responses for each administrator to follow when faced with day-to-day, school-specific circumstances.

Alternative school administrators face similar ethically laden decisions, particularly when developing a purpose for the school. Quinn et al. (2006) described philosophical

choices that alternative leaders and districts make about their schools. In their study, Quinn et al. (2006) identified three general categories of alternative school philosophies: change the student, change the school, or change the educational system (p. 12). Roberson (2011) indicated that students on both ends of the bell-curve—typically alternative students— do not function well in the default culture, which matched Quinn et al.'s (2006) on the change the student model. In fact, Quinn et al. (2006) explained how "control, compliance, conformity and completion" were what alternative students cited as the worst part of traditional schools (p. 12). Thus, the "change the student" philosophy in schools often further disenfranchised students, even in alternative settings. Because of this finding, Quinn et al. (2006) found that rather than seeking to change students, alternative schools should change to meet the needs of their students. Each district—and each school—varies in the philosophy of the school's purpose, however. Quinn et al. (2006) examined the difference of philosophies of various alternative schools. Quinn et al.'s (2006) "change the school" and "change the system" efforts led to greater engagement in alternative schools by reshaping the purpose of the school. The characteristics that traditionally turned at-risk students away from traditional schools were not successful in alternative schools.

Kretchmar (2014) supported Roberson's (2011) findings about the default culture, suggesting that districts focus on "strengthening teacher preparation programs, dealing with the larger issues of inequality and working to ensure that all students are taught by well-prepared, inspiring, and effective teachers…" (p. 651). Kretchmar (2014) proposed that alternative schools look to the needs of their diverse population of students first, rather than forcing Roberson's (2011) default culture. Again, research supported the need to create student-centered environments, and at-risk students could benefit from these changes. Most

importantly, Kretchmar (2014) added that leaders should seek out teachers who are strong proponents of the shift to a culture that seeks control and compliance to a culture that works for students.

To strengthen the views on effective practices in alternative schools, additional research goes beyond simple shifts in philosophy. Multiple studies (Laguna-Riordan et al., 2011; Quinn et al., 2006; Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011) observed the characteristics of effective alternative school programs. These studies support the need for true alternative environments, including caring teachers, flexible discipline practices, modified curriculum, and opportunities for reengaging in the school community. While these studies all characterized the benefits of shifting alternative school priorities, additional research is necessary to understand the process that educational leaders go through to achieve an effective culture in alternative settings. Flower, McDaniel, and Jolivette (2011) indicated, "research and practice have significant work to do in an effort to improve the educational programming of youth in AE settings" (p. 505). In response, this research examines the processes that administrators use to establish a culture of possibility in their schools. The study further addresses how ethics factor into school leaders' decisions to run a school and how a school leader's own ethical resources guide the process.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) recognized additional gaps in research about ethical decision-making in educational administration, albeit not in alternative education: "few texts have been developed that discuss ethical dilemmas from multiple perspectives…none had grappled with the concept of professional ethics as a separate paradigm" (p. xiv). Their text—*Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education*—focused on training educators in making ethical decisions. However, because their paradigm—the ethic of the profession—is

relatively new, little research exists to illuminate the process of making ethical decisions, and how the ethic of the profession model takes shape in specific environments. In addition, the recent implementation of PSEL (2015) shifted professional ethics once again to reframe all decisions with student learning in mind. Wagner and Simpson (2009) suggested "the administrator must have both the integrity and the moral courage to make difficult decisions, make amends when things go wrong, and always be prepared to step forward with a plan to make things right" (p. 74-75). This project uses experiences of alternative school administrators, and it attempts to understand how their integrity and moral courage is tested in unique and similar ways based on the students and the environments at their schools. Ultimately, this project seeks to illuminate the process of creating student-centered alternative schools within the landscape of professional standards for administrators and nontraditional populations.

Limitations of the Study

Several key limitations in this study were beyond the researcher's control. First, this study relies on recalling decisions, practices, and processes at different times in the participants' careers. Trying to remember such experiences may have caused some lack of clarity on both the researcher and the participant, and memories—particularly further back in time—might have been less reliable as sources of data. To avoid this, participants were asked to consider recent memories if possible, so the data was grounded in recent experiences.

A second limitation was that administrators frequently move in districts, especially in some districts with multiple schools. Since this research took place in the fall, some administrators might have been completely new to the job. This was both a strength and a weakness. As a strength, the issue with recalling distant memories was not prevalent with

these interviews. However, the administrator may not have had many experiences to draw on to give a comprehensive interview. To address this limitation, the interview questions were designed to study the process of planning the school year, hiring staff, and establishing norms for the school. Such experiences offered insight into the decisions that had little pretense, and illuminated themes that might not have been present in more seasoned administrators.

A final limitation was the size of the study. Time, finances, and access to schools limited the pool of participants to a small grouping of schools in the Pacific Northwest. Some schools or districts did not agree to participate in the study, which affected the sample size for the study. While efforts were made to build a working relationship with districts and schools, it was not clear if each available option was willing or able to be part of this research.

Delimitations of the Study

This study was conducted in the Pacific Northwest only in collaboration with alternative schools. The reasoning behind this decision was that although traditional schools potentially face similar issues outlined in this introduction, alternative schools are similar in scope, purpose, and student population. It is likely that some of the findings in this study translate to traditional settings, particularly because traditional schools may also serve more diverse student populations. However, alternative schools provided a chance to compare schools that had similar clientele, which delimited the potential for variability across environments.

Definitions

Several definitions of words or terms that appeared in this research appear below as a convenience to readers. While not all education-specific terms are present, this list attempted to provide a practical reference point when readers encountered the same term across multiple sections.

At-risk/alternative student

These students are diverse in educational needs, and do not typically succeed in traditional schools for various reasons (Aron, 2006).

Alternative school

A nontraditional school designed to work with at-risk or alternative students. Alternative schools vary in purpose and mission, but the mission of the schools in this study is to provide an alternative to the traditional schools that students attended. These schools are often flexible, emphasize individualized learning for their populations, and seek to reengage students in their own education (Aron, 2006).

Moral architecture

The common goals and ethics of an organization that people in the organization subscribe to and support (Wagner & Simpson, 2009).

Default culture

A culture in schools that emphasizes control and compliance above student engagement (Roberson, 2011).

Culture of possibility

A culture in schools that emphasizes individual student learning and engagement (Roberson, 2011).

Response to intervention (RtI):

A method of testing students to achieve benchmarks in reading and math skills, which schools then use to provide targeted instruction for students in need of skills development (Buffum, Mattis, & Weber, 2011).

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 highlighted the purpose of the study, the background of the current issues affecting alternative school administrators, the research problem, the questions resulting from the problem, the significance of the study, the limitations and delimitations of the study, and a summary of terms. Chapter 2 reviews the literature and establishes the qualities of alternative schools, educational and leadership frameworks, and the development of the school community. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology and analytical methods used during the course of the project. Chapter 4 provides the research findings of the study. Chapter 5 presents the conclusions and a series of suggestions for administrators and other educational stakeholders.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review investigates two areas of administrative decision-making: professional standards and the ethic of the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Each area provides further background on leading an alternative school. The new PSEL (2015) standards and prior research determine that effective administrators focus on what is best for students. This study investigates how professional standards are employed in alternative settings and how ethical decision-making principles materialize in real-world scenarios.

This review of scholarly and published works establishes a conceptual framework. Anfara and Mertz (2006) wrote “any framework or theory that allows the researcher to ‘see’ and understand certain aspects of the phenomenon being studied…” is a theoretical framework (p. xxviii). In short, a framework is a lens through which a researcher views a study. Therefore, the examination of several factors builds the conceptual framework for this study. This framework provides a lens for creating research questions, developing themes, and highlighting significant findings in the research phase of the project. The framework of this study consists of three factors:

1. A review of national professional standards of alternative schools NAEA (2014) and PSEL (2015) in effect at the time of this study.
2. Standards of practice related to leadership in alternative schools.
3. Concepts for ethical decision-making in schools found in relevant literature.

A Review of Professional Standards for Quality Alternative School Programs

Alternative schools were defined previously, but an important aspect to this project was to identify standards for alternative schools. Reviewing the literature on alternative

school standards NAEA (2014) and leadership standards PSEL (2015) identified common expectations for best practices in alternative education leadership. Knowing these best practices clarified focus areas during the research process. Therefore, this first element of the literature review establishes significant areas of observation within the school contexts and in the decisions of the participants.

Mottaz (2002) explained that at-risk students, who drop out of traditional schools for a variety of reasons, work well in more individualized environments that provide flexibility around busy schedules and personal conflicts with the traditional schooling model. Mottaz (2002) furthered this sentiment, defining alternative education as "an education program that embraces subject matter and/or teaching methodology that is not generally offered to students of the same age or grade level in the traditional settings, which offers a range of educational options…" (p. ix). In sum, making school different, yet still engaging, is an important piece to alternative education.

The National Alternative Education Association (NAEA, 2014) defines effective practices in alternative schools. These standards— *Exemplary Practices 2.0: Standards of Quality and Program Evaluation 2014*—highlight fifteen characteristics of effective alternative school programs. The overarching goal of these standards is to emphasize to school and district leaders the key qualities of alternative, nontraditional programs. According to the NAEA (2014), "nontraditional and alternative education delivers innovative 21st Century approaches to teaching and learning which provides students with the opportunity to meet graduation requirements, engage in college and career readiness, and participate as productive members of their communities" (p. 3). These standards attempt to provide a "common framework for future nontraditional and alternative education policy

development" (p. 3). According to the NAEA (2014), these exemplary practices are common among strong alternative programs. To support these findings, Carol Mottaz' (2002) work provided a less contemporary but equally significant guide for developing alternative programs. Many of the guidelines described in her book appear in the NAEA (2014) standards. Described below are key indicators of successful alternative school programs, as highlighted by Mottaz (2002), the NAEA (2014), and the PSEL (2015) standards that are relevant to all school leaders, but strikingly similar to alternative school expectations. Referencing these works together establishes a three-fold set of standards that focus a study of alternative schools not only in relevant alternative school literature and practices, but also on the broader, ethical expectations on school leaders as determined by PSEL (2015). Each subsection below highlights the NAEA (2014) exemplary practices first, followed by supporting or common principles in PSEL (2015) or in Mottaz' (2002) work. It is important to note that not all fifteen exemplary practices appear below because the exemplary practices of the NAEA (2014) are, at times, specific to alternative school programs, whereas this study intended to also include the standards from PSEL (2015). Some are combined into one narrative (7.0, 8.0, and 9.0), and other exemplary practices 12.0, 13.0, 14.0, and 15.0 do not appear below.

Vision and mission: NAEA exemplary practice 1.0

The first exemplary practice from the NAEA (2014) relates to the vision and mission of the school. This standard emphasizes the importance of creating a shared vision with all stakeholders. At the forefront of this standard is exemplary practice 1.7: "student success is central to the vision and mission of the school, which includes the development of effective and affective skills, social competencies, and career readiness skills" (NAEA, 2014, p. 4).

This standard is reflected in the recent PSEL (2015) standards for school administrators as well: the vision always focuses on student success in the school, faces yearly reviews, and exists outside of the paper document and stated intentions (p. 9).

Mottaz (2002) confirmed this standard as critical to the success for alternative programs: "[alternative students] complain, probably correctly, that the emphasis [in traditional schools] was on academics and not on individual differences and needs…" (p. 17). She further argued, "the primary goal of an alternative school program is to first make connections with each student…" (p. 17). Reflecting back to Roberson's (2011) concept of the default culture and the culture of possibility, it is evident that alternative schools need to create a student-centered culture of possibility, starting with the mission and vision. With this in mind, multiple sources may guide alternative school administrators to consider the best interests of students as a primary component of the school's mission. "Hopefully," according to Mottaz (2002), "these values will transcend the realm of the school day into teaching the value of lifelong learning, teaching independent learning skills and providing students with evaluative tools to 'think for themselves'" (p. 20). In order to be a successful alternative school leader, administrators should, according to Mottaz (2002), focus on the whole child when creating the mission and vision of the school.

Leadership: NAEA exemplary practice 2.0

The second standard for the NAEA (2014) cites the need for school leadership to be "passionate, innovative, competent, and experienced…" (p. 5). The leadership indicators in this standard emphasize the influence of district and building administrators on alternative school programming. This exemplary practice encourages leaders to hire and train passionate teachers, while also collaborating with everyone in the school community to ensure that the

school's vision and mission are fulfilled. Mottaz (2002) also urged building leaders to develop leadership within their schools, encouraging principals to delegate leadership responsibilities to staff members: "one of the most empowering aspects of a small, vibrant organization, such as an alternative school, is that there is ample room for leadership development at all levels" (p. 25). Here, Mottaz echoed what appears later in the review of literature: a shared community among teachers and leaders.

The PSEL (2015) standards reflect many of these principles in Standards 6 and 7 (pp. 14-15). Contained in these standards are matters of professional community, particularly to "develop the capacity, opportunities, and support for teacher leadership and leadership from other members of the community" (p.14). This connection to the alternative school standards and Mottaz' (2002) work only strengthens the need to investigate the individual understandings—or practices—of alternative school leaders.

Climate and culture: NAEA exemplary practice 3.0

In this exemplary practice, effective alternative schools create a climate and culture that builds collaborative, working relationships between all members of the school community (NAEA, 2014, p. 6). One aspect of this standard promotes a "positive rather than punitive atmosphere for behavioral management and student discipline" (NAEA, 2014, p. 6). This standard also emphasizes the importance of having high expectations for students and for staff, with clearly communicated rules and expectations (NAEA, 2014, p. 6). Finally, successful alternative schools are responsive to the multicultural needs of all students: "the school demonstrates an understanding and sensitivity to academic, behavioral, cultural, developmental, gender, and societal needs of students, parents/guardians, and the community" (NAEA, 2014, p. 6).

PSEL (2015) emphasizes similar practices in Standard 5 (p. 13). In this section, the standards outline the importance of creating "an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success of each student (PSEL, 2015, p. 13). Among the subsections in this standard, PSEL (2015) similarly encourages all leaders to promote the well-being of students' individual, multicultural needs. Additionally, Standard 3 in PSEL (2015) stresses the importance of leaders who "strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being" (p. 11). Again, the concept of creating a culture of respectful and individualized schools appears not only in alternative school standards, but also in standards for all administrators. This consistent expectation continues to drive the research because administrators in alternative settings create these environments, and they promote the same principles to the teachers and other staff in the building.

Staffing and professional development: NAEA exemplary practice 4.0

Among the most influential members in alternative schools, effective staff members are passionate about teaching and about learning new ways to engage students in their own education (NAEA, 2014, p. 7). Exemplary Practice 4.0 highlights the specific indicators of effective alternative school staff members. For instance, the educators are collaborative with one another, and administrators target ongoing professional development to help teachers continue to improve as dynamic educators (NAEA, 2014, p. 7). Mottaz (2002) expanded on the historical importance of this standard: "the single, most important criteria for staffing an alternative school is to ensure that these people want to be there" (p. 23). Her research also affirms the NAEA (2014) practices: staff should have a positive outlook, a common vision, be a team player, and be flexible (Mottaz, 2002, pp. 23-24). While staff members are critical

members of the alternative school environments, this expectation is also reflected in standards for traditional school administrators.

Standard 7 of PSEL (2015) mirrors many of the concepts for successful alternative programs. Effective leaders, according the PSEL (2015) "foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being" (p. 15). Furthermore, a return to Standard 6 emphasizes not only the importance of the professional capacities of school members, but also the instructional practices that staff exhibit to such as a focus on continuous improvement of practice, caring about students, and the importance of meeting the needs of diverse learners (p. 14). A review of these similar expectations prompted a need to delve into the perspectives of alternative school administrators to see how they established and maintained these professional practices indicative of successful leaders and successful alternative programs.

Curriculum and instruction: NAEA exemplary practice 5.0

The fifth exemplary practice from the NAEA (2014) reveals the targets for curriculum and instruction in alternative schools. This exemplary practice accentuates the need for diverse educational opportunities provided to students, starting with effective teaching practices that engage students as academic learners (p. 8). Most importantly, this standard emphasizes the need to individualize instruction, programming, and educational plans for each student (NAEA, 2014, p. 8). An additional element of alternative school standards is the importance of providing a rigorous and effective alternative learning platform because students are able to learn at their own pace on appropriate technologies, providing individualized learning opportunities for each student (NAEA, 2014, p. 16). Mottaz (2002) also discussed the importance of this standard: "the curriculum is delivered in a manner that is

different than at the local high school… [and] the curriculum must hold meaning for the students" (p. 37). Flexible, differentiated, and unique to students' interests is a critical component of a successful alternative program.

Contained in Standard 4 of PSEL (2015) are the qualities of effective school leaders. For instance, several key indicators outline the importance of diverse curriculum that adheres to the learning styles of each student (p. 12). Within these traits of effective educational leaders, there is also a consistent theme of strength-based practices: "instructional practice…is intellectually challenging, authentic to student experiences, recognizes student strengths, and is differentiated and personalized" (p. 12). In reviewing the three sources, the similarities between the expectations of successful alternative school curriculum, Mottaz' (2002) work, and the PSEL (2015) standards for curriculum and instruction is evident.

Student assessment: NAEA exemplary practice 6.0

Assessment is a key factor in successful alternative schools, but generally, "alternative school students do not do well on standardized achievement tests" (Mottaz, 2002, p. 45). The NAEA (2014) Exemplary Practice 6.0 asserts that assessment should target "individual and group learner needs," and teachers should use these assessments to provide individualized instruction to students (p. 9). According to these sources, teachers and staff know that these interventions are working because they assess regularly to determine student growth (NAEA, 2014). Students also have individualized learning plans, developed by Student Support Teams (SSTs), and these plans are based on the needs of the individual students. The plans include not only reviews of academic progress and goals, but also targets for "effective citizenship, independent living, and college and career readiness" (NAEA, p. 18). Mottaz (2002) recommended relying on assessments that had certain characteristics: part of a

student's education plan, ongoing, data from sources other than standardized measures, progress towards life skills, and growth in basic skills.

PSEL (2015) again outlines similar expectations for school leaders. Standard 4 expresses the importance of effective assessment practices. According to PSEL (2015), effective leaders "employ valid assessments that are consistent with knowledge of child learning and development… [to] use assessment data appropriately…to monitor student progress and improve instruction" (p. 12). With the knowledge of these expectations, alternative school administrators face the task of using student data to drive instruction, while also not alienating students who typically struggle with formal assessments.

Transition planning and support, parent/guardian involvement, and collaboration: NAEA exemplary practices 7.0, 8.0, and 9.0

Several exemplary practices recognize the importance of involving the caretakers for students as active members of the school community "beyond parent/guardian-teacher meetings" (NAEA, 2014, p. 11). Successful schools inform parents regularly of student progress, help parents support their students, and connect regularly with families. Alternative schools should also seek community collaboration and partnerships to "promote opportunities for life skills, soft skills, service learning and career exploration for all students" (NAEA, 2014, p. 12). The goal of this standard is to connect students to positive resources in the community. The standard of transition and planning focuses mainly on the individual needs of students after school (NAEA, 2014, p. 10). This standard encourages schools to develop individualized plans for each student when they graduate from high school. School support teams, counseling services, and connections to community resources are all benchmarks of successful alternative schools.

PSEL (2015) indicates that successful leaders seek the same environment described above. For instance, administrators should "promote adult-student, student-peer, and school-community relationships that value and support academic learning and positive social and emotional development" (p. 13). Additionally, schools should also seek to "create and sustain positive, collaborative, and productive relationships with families and the community for the benefit of students" (PSEL, 2015, p. 16). The exemplary practices for alternative schools and standards for educational leaders both highlight the importance of these three similar exemplary practices for administrators.

Program evaluation: NAEA exemplary practice 10.0

Successful alternative schools, at least annually, assess the program as a whole, surveying parents, students, staff and community members to gauge the effectiveness of the programs (NAEA, 2014, p. 13). All of the offered services face reviews using surveys, student outcomes, and program ratings. Policies and procedures reflect the values of the vision and mission statements, and they are communicated to all stakeholders. These policies focus on the safe, secure, efficient, and legal operation of the school (NAEA, 2014, p. 17). Mottaz (2002) encouraged administrators to review the program in light of the mission and vision regularly to ensure that the program is meeting the needs of the specific population that the school served.

PSEL (2015) establishes similar expectations on school leaders to regularly review school improvement plans and policies and procedures as effective practices (p. 18). In this standard, PSEL (2015) notes the importance of ongoing evaluation of school processes, expectations, and outcomes. As a result, effective leaders continue to engage the school community in looking at what works in the school, and what still needs to improve.

School counseling: NAEA exemplary practice 11.0

The counseling programs at alternative schools provide opportunities for students to learn inter- and intra-personal skills. Successful alternative schools encourage students to "acquire affective skills to become self-directed and independent learners" (NAEA, 2014, p. 14). The program, as a whole, provides students a chance to learn skills that will not only help them within an educational environment, but also give them skills for success in the larger world community. Mottaz (2002) also recognized the value of this standard, explaining the importance of access to counseling, available staff members, small class sizes, and access to Human Service workers (p. 33). Additionally, the expectations for a social work program at an alternative school starts with the idea that "social justice is emphasized by the program" (NAEA, 2014, p. 15), meaning that the school addresses barriers to learning that students face to provide "salient ecologies (school, home, or community) to address a student's social/emotional growth" (NAEA, 2014, p. 15). PSEL (2015) concurrently acknowledges the importance of additional support services for students in schools. According to these standards, effective leaders "build and maintain a safe, caring, and healthy school environment that meets that the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of each student" (PSEL, 2015, p. 13). By doing so, according to these standards, students have a better chance at success in the classroom and after they leave school.

Standards in Practice Related to Leadership in Alternative Schools

Knowing the standards and expectations of a successful alternative school is one element to this study, but acting on these standards can be much more challenging for administrators. Flower, McDaniel, and Jolivette (2011) examined effective behavioral practices in alternative schools by reviewing 29 different studies. Their study compiled

common characteristics of alternative schools that reflected the use of the standards that the NAEA set in 2014, and "without the use of effective practices…successful outcomes for students in AE settings may become less likely" (p. 503). These nine common practices were indicative of effective schools: highly structured classroom with behavioral classroom management, positive methods, school-based adult mentor, functional behavior assessments, social skills instruction, high quality academic instruction, parent involvement, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and low student to teacher ratio (Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011). Many of these characteristics found in Flower, McDaniel, and Jolivette's (2011) study reflect those set forth by the NAEA (2014) three years later. Flower, McDaniel, and Jolivette (2011) cited a lack of these characteristics within alternative settings, which resulted in disappointing results for students, particularly with emotional and behavioral disorders (E/BD).

To add to this review, Cameron and Sheppard (2006) concluded that students who misbehaved were often alienated and disenfranchised with school, often confirming their own negative self-image and further stigmatizing them as students who misbehave. Souza (2005) added "students in alternative schools express an awareness of their marginalized status relative to students in conventional schools and feel they have failed academically" (p. 38). Souza (2005) indicated that a caring teaching staff created positive effects on students; however, students "were learning that they were deserving of caring teachers due to their at-risk status, but may not be deserving of much significant academic learning" (p. 67). In sum, the students in Souza's study identified that teachers cared about them personally, but did not receive rigorous instruction. Souza (2005) concluded that "[at-risk students] also deserve an intellectually stimulating environment that forefronts the process of learning rather than the

product of the earned credits" (p. 68). Souza's (2005) assertion supports the need to engage alternative school students in challenging learning tasks, in spite of the stigmas about at-risk students being unmotivated and disinterested in learning.

In response to the findings that alternative schools struggle to offer rigorous curriculum and instruction, other research investigated the perspectives of students who succeeded in alternative settings. Phillips (2011) described the experiences of alternative school students and their connection to teachers. She emphasized three themes from her research. First, the students agreed, "when trust, understanding, patience, and respect are fostered between teachers and students, a positive climate is created and learning is facilitated" (Phillips, 2011, p. 692). Autonomous learning also emerged as a key finding in Phillips' (2011) study, as some "students were simply given the opportunity to have some agency in relation to their learning" (p. 693). Autonomy is a critical factor because alternative students, as previously mentioned, feel marginalized by the system already. This autonomy allows them to take responsibility for their learning, avoiding unnecessary and off-putting power struggles between the student and the school. The outcome from Phillips' (2011) study was the emphasis on relevant learning experiences that student valued intrinsically and/or extrinsically.

A different study from Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) found similar themes among the voices of alternative school students. First, they examined the reasons these alternative school students did not respond to traditional schools. Negative peer relations, lack of supportive teachers, and not feeling safe all contributed to failing in traditional schools. Conversely, the students identified that their alternative school provided opposing and positive experiences to those in traditional schools. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) described familiar

recommendations from previous studies and in the NAEA (2014) standards: develop positive teacher-student relationships, make connections with the home, create a safe and engaging climate, make flexible rules and consequences, offer education support services, and focus on students' strengths.

Because of the aforementioned perspectives of alternative schools and student voices, literature about how administrators create a supportive community among educational stakeholders adds to this review. PSEL (2015) consistently references the need to have a school community that supports all students. The most significant ideal, according to Mottaz (2002), is to establish a student-centered environment that all members believed in. "Although other successful models of Alternative schools have something to offer in the creation of a new program, the most important thing to remember is that every program should be developed to meet the unique needs of the local population" (Mottaz, 2002, p. 19). In other words, administrators are not the sole stewards of the school's vision and mission; they need to create buy-in and ownership among the staff to ensure a sustainable and functioning program that addresses the best interests of their students. In a study on effective alternative school programs, Bland, Church, Neill and Terry (2008) wrote:

> An effective high school for students that are at risk of dropping out should attempt to develop a school culture that enables students to become educationally engaged in relevant, meaningful learning in a caring setting. High schools need to examine the issue of control and seek to establish learning settings that are founded on mutual respect, known learning standards, and teamwork rather than hierarchy, competition, and control. (p. 37)

In other words, Bland, Church, Neill and Terry (2008) claim that successful alternative schools should seek to educate the whole child, and that this focus starts with a shared vision within the school community.

Reflected in this statement by Bland, Church, Neill and Terry (2008) is an emphasis on school culture and its impact on the willingness for alternative students to reengage in their own education. According to Mottaz (2002), “building self-esteem and recapturing these strengths can be achieved by teachers having high/appropriate expectations for their students and celebrating their achievements on a regular basis” (p. 35). Accomplishing this feat is part of the culture in successful alternative schools. Teachers, staff, and particularly the leaders believe in this idea to create a successful program that fit the community that the school serves. Mottaz (2002) frequently referred to the resemblance of an alternative school culture to that of a family, where education is not the only element to the school; instead, education is a part of the entire culture. Emphasizing support of the whole child, she claimed, is the route to a successful program.

This research investigates how leaders identify the culture of their schools, and more specifically, how to build and strengthen that community. Wagner and Simpson (2009) defined a moral architecture as “a collection of principles, virtues, and courtesies that people in a given organization implicitly agree ought to guide their collaborations” (p. 6). Educational leaders, according to Wagner and Simpson (2009), are responsible for defining, evaluating, and *living* these architectures in their schools. This study investigates what those architectures were, how they were developed, and how the alternative school principals passed those architectures on to their staff. In truth, “the leader’s lived moral experience reverberates throughout the moral architecture, shifting architectural shape regardless of

original and intentional design" (Wagner & Simpson, 2009, p. 9). As a case study, this research illuminates the moral architecture of alternative schools because this structure often "is not built at a planning session one day and acted on the next. The styles and practices of leadership build the community's architecture each and every day …" (Wagner and Simpson, 2009, p. 131). The perspectives and experiences of each administrator strengthen the themes found in the shared experiences, even though many processes and outcomes were unique to each school and each administrator.

According to Wagner and Simpson (2009), administrators have to be "conscientious educational leaders" who "must not only take time to clarify the moral terms they use, but also to think through how people are affected by given acts, the implementation of specific rules or policies, and the modeling of transparent virtues" (p. 9). For example, when diverse populations come together, it is challenging to find a common ground to develop the school's moral architecture (Wagner & Simpson, p. 10). In these instances, administrators make decisions that shape the architecture of their school, but getting there requires a focused approach to school management. However, "doing good or bringing about human betterment through the Great Conversation is not something an educational administrator can do alone. Faculty [and] staff… must share largely in the same vision of the good" (p. 13). The ultimate goal for schools, then, is to develop a moral architecture that everyone shares. The moral architecture is critical to running a successful school, according to Wagner and Simpson (2009), because it focuses all members on a shared vision (p. 14).

Even though the Great Conversation is critical for all school communities, Wagner and Simpson (2009) recognized the tremendous task of balancing the good of all people, while not sacrificing the welfare of others (p. 15). To be truly moral and committed to the

architecture of the school community, Wagner and Simpson (2009) proposed a "Multitheoretical and Multicultural Approach" (pp. 17-18) to decision-making. They designed this approach to minimize sacrificing the best interests of some students, while also meeting the needs of others. Within this model, Wagner and Simpson (2009) recommend a series of considerations to make morally blurry decisions (p. 18).

Administrators should consider four factors to make decisions that, at the very best, uphold the moral architecture of the community. In sum, the "template is a heuristic tool for beginning responsible moral analysis in cases applied to situational complexity" (Wagner & Simpson, 2009, p. 16). Within this model, administrators have four aspects to ponder: reflection, responsibilities, interests, and considerations. The reflections are the steps that one must go through when faced with morally challenging decisions: problem identification, problem clarification, moral commitments, data collection, theoretical scan, solution construction, consequences considered, solution reconsideration, action plan, and evaluation plan (pp. 17-18). The responsibilities, then, are the action steps for each reflection. For instance, if faced with an issue, administrators first recognize an issue and talk with all relevant parties to understand the problem (identification); clear up any gray areas (clarification); identify the principles involved (moral commitments); gather information that can help illuminate the issue (data collection); consider various ethical theories for assistance (theoretical scan); work with the community to brainstorm solutions (solution construction); anticipate the ramifications of solutions (consequences considered); revisit solutions based on potential consequences (solution reconsideration); make an action plan that is ethical (action plan); and figure out what worked and did not work from the process (evaluation plan) (pp. 17-18). These responsibilities are the actions that administrators take to protect the best

interests of all students, while ensuring that the community is sufficiently involved in the decision. Within these reflections and responsibilities, Wagner and Simpson (2009) highlight the interests and considerations of all parties involved. This process, then, is not only a method for protecting the best interests of all stakeholders—particularly students— but also a way to contribute "to the ongoing thinking of staff about building a classroom, school or district environment that is ethically informed and growing" (p. 18).

While the summary of Wagner and Simpson's (2009) decision-making model is simplified, what is clear from that model is that "followers cannot coast; they cannot merely follow along. Rather, they must believe in both the cause and the leader. There must be evident a clear reason for going above and beyond in the quest for institutional success" (Wagner & Simpson, 2009, p. 48). The moral architecture is a key factor in school success, and through that architecture, all staff share the same vision to manage difficult times (Wagner & Simpson, 2009, p. 49); therefore, the leader should "[instill] in all faculty and staff the sense that education begins with the shared commitment to the service of others through education" (p. 50). For this study, it is important to understand "how one balances the competing claims between educational and schooling purposes..." (Wagner & Simpson, 2009, p. 59). Additionally, this research recognizes a difference between having a controlling environment and one that supports all members to build a lasting community that shares the same moral architecture (Wagner & Simpson, p. 113).

Because the moral architecture of the school is critical to sustaining an institution that promotes and protects the best interests of all students, Wagner and Simpson (2009) suggest methods to build this architecture in the community. What was missing, however, was the perspective of administrators trying to build the architecture, whether they were aware of it or

not. To address this missing element, this project researches the process of decision-making within varied moral architectures under the same umbrella: alternative schools. Within each school was a similarly resonant theme of family, community, altruism, democracy etc., but the perceptions of each administrator illuminates the process of creating a community that serves the best interests of students. Ultimately, these findings expand the literature on ethical leadership by using practical experiences of those who need solid moral architectures: alternative school administrators.

Tenuto (2014) proposed a similar process of involving staff in the democratic process of leading as a group. In her work, Tenuto (2014) identified the democratic professional practice in education (DPPE) "to encourage leading and teaching professional to reflect on beliefs and evaluate practices in advancing leadership for school improvement" (p. 1). This model addresses another tier of leadership in alternative schools: staff involvement in leading the school. While administrators must make decisions about students, , Tenuto's (2014) work adds to Wagner and Simpson's (2009) model on creating a process of involvement within and among teachers and other staff in schools.

One of the three research questions of this study involves the decisions that administrators make about staff; therefore, Tenuto's (2014) work, coupled with Wagner and Simpson (2009), provides a framework for constructing inquiries into incorporating staff in an alternative school. According to Tenuto (2014) "increased standards are causing teachers and school leaders to reevaluate professional practices and reorganize social patters in an effort to raise the bar of excellence in U.S. schools" (p. 2). Tenuto's (2014) model of DPPE, then, seeks to "help teachers and school leaders to effectively care for students and provide necessary supports while expecting them to achieve exceedingly higher levels of academic

work" (p. 3). It is evident that Tenuto (2014) promotes similar principles as Wagner and Simpson (2009) because students benefit from both models. Tenuto (2014) recognizes five elements in her conceptual model for DPPE: sharing purpose, sharing data, sharing expertise, sharing leadership, and sharing responsibility. These five elements advance Wagner and Simpson's (2009) moral architecture because they further specify the importance of shared leadership in schools.

Sharing purpose is the first element to Tenuto's (2014) DPPE because "where there is dialogue, there is potential" (p. 4). Part of sharing purpose, then, comes about by structuring schools that promote dialogue. One way of accomplishing this is to develop professional learning communities (PLCs). Tenuto (2014) states "within these communities, school leaders, teacher leaders, and teachers may uncover a myriad of ideas together, as they work and explore research-based approaches" (p. 5). With this in mind, then, school leaders must create a community of dialogue in their schools to improve the school. This study examined the presence of structures such as these to understand the process that administrators take to create this culture.

The second element to Tenuto's (2014) DPPE involved sharing data. Sharing data could help "teachers and school leaders to reflect on current beliefs about sharing student achievement data and to reevaluate current practices of using research-based principles to improve teaching and learning outcomes" (Tenuto, 2014, p. 5). In short, in Tenuto's (2014) view, could help schools to improve their practices while maintaining open dialogue based on trust and school improvement. This element of the DPPE further formulates the inquiry in to administrators' perspectives on creating culture in their schools.

In addition to sharing data, Tenuto (2014) explained that sharing expertise as another element to DPPE. In her words, "a true learning organization provides necessary supports and nurtures individuals' dispositions to commit to a lifelong process of growth and learning" (Tenuto, 2014, p. 6). To accomplish this, administrators need to provide time, resources, and structures that encourage teachers to research and share practices that improve student learning (Tenuto, 2014). By establishing this culture, the potential for administrators to access and apply the expertise of individual teachers on a broader scale becomes more likely.

Sharing leadership is another tenet of the DPPE (Tenuto, 2014). Within this pillar, administrators can lead democratically by encouraging teacher leadership and instructional leadership within their schools (Tenuto, 2014). By sharing leadership with teachers, administrators encourage teachers to take part in the decisions of the school. By deliberately involving teachers, administrators cultivate an environment of shared leadership among staff (Tenuto, 2014). Additionally, teachers can take on instructional leadership roles because "continuous improvement of development and management of curriculum are essential at all levels of education" (Tenuto, 2014, p. 8). In essence, encouraging teachers to share leadership roles in the school can improve the culture of the school among staff, while also improving the learning of students.

The final piece of Tenuto's (2014) DPPE involves sharing responsibility. When teachers have a shared goal, "a higher level of personal and professional integrity may be realized" (Tenuto, 2014, p. 8). Furthermore, "sharing responsibility…also means sharing a commitment to civic responsibility and social justice education both inside and outside school walls" (Tenuto, 2014, p. 8). Essentially, sharing responsibility in a school creates within teachers a sense of deeper moral purpose to help students. Administrators who do this,

according to Tenuto (2014), are able to—through their staff—help their students become contributing members of society.

With new PSEL (2015) and NAEA (2014) expectations, voices from students, and an emphasis on individuals, school leaders in this study had the tools available to know the "what" to improve their schools—assuming that they were aware of these standards. What is missing, what needs further study, is the "how." The next portion of this study identifies a current research framework that suits these new developments.

Considerations for Ethical Decision Making About Students

This chapter previously reviewed exemplary practices of a successful alternative program and the standards for effective leaders. In reviewing these standards, it was evident that meeting each one of these factors consistently would cause significant struggle and dissonance for administrators. Therefore, it was important examine literature on decision-making frameworks to pinpoint exactly how alternative school administrators attempted to ensure that these factors were prevalent in their schools. This search led to what all the previous literature emphasized: a focus on engaging alternative school students in their own education. Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) ethic of the profession framework most closely matched the issues in this study because it focuses on the best interests of students. Not only does the term itself embody the supporting literature on alternative education, but also it also closely matches my own personal beliefs in education.

Within the ethic of the profession, there are five considerations that administrators must take into account to serve the best interests of students. The first element of the ethic of the profession is the Standards of the Profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 26), which are the standards set forth by states, districts, and other governing bodies. The second

component to the ethic of the profession is the Professional Code of Ethics (p. 26) which is the set of ethical guidelines set forth “by professional associations; and written standards of the profession (p. 24). The third element of the Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2011) ethic of the profession is the Ethics of the Community “in which the leader works” (p. 24). The fourth pillar of this paradigm is the administrator’s Personal Codes of Ethics (p. 26), which is the personal code that administrators “perceive to be right or wrong and good or bad” (p. 23). The final pillar is the Individual Professional Codes (p. 26) where the administrator must find a balance between their personal codes of ethics and their individual decisions (p. 23). All of these elements shape Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2011) ethic of the profession as an instrumental decision-making process, with the best interests of the students at the center of these considerations.

To understand the decision-making process in this study, it is important to attend to the values of administrators. Paul (2005, p. 47) explained how values—be it language, observation, race—influence our understanding and reporting on an issue. Paul (2005) further noted, “inquiry is value-centered rather than value-free and strives to recover moral importance and imagination of the social sciences in order to create change in the world” (p. 47). Understanding the personal ethics and the decision-making processes of principals in alternative schools unveiled ethical stances—spoken or inferred—that exist among one or multiple administrators.

The word dilemma appears frequently in ethic decision-making literature. Robbins and Trabichet (2009) defined a dilemma as “a situation where one has to choose between two options but does not know which side to take because both seem legitimate” (p. 52). Robbins and Trabichet (2009) recognized the need to identify “criteria for decision-making when faced

with ethical dilemmas" (p. 52). Robbins and Trabichet (2009) explained that administrators face decisions where various decisions appear to be reasonable; however, no clear-cut response is obvious. Therefore, there is a need to have some set of established criteria to help administrators navigate situations like this. Making ethical decisions, as Paul (2005) discussed, means identifying personal preference, or go-to processes that administrators have at their disposal.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) established the ethic of the profession to help administrators "become more aware of their own personal and professional codes of ethics" (p. 19). The ethic of the profession is "an ethical paradigm [that] includes ethical principles and codes of ethics embodied in the justice paradigm, but is much broader, taking into account other paradigms as well as professional judgement and decision making" (p. 22). Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) ethic of the profession is a process for administrators to use when facing challenging ethical dilemmas in schools because "frequent confrontations with moral dilemmas become even more complex as dilemmas increasingly involve a variety of student populations, parents, and communities comprising diversity in broad terms…" (p. 25). The model for decision-making, according to Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011), is intended to help administrators navigate the dilemmas they would inevitably face. Accompanying this model are a series of questions to guide an administrator's decisions: "What would the profession expect me to do? What does the community expect me to do? And what should I do based on the bests interests of the students, who may be diverse in their composition and their needs?" (p. 27).

PSEL (2015) highlights broad expectations for administrators at any level. In Standard 2, PSEL (2015) indicates that effective leaders "place children at the center of

education and accept responsibility for each student…[to] safeguard and promote the values of democracy, individual freedom and responsibility, equity, social justice, community, and diversity" (p. 10). Stefkovich (2014) identified a component of decision-making that administrators *should* face most frequently; she defined the best interests of students as a three-fold consideration of the student: rights, responsibility and respect (p. 28). In other words, when making decisions under the ethic of the profession, administrators consider the rights of the individual students and of the student community, promote the capacity for students to take responsibility for their own actions, and a general respect for students as human beings.

Robbins and Trabichet (2009) acknowledged, however, that administrators often face competing expectations from the school community, the district, and from parents of other students (p. 55), and they encouraged administrators to question the cultural roots of such expectations. In that light, then, the best interests of students are not always clear to administrators. By examining the decisions of alternative administrators, this study attempts to illuminate the existence of the ethic of the profession framework in nontraditional schools with nontraditional populations, addressing the relevance and challenges of using this paradigm. This study hypothesizes that when students' best interests conflict with other interests of teachers, or with other students, the ethic of the profession might not be so clearly applicable.

There are few applications of the ethic of the profession in the literature, so this study attempts to extend the work of some studies regarding the ethic of the profession. One study found in the literature at the time of this project was that of Frick, Faircloth, and Little (2012), who studied the viability of the ethic of the profession model among working administrators

in an elementary school with special education students. Although their study emphasized how administrators viewed special education students' individual needs in relation to the needs of the whole—and not alternative secondary students— their study challenged the model as a practical decision-making paradigm. Frick, Faircloth, and Little (2012) found that the ethic of the profession had limitations. First, their study highlighted how principals generally regarded the best interests of students as meeting their needs (pp. 221-222). Many principals in the study "engaged teachers in collective problem solving and instructional decision making" (Frick, Faircloth, & Little, 2012, pp. 221-222) to invoke their own sense of responsibility for student success by making sure students had what they needed. However, "serious internal tension existed as principals related their obligation to represent all students and their best interests in collective terms" (Frick, Faircloth, & Little, 2012, p. 222). It was in this conflict that collective best interests took on different meanings than individual ones did. In Frick, Faircloth, and Little's (2012) study, principals defined the collective interests as "health, safety, and student welfare" (p. 224). Ultimately, the principals in this study wrangled with dilemmas when deciding between individual and group best interests. This dilemma took further shape in the concept of equity versus equality.

Frick, Faircloth, and Little (2012) determined that equity and equality in schools created ethical dilemmas: "to focus solely on ensuring equality or even-handed treatment, irrespective of student characteristics and circumstances, would be a travesty in public education even if the reasons for doing so were well intentioned" (pp. 225-226). Frick, Faircloth, and Little (2012) argued that the best interests of the students were not always the same as for others, which was why most administrators felt trapped in decisions between the collective and the individual. However complicated these distinctions were, Frick, Faircloth,

and Little (2012) defined the best interests in administrators' minds as "sensitive to students' needs, expressing care in a way that demonstrates genuine concern for children's wellbeing, and assuming responsibility for relationships that emulate parental guidance and direction" (p. 228). Ultimately, administrators "viewed their thinking, decisions, and actions in accordance with the best interests of all students as taking center stage in the daily operation of their schools" (p. 228). Frick, Faircloth, and Little (2012) did not challenge the best interests model; instead, they "add[ed] a much-needed dimension to the ethical issue of individualism versus collectivism in the classroom" (p. 228). Frick, Faircloth, and Little (2012) concluded with a final question of "whether corporate best interests outweigh individual best interests in the public school arena" (p. 230). In sum, administrators tend to have the best interests of students at the heart of decisions, but when individual needs conflict with the needs of the whole, ethical dissonance becomes a challenge for these administrators. This study further explores the distinctions that administrators make between the best interests of one student versus the best interests of many in alternative settings, adding to Frick, Faircloth, and Little's (2012) application of the ethic of the profession.

To diversify the lens for the study, this study examines other decision-making models to understand decision-making on different levels. For instance, Hoy and Miskel (2008) identified several approaches to educational leaders' decision-making (p. 340) and the usefulness or applicability of each. The contingency model (Hoy & Miskel, 2008, p. 340), assumes that "there is no best way to decide," and that the situation and other factors determine the best course for administrators to take, having four equally valid decision-making strategies to call on depending the situation. Wagner and Simpson (2009) recognized the need to have a strong understanding of moral theories, in addition to decision-making

models, to strategically navigate ethical dilemmas. In fact, Wagner and Simpson (2009) spent significant time dissecting various historical, ethical theories for administrators to consider when faced with challenging decisions. This dissection of multiple ethical considerations support Hoy and Miskel's (2008) contingency model because Wagner and Simpson (2009) confirmed that there was no one correct ethical stance to take when running a school. Instead, only by understanding multiple ethical principles could administrators effectively sustain a solid moral architecture in their schools.

Dantley (2003) argued that administrators must consider the best interests of students as first when making decisions. However, Dantley (2003) cited the pressures of the industrial model of high-stakes testing and other systemic requirements that often conflict with alternative students' success in school, which creates conflicts of administrators' personal values and the expectations of industrial high-stakes testing (p. 275). Dantley (2003) furthered his argument: "this way of perceiving the work of school leaders assumes that they labor in a value-neutral, frictionless environment" (p. 276). Dantley (2003) cited West's (1989) theory of prophetic pragmatism, which was "a potent practice aimed at bringing about a difference in the world…the transformation of philosophical perspective into social action…" (pp. 280-281). In contrast to the objective measures of the industrial model, or the default culture, Dantley (2003) used West's (1989) theory to support administrators making decisions from a personal and moral belief system. Dantley (2003) explained that West's (1989) theory of purpose-driven leadership could help administrators work beyond the expectations of the industrial education model:

> [Purpose-driven leadership] serves to bring about reform and reconstruction that are external to the normative paradigms of school change. Instead of using empirical or

> quantifiable qualifiers of school effectiveness, educational achievement takes on a more axiological, moral, and teleological tenor. (p. 282)

Students' best interests in alternative settings may not be to focus on passing high-stakes tests or to meet seat-time requirements—a common way to earn credits. Alternative school administrators work within the industrial system to meet the federal and state mandates, but these student-centered theories most likely take greater prevalence in schools composed of nontraditional students. When making decisions, alternative school administrators likely look to the interests of the student populations—what they need on social and emotional levels—in addition to staying within the bounds of mandates. Wagner and Simpson (2009) surmised "school courtesies, communication patterns, and democratic processes may recede to the background when school personnel sacrifice these values as they rush to meet pressing state or federal mandated deadlines" (p. 6). This study examines how alternative school administrators create a culture that not only meets these guidelines, but also maintains the structures that work for nontraditional students. In short, this study researches the decisions—both the what and the how—that alternative school administrators make to protect the best interests of their students.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This chapter details the process used to conduct the case study of alternative school administrators in the Pacific Northwest. The qualitative methods in this study, as described below, helped to make sense of the stories of administrators. The goal of this study is to capture perspectives from actual administrators and to understand their practices while engaging the school community. Exploring their stories attempted to explain ethical decision-making processes from multiple angles. Stories and narratives are critical aspects that helped unveil the understandings of the actors in the field. Whether explicit or hidden, the experiences of actors in whatever field unveil the humanity in experiences (Stake, 1995). A quantitative study could have provided some answers to the research questions of the study. For instance, the study could have surveyed a sample of administrators in alternative schools, asking them to respond to various survey questions to try to determine a generalizable explanation of how alternative administrators differed from their peers. However, this study attempts to understand how school leaders look to various professional ethics, what their individual ethics are, and their process of decision-making when building a moral architecture in their schools. This study does not try to identify broad generalizations about alternative school administrators' decisions; instead, the study endeavors to understand the unique and individual voices of a few administrators, and to examine the multiple—yet similar—realities in alternative school leadership.

Quantitative research attempts to explain large-scale relationships and to make reasonable predictions about the effects of one—or multiple—sources on another subject or subjects. It would be sensible to assume that quantitative research is the opposite of qualitative, but the two work in different realms and with different data sources to find truths

at different levels. Crotty (1998) explained "that this divide—objectivist research associated with quantitative methods over against constructionist or subjectivist research associated with qualitative methods—is far from justified" (p. 15). Both research methods seek explanations or understandings of important questions, but instead of using numbers, this qualitative research used actual human experience, observation and narrative to investigate what quantitative may not have revealed. Qualitative research seeks understanding by using detailed descriptions from actual participants. In this project, it was important to understand the process of making decisions about students, staff, and programs from the perspective of an alternative school administrator.

The final justification for a qualitative approach appear in the foundations of constructionist and subjectivist epistemologies (Crotty, 1998), which fit into the concept of emerging understandings based on each case. Trochim and Donnelly (2008) summed up the importance of voice in qualitative research: "the use of expressive language and the presence of voice is a particularly distinctive feature of qualitative research reports" (p. 179). Furthermore, Trochim and Donnelly (2008) specified how qualitative research applied to this project: "qualitative research is emergent; that is, it is well suited to situations in which preconceived notions are purposely limited and where the intent of the researcher is a more gradual process of discovery as the study unfolds" (p. 178). Finally, Creswell (2013) sharpened this definition:

> Qualitative research begins with assumptions of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem…qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural settings sensitive to

> the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. (p. 44)

Several details in Creswell's definition refined the meaning of this qualitative study. An "emerging approach to inquiry" indicates flexibility to conduct a qualitative study because collection methods or approaches during a study might change to understand the true nature of the issue if current methods are not sufficient (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). In that vein, Creswell (2013) wrote, "we conduct qualitative research because a problem needs to be explored…to empower individuals to share their stories… [and] to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations…" (p. 47-48). The need to explore this topic created an intrinsic interest in the case, matching closely with case study methodology. More importantly, the findings emerged with the transcription and coding process, allowing this study to take shape as the analysis deepened.

Methodology

In justifying the use of qualitative research methods, this chapter explains the importance of listening to the voices of participants. This section further describes case study methods used to unveil the perceptions of administrators in alternative schools. Creswell (2013) described a case study as "a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection…" (p. 97). This methodology helped to understand the cases, particularly when theory existed about the case, but further understanding of the challenges and complexities of the case was necessary. The narrative structure of the case descriptions helped achieve what Stake (1995) coined as "naturalistic generalizations," which "are conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life's

affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to themselves" (p. 85). With this definition, this study attempts to engage readers in the experiences of the actors through detailed descriptions of their words and contexts, using actual experiences to shape the findings.

Yin (2014) stated that case study "is used in many situations, to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena" (p. 4). The actors, as Stake (1995) referred to them, are individual alternative school administrators, all working within relatively the same system. Therefore, this study examines both individual and group decisions to illuminate the existence of ethical decision-making. Conducting a case study allowed me to capture multiple voices in similar settings, and to identify how alternative school administrators make decisions for and about students and programs in their schools. Stake (1995) highlighted a key qualification in case study, which applies to this research: "we try hard to understand how the actors, the people being studied, see things" (p. 12). Researchers conducting case studies, therefore, attempt to study the perspectives of participants. In this study, the participants were alternative school administrators, and it was important to identify how they viewed their role and their processes of making about their students and about their schools.

Identifying perspectives from administrators was not enough to understand the case; instead, understanding the intricacies of each case—each administrator in each school—created a larger, single case. Stake (1995) explained, "in qualitative case study, we seek greater understanding of the case. We want to appreciate the uniqueness and complexity of the case, its embeddedness and interaction with its contexts" (p. 16). However, Yin (2014) offered a set of guidelines to determine the applicability of case study to a study:

> The three conditions [necessary to use a case study] consist of (a) the type of research question posed, (b) the extent of control a researcher has over actual behavioral events, and (c) the degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events. (p. 9)

Yin (2014) explained that case study research consisted of open-ended, exploratory research questions, no requirement of control, and a focus on contemporary issues (p. 9). This study fits Yin's (2014) qualifications in that all of the research questions are exploratory, there is no requirement for control within the context, and it is a contemporary issue.

Stake (1995) also explained the relevance of case study in his definition of intrinsic case studies, which further strengthened project: "the case is given. We are interested in it, not because by studying it we learn about other cases or about some general problem, but because we need to learn about that particular case" (p. 3). My professional and educational experiences shaped my intrinsic interest in this case. From working as an administrator in a juvenile corrections school, to completing an internship at studying alternative school programs, I was interested in how other administrators made decisions. Stake (2006) supported this notion of qualitative case studies as developing and understanding emerging practices based on the interests of the researcher. Indeed, Stake (2006) described the case (or cases) as almost living entities, taking on different iterations as researchers delve further into them. In other words, different understandings often surface as the case study progresses.

Ethics in Research

The participants of this project were afforded protections and reassurances for participating in the study. Whether it was protection from physical/emotional harm, or from the risk of losing a job, for instance, the participants needed to know the potential threats of participation. Several steps were taken to guarantee protections to all members of this study.

First, I explained the benefits of the study, reassurances of confidentiality, and an outline of potential discomforts accompanying participation in the interviews (see APPENDIX D). To gain access to these administrators, then, it was critical to receive permission from each school district in which the schools resided to conduct the research. Having this level of support from the district was not only necessary, it was also a systemic safeguard that provided a stronger sense of security for the participants.

Along the same lines of systemic safeguards, the most important aspect was to first gain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the project. This system ensured participants, the districts, and the university that all ethical considerations for participants were protected. The process served to first protect participants from harm. However, the process also sought to instill confidence in participants that their part in the research was protected, which strengthened the data and findings. To accomplish this, the participants received an introductory email that detailed the purpose and scope of the project. Additionally, before the interviews started, I introduced myself, describing my background, and explaining to the administrators the purpose of the study. This process was an attempt to make administrators feel more comfortable with the interview process.

Purpose of the researcher

This study attempts to understand the process of decision-making in alternative schools to understand how several administrators make decisions, particularly when the decisions are not clear-cut. As an aspiring administrator, I was interested in the decision-making process because such narratives provide practical wisdom about challenges and successes of those currently working in the field. I was, however, an instrument in this research. My purpose was to make meaning from the cases through my own lens. Creswell

(2013) defined this phenomenon as reflexivity, where "the writer is conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to a qualitative research study" (p. 216). According to Yin (2014), reflexivity can also occur during the research, particularly during interviews, causing "a mutual and subtle influence between you and the interviewee" which could "influence the interviewee's responses, but those responses also unknowingly influence your line of inquiry" (p. 112). Therefore, Yin (2014) suggested that researchers make themselves aware of this potential threat, understanding that it cannot be completely avoided. Creswell (2013) likewise suggested that "researchers 'position themselves' in a qualitative research study…[and] convey their background…how it informs their interpretation of the information in a study and what they have to gain from the study" (p. 47). In fact, Creswell (2013) admitted, "qualitative researchers today are much more self-disclosing about their qualitative writings than they were a few years ago. No longer is it acceptable to be the omniscient, distanced qualitative writer" (p. 214). Creswell suggested, "the researcher first talks about his or her experiences with the phenomenon being explored… [and then] to discuss how these past experiences shape the researcher's interpretations of the phenomenon" (p. 216). It was for this reason that several excerpts in this project include descriptions of my own interests in this topic. My experiences led me to this study, and it was evident that I had a stronger understanding of the situations administrators were in because of my experiences.

Protections for participants

This study used interviews as the primary source of data gathering. Along with the interviews, the researcher conducted direct observations of participants in their schools. Some of these observations were mere walk-abouts in the school environment. Others involved the researcher sitting in on a parent or student meeting. While these observations did not include

direct references to staff and students involved in the observations, as outlined in the ethical obligations, I was able to note appearances of the administrators' practices in action. During the observations, I noted relevant contextual features of each school. All pseudonyms of schools were developed in the essence of the Pacific Northwest's diverse geological terrain, as many schools in this study and not have commonly been named under to highlight the beauty of country's natural beauty. Creating such pseudonyms presented additional challenges than anticipated, as many names had already been used across the various school districts in this state. Therefore, any names that actually appeared in districts across the state and others were purely coincidental. It was more important to protect the identity of each school, and these names were formulated to do so. Academy is a common name used for alternative schools, so each school was assigned that name as well to muddy the connections one could make to the actual school names and to the pseudonyms.

There were likely several common reasons why administrators chose to take part in this research. Some may have sought personal benefits, but others may have participated to add to the body of research, hoping that the findings contributed to progress in the particular area of study ("Ethical Obligations Toward Research Subjects," 2007). Regardless of a participant's reasons for participating, it was more important to disclose the reasons for the research. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2010) prescribed the necessary components of Informed Consent:

> (1) the purpose of the research, expected duration and procedures; (2) their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research once participation has begun; (3) the foreseeable consequences of declining or withdrawing; (4) reasonably foreseeable factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to participate

> such as potential risks, discomfort or adverse effects; (5) any prospective research benefits; (6) limits of confidentiality; (7) incentives for participation; and (8) whom to contact for questions about the research and research participants' rights. They provide opportunity for the prospective participants to ask questions and receive answers. (p. 10)

In short, Informed Consent required me to indicate a number of protections and reassurances for participants. In my study, I used a page-long letter of intent (see APPENDIX D) that participants received prior to participating in the study. On this form, I included an explanation that the study would illuminate different administrator perspectives about ethical decision-making in alternative settings, and I highlighted the potential benefits of the study, particularly that the study could provide a resource for the participants—and for other alternative school administrators—who wanted access to perspectives of other administrators in similar situations. There was also an opt-out clause for participants who were no longer willing to participate, and I provided contact information in case participants had further questions or wanted to provide follow-up information. Finally, I included information, covered in subsequent descriptions below, regarding confidentiality reassurances and potential risks of participation, explicitly identifying that responses in this research would not incriminate him/her for potential discipline from district or state offices.

In this study, the participants were administrators in alternative schools, and their responses were kept confidential to maintain trust and to prevent risks of identity disclosure. During the study, the participants interviewed as part of a case study in alternative school administration. Building trust was critical for the formulation of candid responses during the interviews. This trust started with assurances of confidentiality in their responses. Trochim

and Donnelly (2008) identified confidentiality as "an assurance made to study participants that identifying information about them acquired through the study will not be made available to anyone outside of the study" (p. 24). Confidentiality was a powerful reassurance that participants would not be identified by participating in the study. I used several methods to keep all interviews, field notes, and other data confidential. To do this, I replaced all names and unique identifiers with pseudonyms. For instance, each subject received a general pseudonym, and all schools were only be identified by a generic name. Furthermore, I noted the specifics of each school with phrases such as "a small or medium-sized school" to further distance participants from potential risks of identification. Another reassurance of confidentiality included keeping all hard copies of collected artifacts in a secure location, and all digital correspondences, transcripts, or voice recordings on password-protected devices and files. These systems provided participants the comforts of confidentiality for their protection and for the protection of candid responses.

Another ethical consideration for participant protection was minimizing potential for risks in the research. Trochim and Donnelly (2008) explained, "ethical standards also require that researchers not put participants in a situation where they might be at risk of harm as a result of their participation" (p. 24). They continued: "harm can be defined as both physical and psychological" (p. 24). While the risk for physical harm was not present in this study, the potential for discomfort existed, as participants might have been uncomfortable answering some interview questions. For instance, a participant may have inferred that inquires—while not intending to—questioned his/her competency as an administrator. As an educator and researcher, I had to assure participants that I was not judging their responses as right or wrong, and that the study only sought to identify commonalities or differences in actions

and/or philosophies. In this study, I wanted to identify the process of keeping the best interests of students at the forefront of decisions, so I did not ask questions that required administrators to reveal decisions about specific students or staff members that could have potentially harmed their professional status. Doing so would have put them at risk for exposure, so my interviews focused more on the process of decision-making, rather than the actual decisions or the outcomes.

A final protection for participants took shape in Yin's (2014) description of ethical considerations. According to Yin (2014), all research "will be negated if a researcher only seeks to use a case study to substantiate a preconceived position" (p. 76). Yin (2014) suggested that, to avoid bias, one should consider views that are contradictory to the evidence that one finds in their research (p. 76). Yin (2014) recommended that, early on, researchers present initial data to colleagues and ask them to find contradictions in the findings. This process, according to Yin (2014), minimized the potential for unforeseen bias on the side of the researcher. A team of experienced researchers reviewed my writing to reduce bias. Most importantly, I informed participants that there was a potential for follow-up interviews, particularly if the research began to take on a different shape from the conceptual framework. I recognized the need to adjust my research based on what was discovered because qualitative research, after all, was an emergent practice.

Research Questions

The main questions in this project investigate how administrators meet the best interests of their students based on alternative school standards, professional standards, and the ethic of the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Stake's (1995) perspective on qualitative research questions represented the purpose for choosing a qualitative case study.

He described the variations between the quantitative and qualitative as "a difference in searching for causes versus searching for happenings" (p. 37). Stake (1995) further discussed that qualitative studies searched for understandings, rather than explanations (p. 37). This distinction naturally segued to the research questions of the study:

1. How do alternative school administrators make decisions, and in their perspectives, how do they rely on ethical principles?
2. What factors do alternative school administrators consider when making decisions about personnel?
3. What factors do alternative school administrators consider when making decisions for or about students?

These three questions, as Yin (2014) described, were written as exploratory questions, which are characteristic of good case studies. Questions of this nature promote an understanding of a process. Alternative school administrators in this study worked within the world of traditional schools and expectations, while also promoting the success of students who failed in these traditional schools.

Site Selection

Several factors determined the setting for this project. The first was the need to interview enough administrators to make the findings of this project credible. The target was eight to twelve individuals who worked as administrators in alternative schools. The second reason for selecting these sites was the regional accessibility of the schools. This dissertation was a project done as a preliminary experience in research; I had a full time job, a family, and no financial backing to expand the project to sites that are not geographically close. Staying in the Pacific Northwest allowed me to conduct research at districts in one area to keep the scope

of the project manageable and practical. Finally, this project was relegated to alternative schools. While ethical dilemmas certainly existed in traditional schools, alternative schools—with the unique populations—provided a comparable population. These schools were intended to be a safety net for many at-risk students, and it was possible that because of this feature, administrators felt compelled even more to pull out all the stops to protect their interests.

Participants

Participants were limited to administrators in alternative schools, which included principals, vice/assistant principals, and site administrators. It was important to target only administrators in the alternative schools, since the project focuses on understanding the decision-making process of administrators. Because there were several participants to observe, this study was a multiple case study (Yin, 2014). In this type of case study, or Yin's (2014) Type 3 design, the study examines the same case—alternative school administrator decisions—in different schools, or contexts. Some of the contexts were similar, such as the same district or the same grade level, and some of the contexts varied depending on the size of the school. Because of the need to find at least eight to twelve different individuals, the participants and contexts differed based on need and willingness to participate in the study.

In this study, I did not seek to understand the schools as institutions; rather, I attempted to understand the perceptions of administrators as leaders of their schools. By focusing on the administrators and their decisions, I gained better understanding about the values of each administrator, and as Stake (1995) wrote, "the first criterion should be to maximize what we can learn" (p. 4) from each case. Examining only one school would have resulted in less detail about alternative school administration. In later work on case studies,

Stake (2006) further argued the value of using multiple cases. Case study researchers use multiple cases "to understand the Quintain (i.e., the program or phenomenon)—both its commonality and its differences across manifestations" (p. 40). This project attempts to understand these similarities and variations, as they exist in their environments. While it was reasonable to assume that the administrators would share similar perspectives, it was also likely that they each had unique styles and values that built a diverse picture of alternative school administration. Stake (1995) described the need for a variety of cases: "balance and variety are important; opportunity to learn is of primary importance" (p. 5) because "it startles us to find our own perplexities in the lives of others" (p. 6). Therefore, eight administrators participated in this study, which added variety and similarity that would not have been present in a smaller study.

Data Collection

Creswell (2013) explained that all good case studies encompass an "in-depth understanding of the case," and to develop this understanding, case studies use multiple sources of data (p. 98). The data in this study includes interviews, observations, document or archival review, and field study (Creswell, 2006; Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995; Stake, 2006). In this study, I used this data to understand how administrators perceived the process of making ethical decisions about their schools. Stake (1995) explained, "[data gathering] begins before there is a commitment to do the study: backgrounding, acquaintance with other cases, first impressions" (p. 49). This was true for me because I worked with alternative programs throughout my career. In a sense, I was already acquainted with the cases. Moreover, as the initial review of websites and district policies began shaping the study before the bulk of the research started, the case already began taking shape.

My chosen qualitative methods also used specific data sources and analyses to generate findings, although a criticism of qualitative research is that it is not an empirical truth. Trochim and Donnelly (2008) stated, "one of the reasons that qualitative research is sometimes not regarded as seriously as quantitative is the misconception that analysis of qualitative data is unsystematic and superficial" (p. 179). However, "a well-planned qualitative study includes an integrated approach to design and analysis," (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008, p. 179) to ensure credibility of findings. Since Stake's (1995) intrinsic case study closely resembled narrative research (Creswell, 2013, p. 100), the data came from Stake's (1995) main sources: observation, context description, interviews, and document review. Using these four forms of data collection sought to improve the rigorous methods of this study.

In order to create a well-planned and research-based study, several protocols were developed to identify the perspectives of alternative school administrators. First, the Interview Protocols (see APPENDIX A) sought to identify the knowledge, use, and applicability or appearance of alternative and administrator professional standards when making decisions. These protocols addressed a variety of issues revolving around being a leader at an alternative school. Among these protocols were probes about the PSEL (2015) standards, the NAEA (2014) standards, and the ethic of the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011) to understand how the school created an environment among staff to serve the best interests of students. The probes focused on the perceptions of the mission and vision of the school, and how or if both influenced general decisions about the school, students and staff, and how or if these standards affected day-to-day decisions. Coupled with the standards, I referenced relevant research about effective alternative environments (Mottaz, 2002; Flower,

McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2012; and Kretchmar, 2014) to craft questions that focused on the best interests of alternative school students.

The Observation Protocol (see APPENDIX C) was developed in a similar fashion. However, to observe every standard from PSEL (2015) and the NAEA (2014) would have been unmanageable and overwhelming. Therefore, I selected three key elements—the best interests of students, community relationships, and leadership capacity of staff—as observable behaviors to note while observing administrators in a school setting. These three elements allowed me to focus my attention on actions and reactions that administrators displayed during the observation, while also allowing for descriptive notes. There was also a space for context description, as Stake (1995, 2006) referenced the importance of context description in the analysis of the case. Finally, since the observation was only a small snapshot of the environment, I also included a space for document review notes on the same protocol. This allowed me to make notes about the school prior to or following the observation to focus findings. Having everything on one form helped organize the data in manageable sections that were easily referenced during the observations. The reflective notes on the protocol allowed space to interpret what was going on in the three data sources.

Observations

Stake (1995) cited observations as a way to help the researcher achieve “greater understanding of the case” (p. 60). The observations in this study included information that would be pertinent to the issue of the case: how administrators participated in their natural environments. I observed the principals interacting within the school setting because “the story often starts to take shape during the observation” (Stake, 1995, p. 62). This meant I observed during passing periods, supervision times, or meetings. To streamline this process, I

created an Observation Protocol (see APPENDIX C) that contained various elements to the principal's interaction with his/her environment. Doing so, I noted "categories or key events, attentive to background conditions that may influence subsequent analysis…" (Stake, 1995, p. 62). Therefore, instead of creating a system of tallies for each observed phenomenon, I used relevant literature on alternative schools and ethical decision-making to document when I saw those specific features in each school and among each principal. This helped me account for the fact that there was "no numerical indicator…available here to indicate the ratio, but researcher and reader [were] likely to interpret…" (Stake, 1995, p. 60) that the observations were present. I understood that each piece of observation data would not appear every time, but the form allowed me to maintain a focus on common elements of the case. Stake's (1995) recommendation for a space for "natural language description" (p. 63) allowed me to elaborate on the observed experiences, and gave a space to pay "special attention to anything that happened relevant to key issues" (p. 63). These observations averaged about 30 minutes, as it was important to leave enough time to see numerous interactions from the administrator without appearing too invasive.

Context description

The Observation Protocol (see APPENDIX C) was also used to construct context descriptions, which were another major component of Stake's (1995) data sources, as Stake (1995) recommended that some "procedure should be followed" (p. 63). Additionally, Stake (1995) suggested that the having a simple form to document observations would help describe the intangibles in the context, such as culture (p. 64). The goal in creating a visual of the context was to describe "some balance between the uniqueness and the ordinariness of the place. The physical space is fundamental to meanings for most researchers and most readers"

(Stake, 1995, p. 63). Descriptions of the contexts attempted to provide "vicarious experiences for the reader, to give them a sense of 'being there'" (Stake, 1995, p. 63). These descriptions were important because the intrinsic nature of my case study required more attention to the contexts (Stake, 1995, p. 64). Stake (1995) promoted the use of context descriptions on the same observation form to maintain an easily accessible and standard form, which focused the observations and the context descriptions on particular areas.

Document reviews

Another component to this research was to review relevant documents to understand the case further. The purpose for reviewing documents was that "often, documents serve as substitutes for records of activity that the researcher could not observe directly" (Stake, 1995, p. 68). I saw documents as valuable for this reason, particularly, so I also used the Observation Protocol (see APPENDIX C) to review documents before, during, or after the observation. In the dissertation, time and efficiency were key, and these documents helped to formulate a better understanding each school and the context in which it existed. Furthermore, time was limited to do multiple observations, so Stake (1995) also suggested an organized approach, where I "developed in advance a system…to keep things on track" (p. 68). Notable documents that I reviewed revolved around places where, as the literature review suggested, successful and ethical school structures existed: school newsletters, faculty handbooks, student handbooks, district policy, and the school website (Stake, 1995, p. 68).

Yin (2014) explained that reviewing documents should "corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (p. 107). For instance, "if the documentary evidence is contradictory rather than corroboratory, you need to pursue the problem by inquiring further into the topic" (p. 107). This method in the study assisted when other evidence was absent.

Interviews

Interviews were the bulk of the research because “the interview is the main road to multiple realities” (Stake, 1995, p. 64). The interviews allowed this study to find the “special stories” that each administrator told. The semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews provided the main source of interpretive data to understand the findings of the research questions. The interview guide used in this study to conduct the interviews was reviewed by my Doctoral Committee (see APPENDIX A). As Stake (1995) suggested, each question sought open-ended responses, rather than yes or no answers (p. 65). As an important ethical protection, I also understood and planned for the need to interview participants a multiple times, whether it was to verify findings, or to identify new elements to the research that had not been considered prior to the start of the interviews. Doing so was an attempt to achieve data saturation, where relevant information was fully gleaned from the participants and all possible angles to a question or concept had supporting evidence. Stake (1995) asserted, “a good interviewer can reconstruct the account and submit it to the respondent for accuracy and stylistic improvement” (p. 66). To protect the credibility of the interviews, I recorded and created verbatim transcripts of each interview so that when reviewing the transcripts, I had direct words from the participants. In addition, Stake (1995) emphasized the importance of paying attention to the non-verbal cues during the interview, as some responses indicated certain responses that could not be recorded. I used the narrative space on the Observation Protocol (see APPENDIX C) to document these notes as well. Without having a recording, I could have missed important statements from the participants while I also noted these non-verbal cues. Furthermore, Yin (2014) stated interviews “can provide important insights into…the prior history…helping you to identify other relevant sources of evidence” (p. 113).

In other words, as the cycle of data gathering continued, I noticed information in other data sources that needed further clarification. These follow-up interviews allowed me to revisit unforeseen findings or issues that arose in the study, and the process allowed me to capture the unique features of each case.

Finally, Yin (2014) provided more specific guidelines to consider before recording the interview. Yin (2014) warned researchers against recording interviews when an interviewee did not want to be recorded or was not comfortable, there was no plan to transcribe, the researcher did not know how to work a recording device, or the researcher mistook recording with listening closely (p. 110). To participate in the study, all participants agreed to be recorded, so Yin's (2014) first guideline did not apply. However, the rest of these parameters reminded me of the importance of being prepared and proficient when interviewing so I did not appear incapable or unprofessional when gathering data.

Data Analysis

Stake (2006) described multi case study analysis as "not a design for comparing cases," but to gain "a better understanding of the [problem]" (p. 83). Creswell (2013) identified this focus as a "holistic account," where "researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem...and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges…by identifying the complex interactions of factors in any situation" (p. 47). In sum, Creswell (2013) described that case studies used rich details to illuminate specifics of a phenomenon, not necessarily looking for correlation or causation, but the stories and perceptions within each case. Doing so, according to both Stake (2006) and Creswell (2013) provided a better understanding of alternative school leadership during the course of this study.

Trochim and Donnelly (2008) also described the purpose of qualitative studies that reflected the primary task of case studies: "the goal is to go beyond surface characterization to… 'thick description'" which "means that the story is told in detail, communicating the essence of what it is like for the participants" (p. 179). When creating these thick descriptions, qualitative studies must then reduce data into manageable or meaningful chunks. "Data reduction, " according to Trochim and Donnelly (2008), was "the translation of raw data into a form that represents the original data in summary, indexed, graphic, or other coded form" (p. 284). Creswell (2013) also explained that researchers must "[reduce] the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables or a discussion" (p. 180). This study explained findings with these chunks of data through coding processes. I looked to Saldana's (2010) work on coding, which provided a direction for reducing the data into manageable chunks.

In accordance with the above descriptions on how to compile the data, I then developed common themes gathered from observations, interviews, context descriptions, and document reviews through a process called coding. I began to analyze emerging themes in the data as they appeared, not to generalize beyond the case, but to understand the complexity of the case (Creswell, p. 101, Stake, 2006, p. 90). Creswell further recommended a within-case analysis by studying the themes in individual cases, and then comparing those themes to the themes in other cases, called a cross-case analysis (p. 101). Stake (2006) confirmed that this approach was important to finding the intricacies of the problem. Since this study was intrinsic, the "primary task is to come to understand the case. It will help us tease out relationships, to probe issues, and to aggregate categorical data" (Stake, 1995, p. 77). Stake (1995) also explained that patterns—not empirical generalizations—guide the case study

analysis. I looked for these patterns in the within-case and cross-case analyses to develop the codes and themes as they emerged in the analysis.

In all, I visited seven schools and interviewed eight administrators. While the contexts of each school initially influenced my interpretation of the schools, the interviews provided the most data for me to study, reduce, and analyze. Each interview ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the depth of answers, probes, and time of each administrator. I also conducted follow-up interviews with some participants to further probe, clarify, and to member check as I began formulating my findings.

As I transcribed the data, initial ideas about the answers to my research questions began forming. A second round of issue identification occurred when I reread transcriptions while listening to the recordings again. During that process, I clarified my own transcriptions, seeking accuracy and ensuring that each transcription directly matched the recording. All the while, issues and concepts continued to develop, as I began to recognize patterns and common concepts among the interviews. Once I completed this process with all of the interviews, I started writing memos about what I noticed about the perspectives of leading an alternative school. I reread each transcription again, taking notes about the nuances of leadership in alternative schools, keeping in mind my own research featured earlier in this study. After memoing, I began listing out process codes, as indicated by Saldana (2010). Process coding is an initial coding strategy when one is trying to understand the "movement and change over time" (Saldana, 2010, p. 80) to understand the process that administrators use when making decisions in their schools. This strategy made the most sense to help me illuminate the process of leading an alternative school. However, I ended up with over 50 codes, which overwhelmed me when trying to code the data.

It was then that I looked back to Saldana's (2010) coding strategies and decided to create more general, structural codes (Saldana, 2010). I began grouping codes into larger, common areas, not realizing that I was simply creating themes. This process allowed me to narrow my codes to 32—a reasonable number—but more importantly, to create broad categories (themes) to better organize the coding process along with further generalizing the data into more conceptual aspects of alternative school leadership. Seven themes emerged from the sub-codes within the data. I identified seven broad categories to understand the perspectives of alternative school leaders. Each theme contained 4-6 codes that related, almost entirely, to the parent theme. I say "almost entirely" as some codes appeared in other themes in similar ways; however, in applying the codes, any overlap only helped to understand the cases as I began to look at co-occurrences of codes across the entire data set. The themes that emerged from this process allowed me to begin formulating assertions about the research questions.

Trustworthiness

In addition to theme analysis, triangulation helped me analyze the case from different angles (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In a sense, triangulation was data checking, among other forms of triangulation (Yin, 2014). Triangulation was a common way for me to validate data that provided more credibility to this case study and its findings. Houghton, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) examined triangulation as a means of increasing rigor in nursing case study research to confirm data and to prove the completion of data. According to their explanation, confirming data includes comparing data from multiple sources to examine the findings (Houghton, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013, p. 14). Additionally, researchers verify the completeness of data by confirming multiple sources of data to answer the research questions (Houghton, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013, p. 14).

While Houghton, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) practiced triangulation in the nursing field, Creswell (2013), Yin (2014), and Stake (1995) all promote triangulation in educational case studies. Yin (2014) explained that researchers achieved triangulation by using "multiple sources of evidence…to address a broader range of historical and behavioral issues" to develop "converging lines of inquiry" (p. 120). Yin (2014) advanced his argument for triangulation because "any case study finding or conclusion is likely to be more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information" (p. 120). Finally, Stake (1995) explained "data source triangulation is an effort to see if what we are observing and reporting carries the same meaning when found under different circumstances" (p. 113). Yin (2014), like Stake (1995, 2006), confirmed that data source confirmation was one of the most effective ways to add credibility to the research. In this study, triangulation occurred across the different methods of data collection. If observed criteria from the Observation Protocol (see APPENDIX C) appeared in an interview and in a document that was reviewed, this triangulation then verified the existence of the finding.

Triangulation also occurred within each case of a multi-case study. Stake (2006) examined the use of triangulation in multi-case educational studies. "Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, but it is also verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (p. 37). First, the codes and themes that emerged in the analysis occurred frequently in visual form. I used the Dedoose software to code and to analyze the data, which helped put codes into numerical occurrences. While some codes occurred more frequently than others, the Dedoose system provided a visual and numerical representation of all codes that simplified the data and the findings into more manageable chunks.

Only one researcher completed this study, so there was not an option to triangulate data through different parties to compare interpretations. To address this limitation, member checking, “a vital technique for field researchers” (Stake, 2006, p. 37) was a form of triangulating data with participants of the study, where “the researcher asks the main actor or interviewee to read it for accuracy and possible misrepresentation” (p. 37). As a result, I mailed sections of the findings to each participant to “provide new data for the study, as well as contribute to the revision and improved interpretations of the reporting” (Stake, 2006, p. 37). Rather than having participants read over entire transcripts of the interviews, I instead asked them to verify the passages from their responses and my surrounding interpretations that appeared to have significance in the findings. This process saved time, and it only required that administrators reviewed information that I used from their interviews. A final benefit was that this process of member checking allowed me to complete a follow-up interview if new understandings had arisen from the coding process. In all, one participant responded with feedback for revisions, while some reached out to verify the accuracy of the report. All changes from the participant’s recommendations were reflected in the findings.

In addition to member checking, Stake (2006) also emphasized the importance of cross-case triangulation. To broaden the credibility of the research, then, “the binding concept—a theme, issue, phenomenon, or functional relationship that strings the cases together” (p. 39) was the ultimate goal of this project. The reason cross-case triangulation, or analysis, was so important was because cases may have had similar themes, but they also had differences that were important to recognize (Stake, 2006, p. 40). Triangulation across cases, according to Stake (2006), “serves the same purpose as in a single-case study: to assure that we have the picture as clear and suitably meaningful as we can get it, relatively free of our

own biases, and not likely to mislead the reader greatly" (p. 77). The overall practice of triangulation across the cases involved reviewing transcripts of interviews with one another, finding commonalities in administrators' responses, crosschecking with observations and documents to see if multiple schools contained similar patterns. Doing so strengthened the credibility of the findings at the end of the research. The whole process ensured a level of accountability in the findings because the findings appeared in more than just a case or two.

Summary

Beyond generalizations, qualitative research allows those working within the field to share what a survey cannot capture: individual experiences or voices. Jackson and Mazzei (2009) explained that voice in qualitative research "makes present the truth and *reflects* the meaning of an experience that has already happened" (p. 4). Therefore, this study attempts to examine and to describe the individual experiences of administrators in alternative schools, to capture their voices, and to understand the meaning they attributed to facing difficult decisions that challenged their ethics. This study uses narratives, observations, context descriptions and artifacts of those working within the field because each decision—even from the same person—contains nuances and considerations that likely differ from the last.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate ethical decision-making in alternative school leadership. The findings of this research could provide administrators and educational stakeholders with theory-based conclusions to make ethical decisions that serve the best interests of students in alternative settings. The guiding research questions were:

1. How do alternative school administrators make decisions, and in their perspectives, how do they rely on ethical principles?
2. What factors do alternative school administrators consider when making decisions about personnel?
3. What factors do alternative school administrators consider when making decisions for or about students?

Entry Vignette

A frozen parking lot greeted me as I entered the Summit Academy. The area's coldest and near record-breaking winter had just begun, and the journeys to each school provided new driving challenges: blowing snow, partially plowed roads, arctic temperatures, and frozen treks through parking lots and walkways. Tucked away in their own buildings and spaces, or attached to others, each school had clearly made efforts to personalize the learning environment for students. Whether it was at the Summit Academy, where academic achievements of students hung prominently throughout the hallways on bulletin boards and inspirational displays; or at the Creekside Academy, where decorative student-made murals splashed the brilliance of student's portrayals of their mascot, school colors, and historic scenes; each school found a way to help students take ownership in the community of learners (see APPENDIX C). Student artwork filled the hallways of each school, along with messages

of hope and inspiration. Mountain Crest Academy and Great Basin Academy went as far to have students create lounge chairs with old skateboards, skis, and snowboards for students to use in communal learning spaces. River Bend Academy, like others, featured pictures of past graduating classes, with inspirational quotes seemingly supporting the weight of the individuals in the pictures above (see APPENDIX C).

The holidays were approaching for some. Spring Rapids Academy had decorated the cafeteria with holiday displays; their staff party was that night, and students had helped to create a holiday environment for the teachers and staff to celebrate another year gone by, and another year together. Doors to classrooms, wrapped in student-made displays, invigorated old wooden entryways at Creekside Academy; students had a competition to see whose door would win before winter break. A special surprise awaited the winners (see APPENDIX C).

Student cafes and communal learning areas in various schools provided a space for students to engage in the school community with one another. With money from a school improvement effort, Spring Rapids set aside a student store, with a big screen television, digital movie access, and comfortable-looking furniture for students to use during downtime and to study. Creekside's student café went further, converting an old auditorium into a student store, café, and gathering area for students to lounge and eat. Several televisions hung around, and one, still on, played sports highlights from the previous night's professional sports games. Mountain Crest had a similar gathering area, but its focus on personalizing learning for students materialized in the multicolored tables, built like puzzle pieces and easily moved, for students to choose when, how, and with whom to learn (see APPENDIX C).

Various vision statements hung prominently throughout the hallways, in the classrooms, and in the offices; I could not miss the unique statements of student success. These schools

engaged students and staff in the moral purpose of the school: to create functioning members of society that could succeed beyond the rigor, and in many cases, the protections within each building. Creekside Academy emphasized the instructional model and expectations in each classroom, and I later discovered that that philosophy, although simplified in a neat, graphic metaphor, represented years of culture building and research that lived in every thread of the school's vision. Other schools displayed their stances on mastering of content through unique learning models. This philosophy appeared simply beyond the walls and bulletin board displays, but in the websites of schools, in the visions, the classrooms, and in the very belief that alternative schools students could be empowered to take ownership of their own educational journey (see APPENDIX C).

Each building—although mostly unique in design, age, and frequency of these features—attempted to transform its walls, classrooms, meeting areas and offices into visually and practically dynamic learning spaces. Students, staff, and administrators *owned* these schools, and the belief that every child could learn materialized symbolically throughout my observations. And as I walked into the doors of the Summit Academy, my first school, I could not help but already feel part of the struggles and the triumphs of students, staff, and, of course, my welcoming participants: the schools' administrators (see APPENDIX C).

Contextual Background

Participants in this study included eight alternative school administrators who worked in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Each administrator brought over 10 years of experience overall in education, with administrative experience ranging from 4 to over 20 years. This study sought to explore the perspectives of administrators, regardless of experience. However, each administrator had been in his/her current school for at least 3

years. This level of experience was unexpected, but it was a welcome element as much of the research sought to understand the long-term perspectives of leading an alternative school. It should be noted that to protect the identities of each participant, unique information collected in the pre-interview questionnaire (see APPENDIX C) was not broken down in this section.

The schools in the study varied in size. The smallest school had approximately 28 students, while the largest school exceeded 300. It appeared that in the larger district, there was more capacity for alternative school students. In terms of staff, as expected, the larger schools held more staff, while the smaller schools had a few support staff in place. As the schools increased in size, additional support staff was available, such as counselors, dropout prevention counselors, school resource officers, and safe school aides.

The issue central issue in this study was to explore the perspectives of alternative school administrators, particularly in the processes of making decisions about their schools. Therefore, this chapter identified common elements among the participants in each case to develop codes, and furthermore themes to better illuminate the shared perspectives. In the following section, the themes and codes were discussed using details from the four case study methods: interviews, observations, context descriptions, and document review.

Themes

Seven themes or factors emerged from the evidence in the study and are presented in this chapter: (1) creating a culture of high standards, (2) personalizing leadership, (3) utilizing professional resources for making decisions, (4) managing staff through active engagement, (5) accessing and using innovative practices, (6) establishing teaching and learning norms, and (7) managing students as a collaborative and individualized process.

Creating a culture of high standards

"If you don't have the staff, you have nothing. In the education business or anything." Mr. Peterson had a way of simplifying school leadership into manageable, almost coach-like terms and phrases. Before even responding to the interview question about culture, Mr. Peterson emphasized the importance of culture on students, staff, and the success of the school, and his belief, evidenced by numerous statements such as the one above, reverberated throughout his retelling of creating culture of high standards in his school. This theme involved four elements that appeared in the data: (1) building relationships with students, (2) putting students in charge of their education, (3) developing a vision and mission, and (4) changing the reputation of the school.

Building relationships

Building relationships with students started with how administrators interacted with the staff and students. Walking around with Mr. Peterson during the observation (see APPENDIX C), it appeared that he strived to act on his beliefs, interacting with staff and students with positivity and enthusiasm. However, the culture he referenced in the interview, one of "tough love," had to trickle down to the students as well as the staff. Tough love, as Mr. Peterson said, was about holding students to high standards while also supporting them:

> We [are] on you. Most kids most people consider what kind of school are you and I say we're a tough love school. What do we mean by that? We be tough, but we are going to love you; we're going to love you so much.

Mr. Peterson's voice, evident throughout the interview, was best reflected in this passage about building relationships with students among staff. Although he believed that he could

build solid relationships with students, he also thought that holding them to high standards as part of the school's culture would benefit his students.

Mr. Banks also saw the value of building relationships with students as part of the culture of his school. He stated "in the alternative school I think the expectations are more, if we're going to be successful, are rooted in our commitment to the student rather than just job responsibilities." Mr. Banks' words helped characterize the importance of building relationships with students as part of the culture of the school. By only focusing on job responsibilities, as Mr. Banks put it, the school would lose focus of the individual students who needed that more in-depth relationship to be successful.

Putting students in charge of their education

Every administrator voiced the need of their schools to put students in charge of their education, which further developed the theme of creating a culture of high expectations. Mr. Peterson appeared to believe so strongly in his school's mentality—and "grit training" kids—that I was also able to see this appear in observing an interaction with a student, asking her about her mindset, and what *she* was going to resolve a problem (see APPENDIX C). His relationship, and his intense focus on putting the student in charge of herself, appeared throughout the interview and in this interaction.

Ms. Young also emphasized the need to put students in charge of their own education. In her interview, Ms. Young discussed how the culture of her school strived to give students the tools to take control of their education and, with hope, their lives:

> The ultimate goal is [for] kids to own their own educational journey. We want them to have pride in it. We want them to take control of it. We want them to be able to articulate it. We want them to be able to know what they're learning, know where

> they're going, how they're getting there. And we want them to have the metacognition to go behind it. We want all of those things we really want those [traditional students] to have.

Ms. Young articulated the culture of her school, and it was not simply a culture of high expectations for grade achievement or test scores; instead, Ms. Young's vision for the school was to help her students take control of their worlds, so that they could understand the reasoning behind what they were learning.

Developing a mission and vision

Other administrators added to the analysis of creating a culture of high standards, voicing the importance of developing a mission and vision that gave the staff and the administration a direction. The process of developing the mission and vision took various forms across schools, but it came down identifying targets—where the school wanted to go—and steps to get there. Several schools even worked with other schools that were attempting to rewrite their mission/vision statements. It was important to these administrators that their staff have input in developing the statements to help them feel part of the change process. Mr. Smart was a firm believer in leading change as a group:

> The staff and administration of those three schools have been the people working on revising the mission and vision. I'm a very lead as a group type person I'm not a lead from the front office type guy. Pretty much everything that we do as far as mission vision even in general terms decisions that are made in the school I try to gather as much staff input as possible.

So in developing the mission and vision, and with other decisions, Mr. Smart found value in giving staff the chance to have input. Other administrators in this small conglomerate

confirmed that this process needed as much staff inclusion as possible in order to achieve the seemingly moving target of “buy-in.”

When developing a mission and vision, staff input did not always equate to “buy-in,” however, as some administrators voiced persistent pushback from staff who, although they provided input into the change process, still did not fully support changes taking place in the school. Mr. Downs, for instance, noted resistance from some staff members who participated in the development of the new mission and vision. He referenced “saboteurs” and “early on-setters,” two different staff types that responded negatively to the development of a new culture.

> We have people trying to stop it all the time, and they tried to stop it a little bit in those meetings. But when there's that many people there and you have the overwhelming number of people that really want to do something different really want to make an alternative school alternative instead of just the little traditional one and you have all that excitement and all those people on board it's hard for the naysayers to take over and stop it.

He further mentioned that he was always trying to stay ahead of saboteurs by focusing on the early-on setters—the staff who were ready and willing to try anything.

> I cater to those early on-setters, go-getters, the positive people who want to see us make it. I give them everything they need and pretty much ignore the naysayers and the ones who are trying to sabotage and keep offering them a way to leave and go to another school.

Mr. Downs’ comment suggested a need to continue focusing on the staff who were willing to work with him in changing the culture of the school. He did call it “exhausting,” and one of

the least favorite parts of his job. However, he was hopeful that the mission and vision that they had developed could continue to persist as more people came on to his school as other unwilling staff members left.

Changing the reputation of the school

The final element to creating a culture of high standards meant that administrators had to seek to actively change the reputation of the school. Throughout the interviews, most administrators used the term "dumping ground" as a descriptor for how alternative schools used to be viewed by the community, other schools, and sometimes even the districts of which they were a part. However, changing the reputation of the school was a critical factor in creating a strong culture in the school. Mr. Peterson went as far to say that "we're not alternative; we're traditional" in trying to separate his school from the previously established view of alternative schools as dumping grounds.

Ms. Harrison voiced her beliefs that alternative schools should not be dumping grounds, and certainly were not places where things were simply easier for the students so they could coast by:

> I think there's that misperception that if I go to the alternative school it's going to be easier. I don't want it to be easier; I just wanted to be an alternative setting. That maybe just goes back to my belief I don't want anybody thinking that just because they're here you're not going to learn.

Ms. Harrison spoke about the emphasis of writing in her school, and that students—early in her tenure—would come the school with the mindset that they could simply show up and get credits. Her early experience as the administrator had her struggling to change the reputation of her school to help the students become more engaged in their own learning.

All the administrators in this study emphasized the value of collaboration in creating a school culture of high standards. The administrators in this study employed collaborative opportunities to change the mentality of the community, the district, the teachers and students to keep the school from being perceived as a mere dumping ground. Creating a culture of high standards in an alternative school encompassed many of the other themes and codes that were discussed further in this chapter. Creating such a culture required an emphasis on (1) building relationships with students, (2) putting students in charge of their own education, (3) developing a mission and vision, and (4) changing the reputation of the school.

Personalizing leadership

"We try to make it Disneyland almost in here. We try to make it the happiest place on Earth for the kids and for the staff." Ms. Young's words on leading an alternative school captured her philosophy of personalizing leadership for students and for the staff at her school. Her interview, filled with statements such as this, provided a hopeful look at alternative school leadership. Part of this hope became one of the driving themes of this study: the concept of personalizing leadership for staff and students. Within this theme, four codes emerged from her transcript, and they became applicable to other interviews to varying degrees. Personalizing leadership involved four components: (1) caring for staff, (2) involving staff in decisions, (3) owning administrative decisions, and (4) working as a team.

Caring for staff

Caring for staff was most evident in Ms. Young's interview, her observations, and her school. Part of her "moral purpose," as she put it, was to "take care of the staff:"

> We take care of the staff in the staff takes care of the student. Sometimes we waiver and start taking care of the students so much that we neglect the staff and you can

> really see the morale of the building go when that happens. So then we have to get ourselves back and check and say no what have we done for the staff lately?

Part of taking care of the staff, according to Ms. Young, was to throw "blowout Christmas parties," and to regularly check in with staff in the hallways, classrooms, and before and after school hours. She went on to say that at least four times a year, she would set up a barbecue outside of the school and cook burgers for the staff. As she put it, taking care of the staff meant that staff would, in kind, take care of the students.

Caring for the staff also appeared in Mr. Peterson's interview, as he continued to emphasize the importance of staff in running his school. Mr. Peterson's idea of caring for staff started with taking his staff on retreats to a cabin on a lake with a life coach:

> This life coaching deal he talked about the breakdown of us and who we are. And breaking down the boundaries it's okay to be vulnerable it's okay to fail even as a teacher. We wanted teachers to be able to take risks. And all that takes time and trust but that's what we started working on right off the bat. A third of it though is all about you. Are you healthy? If you're not healthy get in shape. Do whatever you can. What we tell staff is it's all about you. And that's different I don't think teachers get that a lot of time. We walk in and say listen all we care about is you.

This retreat, and the actions above, seemed to allow Mr. Peterson to develop a strong sense of caring for his staff, noting that they needed as much attention as the students.

Mr. Jessup found similar value in caring for staff as a way to keep his staff at the school by communicating a deeper purpose to them. He said he tells his staff that "teaching at an alternative school will make you a better teacher" as a way to care for their professional

advancement. Additionally, however, Mr. Jessup found that his staff needed reminders of their value at the school:

> The best part about it is I always sell it like this you can make so much difference in a short time with these kids…That's what it is; you're making a huge difference in these kids' lives and totally flipping them around instead of in the regular school you know they're already going that direction.

"Going that direction," according to Mr. Jessup, meant that if students stayed in the traditional high school, they might not improve as they would in an alternative setting. Furthermore, Mr. Jessup's constant reminders to his staff were meant to help them see past some of the challenges of working at an alternative school. Therefore, he showed care for his staff by communicating the importance of their work to keep them motivated and energized.

Involving staff in decisions

Ms. Nicholson recognized personalizing her leadership as involving staff in decisions on schoolwide changes. Her constant reference to the "dedicated" staff who displayed "professionalism" at every turn—a group who were always "asking each other those hard questions" when they planned changes, suggested that she valued personalizing leadership. Ms. Nicholson referenced a moment that captured her involvement of staff in a schoolwide change when they transitioned to a Mastery Education model:

> When we made the decision to join the Mastery Ed program, we had a work day—this was kind of a cool story—and we'd been talking about do we want to apply for this grant. Do we want to do this? And we got everybody together and said let's do it. We had a five o'clock deadline every single person in the building took a different section and put together this document.

Ms. Nicholson, as most administrators in this study, regularly spoke as “we” when describing any changes to the school, which indicated the focus on involving staff in school decisions.

Mr. Banks believed in involving his staff in decisions, saying “I think that we have open dialogue first and foremost about what's best for students. Between us and the staff.” However, Mr. Banks explained that everything came back to him, and that he felt the need to have more control over the decisions: “There's literally nothing that I don't do here which can be very tough too.” This pressure of feeling as if the school’s performance rested solely on him could have affected his willingness to hand the reins to staff. Even so, Mr. Banks also recognized the need to involve staff more in the school’s decisions: “I have tried to move away from that a little bit and get people a little bit more you know decision-making power.” Mr. Banks’ reflection on needing to involve staff more in decisions reflected his need to personalize leadership.

Owning administrative decisions

An additional issue of personalizing leadership—owning administrative decisions—emerged in Ms. Harrison’s reflection on a decision she made early in her tenure. In her first year as the administrator, Ms. Harrison faced a dilemma between expelling students who were disrupting the school’s ability to function. Some of the smaller alternative schools had to focus on enrollment numbers, and expelling students could have affected their ability to stay: “I did it at the risk of possibly the school being closed down. But I noticed that once that element was gone then other students I think felt free to come and…since that first year we've always opened the school with 20 students.” Ms. Harrison recognized the need to make an administrative decision of expelling student—one that most administrators in this study voiced as a last resort. However, Ms. Harrison owned this decision by recognizing the value

of the greater good of her school community. In fact, since that decision in the first year, Ms. Harrison said the school changed, and she currently struggled to admit students because her enrollment was frequently at capacity.

Mr. Banks expressed the importance of owning decisions as well, particularly in monitoring the effectiveness of decisions and changing based on input from students and staff:

> We try to make adjustments. We started out this year and had a certain system going, which I thought was going to be great but found out that our staff and students were struggling with it and we went ahead and made a transition to a different system.

Owning administrative decisions, in Mr. Banks' view, meant that decisions would be made with the best intentions, but recognizing a need for change was as important as making the decision. Owning decisions, then, involved being comfortable changing when a decision was not working.

Working as a team

A final issue in personalizing leadership emerged as the concept of working as a team. While I struggled at times to delineate between involving staff in decisions and working as a team, this concept deserved its own code because working as a team did not always mean that administrators were involving staff in schoolwide decisions. Instead, working as a team meant that staff and administrators worked together to create a successful environment for students. For instance, most administrators implemented mentorship programs or advisory periods to further help students achieve. While the decision to make this change involved staff, the application of the decision mainly involved working as a team. Mr. Downs summarized teamwork as part of personalizing leadership. He wanted "make sure that every

student has that person to check in on them and talk to them and encourage them mentor them. So that's where we started the mentoring." The effort of mentoring students required a push to support students as a team and not simply as an individual staff member merely teaching the content to one class, change periods, and do it again.

Mr. Peterson further defined working as a team as a whole-school effort. To create an environment of teamwork, Mr. Peterson got rid of specialized committees:

> We got rid of teams. We got rid of leadership [team] you know we had a group in charge of you know there was a group in charge...before we had a dress code committee. We had a tardy committee. we had every committee. And we're like are you serious? Nobody ever made decisions. So we got rid of all of them. We said you're all one big team. We are all one big team. We're going to work together every single day to do that.

While eliminating committees seemed contradictory to working as a team, Mr. Peterson believed that taking away specialized committees opened the door for teachers to participate in all facets of the school to make decisions. In his school now, "no person in here is more important than the other." Even more importantly to him, everyone was there for students:

> When the bell rings our custodian…you're not a custodian. You're not a custodian. You're in the hallways greeting kids talking to kids. It's about the kids. It's the same thing with our secretary right here…We're all about kids. I want you in the hallways and want you around kids. Be a difference in the kid's lives. And that's different. A lot of times that's up front that's what their job is. Bull crap it's not their job. Everybody's job here is to be part of the kids and part of who we are. Our cooks in the back, big deal. They're part of us, part of the school, part of the kids.

While Mr. Peterson's unique change highlighted the importance of the whole team, his words encapsulated the stance of many administrators in this study: working as a team meant every person taking responsibility for every student.

Personalizing leadership was an important aspect of perspectives in alternative school leadership. By (1) caring for staff, (2) involving staff in decisions, (3) owning administrative decisions, and (4) working as a team, administrators in this study felt that their schools depended on this concept to best serve the students. Without these elements, the culture and the students could have suffered.

Utilizing professional resources for making decisions

"What led us here as administrators? We are bought into deeper moral purpose. The job is about something bigger than ourselves." Ms. Young's personal ethics—her "moral purpose"—were a guiding principle in her interview. Utilizing professional resources encompassed a variety of resources that administrators in alternative schools called on to make decisions, and some were formal resources, while others were intrinsic. At times, policy and state requirements were enough to help navigate the role of administrator in an alternative school. But there were times when what was best for students was not well-defined in any manual or book, and at those times, administrators had to turn to more informal resources to decide how best to proceed. The following areas shaped this theme: (1) relying on district/state resources, (2) looking to policy, (3) relying on accreditation standards, (4) applying professional standards, (5) calling on personal ethics, and (6) using discretion when making decisions between policy and practice.

Relying on district/state resources

Leading an alternative school required a reliance of professional resources that administrators, even in traditional schools, would be familiar with. However, the task of an alternative school administrator could become more nebulous as a less traditional population of students and families. Regardless, a standard practice among all administrators was to rely on district/state resources to help make decisions about the school or students. Further in this section, the state rating scales for schools appeared. Many alternative schools in this study, and in the state—according to several administrators—were put into what was called improvement status. A more specific discussion followed in later sections, but part of being in the improvement status was that the schools received assistance from the state. Mr. Smart cited $131,000 as part of that school assistance for getting the school out of improvement status. While the moniker of "school of improvement" held negative connotations, according to Mr. Jessup, the resources that the state provided did help many schools improve.

For instance, Ms. Nicholson indicated that her school became part of consortium of schools because of improvement efforts from the state. This move, orchestrated by her entire staff, allowed her to diversify the offerings that the school had for students. In this instance, Ms. Nicholson and her staff applied for a grant to develop a mastery-learning program at her school. Other schools in this study were also part of the consortium, and they attributed some of their improvements to the additional resources that the state provided. As part of this "incubator program," schools could try new methods of teaching and learning to engage students. Mr. Banks said he appreciated the flexibility of the incubator program, although he "wished we had even more flexibility."

Mr. Downs also attributed the positive direction of his school to this incubator program, but voiced some of the unclear expectations that made him cautious to try too much. For instance, the program and its governing body contained what was called a “no harm clause.” When asked to describe the “no harm clause,” he said:

> We don't know. It's like does it mean I'm trying to help [someone in a different way?]. If that is against the law or if I'm doing something will I be held to no harm because there is a no harm clause? Because the no harm clause doesn't say what it covers and what it doesn’t cover. And maybe that's okay and maybe it should just be your hearts in the right spot and you're trying to help kids and you're doing the right thing then there's no harm. But if you're doing something bad then no harm is not going to help if you're going to get punished for it. (Author’s note: the bracketed words were changed to protect the identity of Mr. Downs, as his exact words could have possibly helped readers identify him in this passage).

So while programs from the state, according to Mr. Jessup, helped his program because “we got a lot of money for that. And so with a lot of money that we got for that we are able to do some improvements,” some schools noted unclear expectations or, again from Mr. Jessup, “I could have done it without the micro-management.” What came of state resources, then, was additional resources to help the school improve, but a lack of clarity or hyper-focus on the school was somewhat off-putting for some administrators.

Mr. Peterson’s perspective on the school improvement process from the state differed from the other participants in this study. He was all for the state involvement when he said:

> We're a school of improvement. You’re categorized that by the state because of our test scores and everything. And that was a huge deal for us because it gave us extra

> money to be able to and what it did it gave them we had people coming in and evaluating us, which is awesome.

Mr. Peterson also mentioned additional funding as a key component of state assistance, and he spoke positively about the state's involvement because it helped them to look at their school from an outside perspective.

In addition to state resources, administrators also commonly relied on district resources to make decisions. Ms. Harrison referenced an administrative team that she belonged to that helped her tackle more challenging issues:

> When I'm not feeling comfortable with something that is my place to go and say you know what? I realized I can't find anywhere in a book that says you should do this or you should do that. If it's an ethical question then they are kind of there to guide me.

Mr. Jessup also felt like he received support from his superintendent and the special education director when making decisions, particularly ones that did not have a clear answer or direction. Finally, three schools in this study had someone from their district as a liaison between them and the state to navigate some of the requirements of the state, and to organize the schools collectively.

Looking to policy

When administrators began describing their daily decisions, they stated that looking to policy was a key factor in making decisions. Policy was, of course, a state and district resource, but this code deserved its own space because it dealt primarily with the regular decisions that administrators faced, rather than large-scale programs and/or resources. The use of policy in daily decisions suggested a discrepancy of practices and opinions between the

participants. Where some of the administrators were dedicated to sticking to policy, others expressed the importance of using policy as “a guide.”

Mr. Jessup’s stance on looking to policy to make decisions about his school held closely to his belief in “fidelity” of state reporting and in following policy:

> Well we can't go outside of policy I have to go to the superintendent and the board. So we have to go down that road. We have to do that if you don't do that then we're out of line. That's a harder issue a tougher issue. I wouldn't be here if I wasn't following those policies.

Other administrators expressed that going outside of policy could result in losing their jobs, which was an understandable apprehension. Mr. Jessup, however, did not view policy as a fixed mark, stating:

> If we see something that we think needs to be changed, which we’ve done that, we’re pretty proactive here in the district. When we see a policy that might need to be changed, we go through the process of getting a change through the board, and we've done that.

So while Mr. Jessup expressed his focus on using policy in his daily decisions as a static process, he also recognized that policies did not always work in the best interests of his students. Therefore, his approach was to propose changes to the superintendent and to the board to make the policy work for his students.

Several other administrators expressed views on policy as being a guide. One administrator, the most vocal about this concept, stated views on the use of policy:

> I know them up one side and down the other. So I know going into every single decision that we make we know why we've made it and I can always defend why I

> made it. Somebody might have a different opinion, which is totally fine but we know why we've made it. And then the other thing that happens is at the end of the day in this work if you can't, if the work you're doing is by policy and you know you're not making a difference, I would never want to do the job. I would never want to do the job. So if I get called onto the carpet or written up for something it probably doesn't mean I'm going to stop doing it if I think it's right for kids…I would never intentionally make a negligent decision based on what was best for kids.

This administrator expressed the students' needs as trumping policy at times. However, it was also important to note that this person's views were always backed by research:

> Any time I stray, I have to go away I try to be pretty good about bringing up that this policy won't work for our environment. And I try to always back it up with research not gut feeling.

The reason for doing this was simple for this administrator; it was what was best for students stating that "99.9% of the time what I've done is so much softer than a policy would ever require." This administrator's sense of people over policy was founded in research about alternative school students, stating "policy is the number one deterrent for any kids to being successful in this type of environment." While policy certainly factored into the decisions of administrators in this study, it was important to recognize that to one extent or another, administrators would look to policy as a guide to making decisions. When the policy did not match the best interests of the students, administrators revealed varying levels of practices to ensure that the policy did not interfere with student's best interests.

Relying on accreditation standards

Relying on accreditation standards was another layer to the theme of utilizing professional standards for making decisions. The perspectives on the accreditation *process* were similar across interviews that touched on accreditation. Ms. Nicholson surmised, "the accreditation process was valuable as a school." This process of evaluating the school based on data, surveys, and site visits helped to unpeel the layers of school effectiveness and areas of improvement.

However, the perspectives on the findings from the process varied across interviews. Ms. Nicholson enjoyed the process because "I think my students need to be held to the same standards." Her view of the accreditation findings allowed her to set a course for her school and for her students. On the other hand, Mr. Banks mentioned that his school did not do well on their recent accreditation review. He mentioned that the accreditation process was perhaps unfairly focused on a traditional system, whereas his school was filled with non-traditional students:

> If you have students performing at the 20th percentile, you won't see teaching and learning at the 90th percentile. I would love to see a school where the learning and the teaching is at a 9 out of 10, but the scores are at the 10th percentile. You just have to keep showing that you're doing something. Sometimes that's above and beyond the traditional schools.

Mr. Downs echoed this stance, as his school also had recently been through an accreditation review. In his interview, he pointed to binders full of material about their school for the accreditation. He also suggested, as did Mr. Banks, that perhaps the standards could differ from those of traditional schools because of the variety of students in the school.

Applying professional standards

Applying professional standards was another element that appeared, if only because of interview questions about them. It is possible, based on the short responses from all administrators, these would not have been referenced if there were not questions about them. A large portion of the literature review in this study focused on the standards from the NAEA (2014) and from the PSEL (2015); however, no administrators—save for one—mentioned these standards by name. In fact, this code was developed not by what was said by administrators, but what was not said.

When asked about standards for alternative schools, the administrators equivocally stated that they were no different than those of traditional schools. Mr. Peterson aptly put it: “we’re no different.” With a lack of transcription to cite, it was evident that administrators felt their schools were not held to different standards than their traditional counterparts. In a sense, they were correct. In looking to the state’s rating system of schools (see APPENDIX C), for instance, all schools were rated on similar scales using a star system (before the shift in testing formats from state designed tests to tests over the Common Core Standards). Mr. Smart said that standards for schools, as a whole, did not influence day-to-day decisions:

> So I know that all the standards are there but when it comes to day-to-day decisions it's really about making good decisions for kids. And if you're making good decisions for kids you're going to be in line with the standards because the standards are all written to protect kids for the most part.

Ms. Young added, as she pulled out the printed binder of NAEA (2014) standards, “Do I know them verbatim? Absolutely not. Can I reference them in a heartbeat? You saw me do it.”

Many interviewees became noticeably apprehensive about the question on standards for alternative schools. I assured them that this was not a “got ya” moment, but more of a revealing into what they knew and what they used to make decisions about the school. The lack of information from participants suggested that if the NAEA (2014) standards were not relevant to the decision-making process of administrators in alternative schools.

As far as professional ethics when applying professional resources, administrators were more able to discuss the standards in broad terms. While all administrators referenced the state’s code of ethics for administrators and for teachers, it was evident in the lack of elaboration that the standards did not influence daily decisions. Ms. Nicholson explained that “I'd certainly read the Professional Standards but I don't think I ever stop and reflect on them.” To varying degrees, all the administrators in this study echoed this sentiment.

Calling on personal ethics

While administrators did not report that they formally reviewed the professional standards when making decisions, many indicated a more informal use of personal ethics to guide their decision-making. Utilizing professional resources must include professional judgement, as Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) suggested in the ethic of the profession. In fact, as other research, particularly from Wagner and Simpson (2009), describes, professional codes of ethics typically do not factor into daily decisions. What did, however, was the personal ethics of individual administrators. Some of the statements that administrators directly referenced personal ethics; however, in coding the data, implicit ethics emerged as well, which I also categorized in this code. Many of the implicit ethics came from phrases of interview transcripts that keyed me into participants’ personal ethics. For example, phrases such as “I think,” “I believe,” “Our philosophy is” demonstrated administrators voicing

personal ethics without necessarily claiming "these are my ethics." Without any true source of personal ethics, then, I felt it was important to find the common beliefs that administrators voiced that helped to understand the personal ethics of administrators as a whole, rather than to delineate between participants. There were, in fact, several commonalities that administrators voiced.

Ms. Young, as stated earlier, mentioned her "moral purpose" in leading her school. What became a common factor for the administrators in this study was an intense focus on what was best for students. When faced with decisions that could not be addressed fully by policy, school standards, or district/state resources, administrators found themselves facing dilemmas that led them to calling on their individual personal ethics, and many of them voiced the students' best interests as the key factor in making ethical dilemmas. Mr. Peterson shared this view on this matter: "Yeah what's best for kids. I would say this. What's best for…you know we have to keep a safe and orderly environment. That's number one. So we're going to make decisions off that."

Mr. Jessup voiced his beliefs about the same topic, stating that students deserved an environment that held them to high standards:

> What we talk about is that the kids they can all learn they can all learn to high expectations. And you've got to believe it. So that's a banner or standard that says ok we believe that every kid can learn with high expectations, meet up to our expectations because if you don't believe that, you've already just flushed them down the toilet.

Not believing in the best interests of students would, as Mr. Jessup said, hinder a student's chance at an education worthy of each individual. His school's focus on high expectations for student success translated directly to his own personal ethics that "you have to have a staff

that is interested in kids like that. You have to work with the staff and say okay we're really going to be making a change in these kids' lives." Not only did Mr. Jessup believe in his personal values about students, but he went to great lengths to ensure that his staff believed in their own "moral purpose" of helping students achieve in school.

Mr. Downs expressed his view on the students' best interests. He said, "I like to tell people that they just need extra love." By saying this, his personal ethics became apparent in multiple facets of the interview. He, along with all of the other administrators, appeared to express a deep concern for the welfare of their students. This concern appeared in their interactions with students, in their school policies, in their practices, and in their interviews. It was evident that personal ethics shaped many of the decisions that administrators held about their school.

Using discretion when making decisions between policy and practice

The final element to this theme emerged because when calling on personal ethics, administrators often found themselves having to use discretion when making decisions between policy and practice. A common view among administrators appeared in the purview of the state requirements for what constituted a school in need of intervention. Mr. Jessup voiced some frustration with the state requirements: "they put the majority of the schools that are alternative schools to an improvement plan." What Mr. Jessup was referencing was a school rating system developed by the state that rated schools on state tests. Based on the achievement scores of the school, schools could be put into improvement plans, as Mr. Jessup referenced.

Ms. Nicholson, along with several other administrators, referenced test scores as an obstacle to making decisions that were best for students, while still meeting the requirements from the district, and in this case, the state:

> I think my students need to be held to the same standards, but you have to look at the reality of the population. Test scores are ridiculous; you can't compare that. Across the board there's no way to take a student who has failed in a traditional school and expect that score to level out as the same. We were a 1 star school when they first came out of this, and it was actually a kind of relief because you can't go any worse. The other way that they're trying to do is to give us different ways to measure. Growth scores. State level, alternative schools, they are looking at different measures of accountability. What else matters in your building?

In her analysis of holding alternative schools and students to the same standards as traditional schools and students, Ms. Nicholson expressed the need for flexibility in how her school and students are rated.

Mr. Downs added to this discussion of working in the grey areas of policy and practice when describing policies meant for the masses:

> I think it's the right thing to do I think a lot of policies were written for the mass you know it works most of the time, but in an alternative school and nothing worked for these kids and that's why they're all here. And so if we just say well we're just going to do what's already been done to you and there's no leeway and they never get a sense that someone actually cares about them and is trying to help them, then I don't think you get anywhere.

Mr. Downs' practical view, while voicing his personal ethics, also illuminated a commonly-held belief of participants in this study: alternative school students needed high expectations, but they should not be punished—nor should the school—for performing differently than traditional students or schools.

Ms. Young voiced her inspiration for managing many of the grey areas found in alternative school leadership. "It is navigation; it's a game. It's a part of it is just being fearless knowing that the end of the day it's not self-inflicting wounds if you're doing what's best for a kid." Her personal ethics shone through in this statement, and being fearless, according to her, was to keep that focus on the best interests of the kids in her school.

Ms. Harrison said, similarly, that her school accepted certain factors about her students, particularly regarding test scores:

> The testing scores I struggle with again, and I'm very fortunate that my school board recognizes that they will always be low. So we don't put a high emphasis on preparing our students for the test. We just accept that they're going to be low we have them take the test, if [they succeed], we were cheering or excited. We know that our students are growing in other ways.

Ms. Harrison could be fearless in her own way because of the support from her school board, which she mentioned in a follow-up interview. She stated that several board members supported her school so strongly that they would frequent the school, participating in judging senior projects. But this support helped Ms. Harrison navigate the grey areas of state expectations on test scores to continue to serve the best interests of her students.

A final voice exemplified this fearless attitude based on how the school performed. "We don't believe in policies. We believe in people. That's a big deal. We do not believe in

policies at all. Does it say in our handbook if you throw a punch at all you're gone? No it doesn't. Kids know it." And the ability to navigate this grey area stemmed from the performance of the students, as the data showed "that we're awesome," meaning that their growth measures of students supported their practices, despite not always following district policies. This participant also referenced testing for drug use as an element where policy took a backseat to the best interests of students because of the high performance of the school.

> We aren't totally policy-driven staff. The new superintendent comes in and says 'hey listen where are we...We have a policy about this' and I say you understand if we follow policy on every kid we would lose 150 kids just like that. The ex-superintendent says 'hey you need to drug test these kids.' And I go for what? 'Well because if they're using marijuana you know it's illegal.' You know I go so, you want me to get rid of 250 kids right now? I go I don't need to drug test. 'Well why not?' Because they'll tell me.

What this administrator expressed was a common belief among several administrators in this study: students in alternative schools needed flexibility, not only in the classroom, but also in the enforcement of rules. While many administrators voiced that this could potentially lead to unclear expectations and dissent among staff, it was important to navigate the grey areas of students' best interests and policies to focus on a greater good: the success of students.

Utilizing professional resources for making decisions incorporated several elements that helped break the decision-making process down into tangible factors. Administrators often used formal outlets to make decisions, particularly about large-scale programmatic shifts. However, when faced with more daily decisions, administrators in this study often used informal approaches to making decisions. Overall, utilizing professional resources to make

decisions involved (1) relying on district/state resources, (2) looking to policy, (3) relying on accreditation standards, (4) applying professional standards, (5) calling on personal ethics, and (6) using discretion when making decisions between policy and practice.

Managing staff through active engagement

"The more I get excited about it the more they get excited about it and the more other folks get excited about it and it's just going to keep growing." Mr. Downs expressed how being visible and available to staff helped schoolwide changes gain steam among the staff, a key component to this theme. Although managing staff through active engagement—another central theme illuminated by this study—involved the supervision piece of school leadership, there were different elements that helped administrators manage the staff in their schools. The following four tenets emerged from the data gathered in the study: (1) hiring staff, (2) evaluating staff, (3) communicating with staff, and (4) being visible and available to staff.

Hiring Staff

Hiring staff encompassed far more than simply interviewing applicants and offering positions to them when the process was over. Instead, hiring staff meant that administrators looked for certain types of people—those who "fit" in the school, with the students, and in an alternative environment. Mr. Smart voiced his views about what he looked for when hiring staff: "The way that I staff really influences the effect it has on the kids as far as culture and as far as the programs." He further clarified the qualities he looked for when hiring:

> I only look for candidates that I know are going to be flexible willing to work with students care about students. You know you can be the best teacher in the world and I will say you know what I think that you might be probably the best science teacher

> that I've ever interviewed. You've got all the right components, but I'm going to pass on you because you're just not right for my kids.

Mr. Smart, along with all of the administrators in this study, felt that hiring flexible staff that cared about students was the most important element in developing a culture at the school. While the same could apply to traditional school administrators, this finding was evident throughout the interviews of each administrator in this study. Several administrators mentioned that they looked for staff who had faced adversity, that—as Ms. Harrison put it—had “been through challenges themselves and have overcome them because that is more inspiring to my students.” Alternative schools in this study were filled with students who had “crazy outside worlds,” and staff who could empathize and connect with these students could further affect students in positive ways. Mr. Peterson and Ms. Young went as far as to scout staff throughout the state at other districts—“never from my own district”—as Ms. Young said, and to bring them aboard.

Evaluating staff

Once staff were hired, evaluating them became the next component to managing staff through active engagement. While administrators across the country must evaluate the effectiveness of staff, the administrators in this study did not view evaluating staff as others might in traditional schools. Rather than what was in this element to managing staff through active engagement, I felt it important to feature what was missing in the interviews: a focus on test scores. While several administrators mentioned test scores, the main emphasis on evaluating staff was not in how they performed, but in how they engaged and interacted with students. Ms. Nicholson voiced a common mentality that others expressed as well. “Are the students engaged in learning? If they are then things are usually good. If I’ve got a vast

majority of the class that's checked out and unengaged playing on their phone not doing the learning, then I start getting concerned." Student engagement in learning was a critical point for the administrators in this study.

Mr. Jessup echoed this stance as he discussed how his school evolved from being a place where students would simply work on packets to earn credits to now learning material through teacher instruction. According to him, his evaluative expectations emerged in monthly instructional meetings designed to engage students, and he used an instructional coach to assist him in establishing those expectations. However, his view, along with all of the other administrators, was that "you get rid of teachers who are harming kids." Mr. Jessup and the other participants saw teachers who were not helping students grow as an important reason to step in as an evaluator. Oftentimes, administrators in this study would use the evaluation process to determine if teachers were harming students or not. They also used that process to help teachers along the way, in addition to determining their effectiveness in the classroom.

Ms. Young saw that it was also important to address issues of staff performance by offering flexible options to improve:

> I think that's our job as principals is to not make everything so black and white because there are good teachers that just aren't good where they got placed. And if you can find a spot in their building otherwise you just turn into a factory. I've gone down the road where I'm like oh my gosh I would never put my kid in the class I need to get him out of here. We get rid of him in the next one gets worse. I've been down that road so many times.

Rather than acting as an authoritarian, Ms. Young preferred to help teachers find their specialty. In doing so, Ms. Young felt that helping staff teach to their passion worked in the best interests of students far more than perpetuating the problem of firing, hiring, and ending up with the same issue again.

Communicating with staff

Hiring and evaluating staff appeared as more supervisory responsibilities for administrators, but a managing staff through active engagement also included communicating with staff. Without communication during the hiring process and in evaluations, staff would not know what was expected of them. Mr. Banks noted that communication was part of his personal ethics: "communication is a standard that I rely on to make decisions which is keeping people open and honest and abreast of what's going on as soon as I have information." By communicating openly and honestly, Mr. Banks ensured that his staff would not feel blindsided by decisions, or in the dark about what was going on beyond their classrooms.

Mr. Smart supported this stance in how he communicated to staff because "you can't leave people out there floundering. You know sometimes it's because of the feedback you get from the staff and sometimes if you just know that it's going to be something that you need because you're changing something." This statement captured the importance of communication because the staff needed information, particularly when changes were occurring in the school. If they were "floundering," then they might become frustrated, angry, and ultimately, they may start acting counter to the established culture of the school.

Being visible and available to staff

The final piece to managing staff through active engagement appeared as being visible and available to staff. Mr. Peterson's interview and the subsequent observation (see APPENDIX C) captured several important aspects of visibility and availability. First, he said that "I think more importantly it's just being out with [staff] in the hallways," meaning his management of staff started with being seen by and interacting with his staff. While observing (APPENDIX C) Mr. Peterson, I noted his casual interactions with staff, some based on student progress, and others on simple personal inquiries into the staff's personal life. And throughout his interview, we would pause the recording, and he would introduce me to staff members, take time with their requests, and ensure them that he would follow up after. The concept of being visible and available came through most in his statement about how teachers asked him to sit in on lessons they were trying:

> We had a gal last week she did a karaoke in her in her English class. And she's like 'hey I want you to come watch this. I don't know it's going to be really.' And I was like go for it girl. You know and I filmed it I filmed it on my phone because she kind of had them rockin'.

This statement indicated that teachers felt comfortable with Mr. Peterson's presence in the hallways and in the classroom; being visible and available to them helped Mr. Peterson ensure quality teaching and learning. Ms. Nicholson had a similar style with her staff (APPENDIX C) as she guided me around the building, stopping in classrooms to socialize with teachers, to highlight their strengths, and to take requests for feedback.

In sum, managing staff through active engagement required administrators to rely on standardized processes such as (1) hiring and (2) evaluating staff, but managing staff also

required a more personal presence by (3) communicating with staff and (4) being visible and available to them. Even in the standardized processes, administrators focused on elements such as flexibility and care for students to manage staff. Ultimately, managing staff was an active process that required far more than an emphasis on test scores and performance evaluations; instead, it was a process of establishing connection and philosophy that truly engaged a school's staff in the best interests of students.

Accessing and using innovative practices

"The language changes and the research changes, but the end goal is to make sure that that best practice is getting to the kids all the time." Ms. Young's comment, along with various others, helped to develop a separate theme of accessing and using innovative practices. It should be noted that naming this theme was challenging; I did not want to mislead readers that this theme only meant using formal processes. The theme of accessing and using innovative practices encompassed a number of methods that administrators employed to ensure, as Ms. Young stated, "the best practice is getting to the kids all the time." Most of the codes under this theme mirrored formal research processes, such as the one in this study; however, the informal research processes employed by administrators took on several forms: (1) organizing professional development, (2) using research to support structure and/or decisions, (3) implementing new approaches, and (4) encouraging staff to take risks. It should be noted that the statements from administrators revealed similarities to qualitative, quantitative, and action research in their responses, although no administrator directly referenced these by name. Finally, this theme, among all the others, had the most variance in code applications, with some administrators not even referencing some of the codes in their interviews. An explanation of this phenomenon will appear throughout this section.

Organizing professional development

Organizing professional development was a common decision that administrators in this study had to make. Mr. Smart explained the importance of professional development as one of his key decisions about staff: “I would say other than that it's for professional development that I choose to bring in for the staff. That probably has the largest impact on them.” Mr. Smart mentioned that beyond hiring his staff, professional development was the next most important aspect of bringing best practices to the students. Mr. Smart further illuminated the process common among other administrators in this study when referencing the mentoring program that his school had recently implemented:

> We realized very quickly is as those relationships have fostered and have grown, the kids start to share things that my staff is really not trained to deal with. And so how do we properly deal with those things? And so we started to do some training on that end to support those staff members.

Professional development, in this instance, was a response to Mr. Smart’s observations about his new mentoring program. He noticed that while the program was sound in principle, his staff needed additional support to better function in their new roles. This type of constant reflection and adjusting was part of the decisions administrators had to make. Ms. Young summarized it best by saying, “you’re either getting better or you’re getting worse.”

Although having to be “reactive,” as Mr. Smart put it regarding the above situation, he also preferred a “proactive” approach to organizing professional development. Almost simultaneously, Mr. Smart’s school was implementing a Blended Learning model, and with time and preparation, he was able to frontload his professional development and to devote several professional days throughout the year to help teachers with the process of change.

> We brought them in for two in-service days before the beginning of the year each year and we specified a professional development chunk of time every week at the end of the day on a certain day of the week because we knew that was going to happen.

Mr. Smart saw the need to support his staff before and during his transition to blended learning, and so his proactive approach seemed to allow him to implement the program more effectively, in his opinion.

Ms. Young, a true advocate for researching and finding innovative practices for her staff to use, organized professional development in her school around what teachers were learning at conferences. Professional development was part of the school's culture: "It's really about teaching and training the teachers and again it just has to become part of the cultural conversation all the time until everybody. It becomes a part of you." Ms. Young's passion for the culture of continuous improvement was evident as she elaborated on how she organized professional development. The most effective way to bring new methods to her staff was to establish "round-robin things where each person is responsible for a total share-out…and the conversation has to flip to how can that be implemented in the classroom tomorrow." Not only did Ms. Young have a passion for best practices, but also, she saw it as most valuable with teacher involvement in the process. Her "round-robin share-out" process encouraged the culture of continuous improvement and collaboration simultaneously.

Mr. Jessup voiced a similar need to constantly improve teaching practices, stating "once a month we have instructional team meetings for an hour, and they get instructed on how to better teach the kids what are proven methods are research-based to get these kids involved in their education is what they need." Along with his instructional coach, Mr. Jessup led the process of discovery, with the focus on continually improving the instructional practice for his

staff. Mr. Downs' process looked similar in that he provided time during the day and during Professional Learning Community (PLC) time for content teachers to create mastery-based performance tasks.

Using research to support structure and/or decisions

Beyond organizing professional development, administrators in this study also used research to support structures and/or decisions. This issue was most evident in Ms. Young and Mr. Peterson's interviews. They both had similar views for the direction of their schools as places that were in constant, positive flux. Their interviews indicated a reliance on using research to support their school, particularly decisions that had to be justified to other stakeholders. For instance, Ms. Young focused on her research at various conferences—not all education related—that helped guide her decisions about the school. References to John Hattie, a seasoned educational researcher, appeared throughout her interview. In fact, her study of Hattie led to multiple changes in her school, particularly in the realm of teaching and learning norms at her school:

> That's the brilliance of Hattie. He took every other Joe-schmoes research and education for the last 100 years and ran a meta-analysis, and then he rank-orders best practice and says this is what you're going to get the best bang for your buck out of an education so you can work smarter not harder.

Hattie's research led her to change the learning structure in her school because, as she said, her students needed a different approach to teaching than they were currently using. She stated, "the research behind it is that the mass versus space practice. And the mass practice doesn't work traditionally with high school kids at all. And it really doesn't work with these kids."

Mr. Peterson also referenced Hattie's work several times, indicating that his school used the concept of a "learning hook" and "visible learning," which was based on Hattie's research, to create schoolwide changes at his school. Mr. Peterson, armed with this research, began training teachers on these concepts, which supported the changing structure of his school and provided teachers a chance to engage students on a "different level."

One final note on using research to support structure and/or decisions came from Ms. Young. In referencing times when she had to justify a decision that conflicted with district policy, she would reference current research and innovative practices to support that decision. "So anytime I stray I have to go away [from policy], I try to be pretty good about bringing up this policy won't work for our environment. And I try to always back it up with research not gut feeling. And there's enough out there." This bold approach was unique among most of the other administrators, but what was key to Ms. Young's decision to "sway" from policy when she had to was that she could always back up her decision with research. "We're not total rogue idiots."

Implementing new approaches

Most administrators in this study were in the process of implementing new approaches, which was an additional element to the theme of accessing and using innovative practices. All of the administrators in this study had at least four years in administrative roles, and many of them had served their schools for most of their administrative careers. Because of that experience, their perspectives on implementing new approaches were vast and a critical element to researching best practices. Ms. Young summed it up frankly, stating, "I kind of look at it once you learn it if you don't implement it it's almost malpractice. It's like a doctor is not going to implement the best new techniques when they learn them. We've got to

implement them once we learned them." While this mentality was not always as poignant in the words of other administrators, it was evident that all of the schools had a deep desire to continue to implement new practices to meet the needs of their students.

This process took on many forms, but within each perspective was a drive to ensure that the school focused on the best interests of students and, particularly, of their learning. Mr. Downs' perspective stood out because he was in the midst of changing his school to a mastery program, in addition to a shift to the traditional instructional delivery method to a blended learning model, while also incorporating mentorship. This large-scale change provided a unique perspective on the process of implementing new approaches. And while Mr. Downs voiced that he was exhausted, his responses were always hopeful and determined to see these new approaches in his school. In his words, "If we can get that vision if we develop that where students can actually do that then they will be engaged and then they will actually be ready when they leave us." Mr. Downs believed in the direction that his school was going, and as other interviews revealed, deciding to make sweeping changes required a deep personal commitment to the new approaches. Without that commitment from the administrator, the "naysayers, the saboteurs," as he called them, would impede any progress. Part of his commitment came from his passion for the students, whom he frequently told "you get one more last chance," when bringing them back in to the school. He also toured other schools that had fully implemented the model he was seeking, and he had his own vision of what his school could be.

Encouraging staff to take risks

A final piece to accessing and using innovative practices involved encouraging staff to take risks with new approaches. Of note, encouraging staff to take risks could have easily

been categorized or combined with other codes, but the concept appeared frequently enough across several interviews that it warranted its own code. Furthermore, taking risks with new approaches seemed much like action research in principle.

Ms. Harrison voiced the value of hiring staff that were willing to take risks. In her view, the best staff members were the ones who would be willing to try new approaches that they were unfamiliar with:

> The other thing that I look for when I hire you is a person who wants to grow themselves. Learning the online programs, you have to be willing to learn yourself and you have to be willing to be vulnerable. Like when you're helping a student with a lesson or maybe helping them reading the test questions and trying to reframe them for the students understanding or something like that you might not always have the right answer. And you have to be okay with that. And not all people, not everybody is okay with that.

In the previous conversation about culture and staff, it was important for administrators to have people in their school who would be willing to try new things—part of the flexibility that many looked for in staff. But what delineated this issue from others was that administrators decided to encourage staff to take risks without fear of reprisal. This was a powerful part to the culture of several schools, who all indicated that taking risks was part of becoming better.

Mr. Peterson echoed this belief about staff taking risks. He said “I think those guys being able to take risks and fail is a huge thing. And we celebrate when a person goes ‘gosh, I tried this and it failed.’ And we're like yeah that's awesome good for you.” And it was not just

random approaches that these administrators discussed; many of them came from book research and conferences, as Ms. Young stated:

> I observed an English teacher the other day and I'm like you'll never believe it when I was at the math conference in Florida here's what we learned on XY and Z. And I go through the whole thing and I said try that next period. And I'm going to come back to next period and see how that works. And I come back and she said 'oh my gosh I can totally see how that makes a difference or I didn't get it I'm going to try again another period.' So continue that professional dialogue with the strategies with the learning and make that part of your culture.

Taking risks, as Ms. Young noted, meant to use what was learned through research, to pass it on to the staff, and to encourage them to try new approaches. After doing this, as Ms. Young noted, following up and examining the effectiveness was all part of the culture of her school. This perspective, although quite detailed, was evident in several administrators as well.

Accessing and implementing innovative practices encompassed a variety of tenets. Whether it was (1) organizing professional development, (2) using research to defend structures/decisions, (3) implementing new approaches, or (4) encouraging staff to take risks, administrators implemented various practices to access and use innovative approaches materialized to serve the needs of students.

Establishing teaching and learning norms

"We want them to believe in themselves enough to go out and venture out and try some new things and have some skills that are going to help them be successful in the world." Ms. Nicholson summarized how her school defined success for students in her first interview. While several themes within this study revolved around creating an environment for and with

staff, the findings also shifted to a focus on students. Therefore, principals in this study emphasized the importance of establishing teaching and learning norms—a key theme in this study. This theme included five different sub-categories as part of the findings from administrators: (1) defining student success, (2) ensuring flexibility for students, (3) meeting the needs of individual learners, (4) monitoring student progress, and (5) evaluating school effectiveness.

Defining student success

To establish teaching and learning norms, administrators all voiced how their school defined student success. This approach fit naturally with ongoing improvement efforts because, as Ms. Young stated, "everything that we do goes back to kids and what makes sense for them make them better and able to grow." Administrators in this study voiced multiple times—and across cases—what student success looked like in their schools, but the common trait among all of the cases emphasized the betterment of the individual student.

In alternative schools, perhaps even more than in traditional high schools, administrators in each case identified what student success looked like. All cases shared graduation as a key point for defining student success. Beyond graduation, however, each administrator believed that graduation was simply not enough to call students successful. In fact, Mr. Downs made a point that was common among administrators in this study:

> I'll have parents right now and say hey with my kid this new system you're doing he's not choosing to do this. He's not going to graduate, and I'm like do you really want a graduate who can't choose to do what he needs to do? It's like let's let him stay in school let's give him time to grow up and become self-disciplined and make himself do it. Or do you always want to go through life with somebody always having to

make sure he's doing what he supposed to do? It doesn't seem like you're making a very good citizen.

Mr. Downs' views were not unique among the other cases, and he voiced similar stances that other administrators in this study expressed. According to several administrators, student success was graduating, but even more so, graduating with the ability to function as a citizen. In fact, Ms. Young said almost the same thing in her interview: "It doesn't matter where their Math [scores] were any of that stuff; that's not the important thing, but if they can go out and get a W-2 job, we know that we've done a good job." One key distinction for the schools in this study was their lack of emphasis on achievement in standardized scores. Ms. Young's views in the passage suggested that passing tests did not equate to student success.

Other schools shared this view. In a follow-up interview about student success, Mr. Banks reported that the state shifted its testing systems from an older test to the new Common Core assessment system. Instead of achievement, several schools in this study recognized that their populations would be better served if their scores were more focused on growth. Mr. Banks voiced a need to differentiate alternative schools from traditional schools, particularly regarding achievement tests:

> As far as PSAT, [state test], we are held to the same expectations. We are stuck in that place. In the state, as far as the state, but also accreditation. If you have students performing at the 20th percentile, you won't see teaching and learning at the 90th percentile.

Mr. Banks—along with several other administrators—saw that holding alternative students to the same achievement standards as their traditional school counterparts was unfair. The reason Mr. Banks cited was:

> What's not taken into consideration, and this is the truth about this population, they grow, but they don't grow enough at the state level. We loved the MAP test because it measured growth; it compares peers against peers. But because it didn't measure achievement, they took it away.

While other administrators did not address specific tests against one another, most of them defined success as growth, rather than achievement. In sum, these administrators all took time to define student success, even if that success did not match the requirements from the state or federal level. However, to keep morale up for the students and the staff, according to Ms. Young, growth was a far better definition of success for alternative programs.

Ensuring flexibility for students

Because growth was the emphasis in most schools, administrators recognized their role in establishing teaching and learning norms as ensuring flexibility for students. In fact, if a word-count analysis were conducted on interviews, flexibility likely would have been one of the top concept—if not the top concept—expressed by administrators in this study. While flexibility was an important characteristic of staff members, administrators also recognized the need for flexibility in the academic programs in their programs.

Flexibility manifested in different forms throughout the cases, with multiple schools making programmatic shifts to delivery methods and/or to mastery-based learning. Other schools recognized the need for flexibility in teaching practices. Regardless of the focus, all of the administrators acknowledged how alternative school students deserved flexible practices. Flexibility, in this study, was best defined by Mr. Smart: "we needed the moniker of choice because we are school of choice in this district." Choice appeared throughout the cases, particularly in learning. Some schools saw choice as time and place for learning, while

others recognized the need to give students choice with demonstrating learning. Despite the differences in choice, all of the school recognized choice as a key to engaging alternative school student in their own education.

Meeting the needs of individual learners

In addition to flexibility, establishing teaching and learning norms appeared in the process of meeting the needs of individual learners. Whether it was Mr. Peterson voicing the need to help students recognize their mindset and handing the reins to them as learners, or Ms. Harrison providing students with an individualized, goal-oriented set of expectations, all of the administrators voiced the need to meet students where they were at and to help them progress from there.

One example of meeting the needs of individual learners appeared in Mr. Peterson's interview. According to him, his school saw meeting individual needs with their emphasis on mindset. "What that means is that they've hit a pit, they can't move on they're stuck. The next thing is how do you get out of that pit? So we tried to tell kids that in your life you're going to fail all the time. You're going to fail all the time. Now you can get better. If you fail you get better." While this idea of mindset matched the vision of Mr. Peterson's school, particularly in his philosophy of "tough love," he recognized that growth occurred when students failed, and his school was committed to helping students navigate failure to achieve success.

Other schools, in addition to Mr. Peterson's, implemented advisory or mentoring programs that put the focus on individual learners. Mr. Jessup saw these periods as a method to meet the needs of students. Mr. Jessup explained this as providing a space for extra time and extra help: "We have a period that's called advisory and that's where we've done it this

way. We saw the need to have students get extra help and extra time. That's the one of the things that we work on: to have extra help and extra time." These periods, common among all of the schools in some form or another, gave teachers time to focus on the needs of individual learners. Doing so, according to Ms. Nicholson, helped because "you can find a lot of different ways to make sure the kids get what they need to know and having more flexibility with that is huge." Once again, flexibility in meeting the needs of individual learners became a key finding for administrators in charge of alternative schools. While this looked different from school to school, the message was clear: alternative students needed programs that helped them individually learn, grow, and succeed to become productive members of society.

Monitoring student progress

In addition to meeting the needs of individual learners, when administrators were establishing teaching and learning norms, it was important to monitor student progress. While Mr. Banks recognized the need for tests such as the MAP test to more effectively monitor growth, others had systems in place to measure student progress. Mr. Peterson, for example, mentioned a benchmark data system, which is a program that helped his school monitor student success: "Every kid that comes in we do [testing] data on them. [Skills] testing. We find out where they are and see how much they can grow." This was important to Mr. Peterson because he referenced how his students needed to have individualized measurements to recognize growth in Math and English. Other schools implemented a Response to Intervention process (RtI) to provide interventions—academic or behavioral—to meet the needs of individual learners. Mr. Smart and Mr. Jessup specifically referenced this process as part of their school's next steps in monitoring student progress.

Ms. Young, however, disagreed with that model of monitoring student progress, and her views diverged from other administrators in this study. In her view, academic and behavioral interventions were antiquated methods for many of her students:

> These kids have been an intervention since the day they walked into the kindergarten door. Why in the heck would we put them in the same interventions they have had for however many years? It didn't make sense. So we just stopped, and we flipped it and we created an intervention we call leadership class which is going under the name change right now I'm not sure where it's going to end up…A lot of the Math research especially the mathematics says stop filling gaps if they don't know their times tables by now they're not going to ever know them. But you teach higher-level math because they will figure out compensatory strategies to fill in times tables when they need to.

As Ms. Young suggested, common RtI processes in alternative environments had failed students for years, and it did not make sense to her to continue doing the same thing with, presumably, the same results. Her unique stance actually produced positive results in her students because the staff knew “the kids deeply,” and as a school, they “focus on students’ strengths” to build them up. The positive results appeared when the school shifted focus: “We saw it jump in Math data without intervening in mathematics. No gap filling no nothing. It's just trying to get kids their own self-efficacy. We call it leading your own lives.” Ms. Young, as did other administrators, used data to drive instruction, but the methods she implemented produced better results than they were seeing before, and it all, according to her, started with monitoring student strengths rather than filling gaps in their weaknesses.

Evaluating school effectiveness

The final process of establishing teaching and learning norms appeared as evaluating school effectiveness. In the above instance, Ms. Young adopted a different approach to monitoring student progress, and her evaluation of that process helped her to feel confident in the effectiveness of the school's program. Other schools maintained more traditional approaches, and they saw a rise in the school's effectiveness. Credits were a common measure of school effectiveness, and Ms. Harrison felt that displaying visual achievements of credits earned helped her students to be motivated. Ms. Nicholson adopted a similar approach by dedicating a bulletin board in the school to celebrating recently earned credits (see APPENDIX C).

Understanding what school effectiveness looked like in the school was an important aspect of alternative school leadership because, as Ms. Young surmised, the students and the staff needed boosts in morale, particularly when compared to traditional schools and traditional methods. Mr. Downs stated that in the traditional four-year graduation school-effectiveness model, their school was graduating students at 30%, meaning students who came in as freshman graduated in four years at a 30% rate. However, Mr. Downs referenced that if his school focused on that measure, they would be failing. Instead, his school chose to monitor effectiveness on graduate rates once students got to their school, regardless of how long it took them. In doing so, they saw that 70% of their students were graduating, and that helped them to recognized the need to evaluate the school's performance on different factors than traditional, state-designated models.

Establishing teaching and learning norms in an alternative school involved five elements: (1) defining student success, (2) ensuring flexibility for students, (3) meeting the needs of

individual learners, (4) monitoring student progress, and (5) evaluating school effectiveness. These tenets required a great deal of flexibility and choice on the part of administrators in this study. While traditional methods of learning, monitoring progress, and evaluation had their merits in alternative school leadership, it became clear that administrators in these environments focused on developing new ways of establishing these norms. In doing so, teachers were more motivated to meet students at their level, and students, according to administrators in the study, began to see growth in their mindsets and in their academics. For many students, this may have been the first time they felt validated in school.

Managing students as a collaborative and individualized process

"Whatever you want the school to do, I'm happy to do it." Mr. Banks invited me to observe a meeting between him, a student, and the student's family (see APPENDIX C). During that observation, I was able to see Mr. Banks perform his duty in managing students as a collaborative and individualized process, which became an additional theme in this study. As administrators discussed how to establish teaching and learning norms, they also revealed multiple facets of alternative school leadership beyond the classroom, which unveiled the theme of managing students as a collaborative and individualized process. While many administrators referenced discipline as a key factor in this theme, several responsibilities that were common among the observations and the interviews emerged. In fact, managing students went far beyond simple discipline procedures. Five categories shaped this theme: (1) engaging students in the school and/or community, (2) holding students accountable, (3) considering individual cases, (4) putting student safety first, and (5) working with families.

Engaging students in the school and/or community

Engaging students in the school and/or community was mentioned in most of the participants' interviews. A critical aspect of managing students as a collaborative and individualized process was to help students become part of the school, not just as students, but as participants in the school or in the surrounding community. Several administrators noted the small, family-like environment of their schools as a key to being an effective school that served the needs of individual students. As referenced earlier, making that shift from a "dumping ground" to a school hinged on the school's ability to engage students beyond the classroom. For instance, Ms. Nicholson explained that her students created a float for the local town parade, and they ran daily announcements for the school. These actions, according to Ms. Nicholson, helped "to keep it very warm and very accepting. We don't have any of the issues…I think we don't end up with as many issues." Participating in the community and in the school helped students take ownership in Ms. Nicholson's school, which alleviated some of the discipline issues.

Ms. Young referenced similar community involvement as a way for her students as "lead volunteers" to show off instead of feeling like outcasts in the community:

> We get them out and seen because we don't want anything in this town or community to be a dumping ground…you don't want a black eye in your community. And when you have a black eye and then you all of a sudden are in charge of it the goal is to flip that thing as much as possible…it's more about the community than it is about anything else. And if kids thrive, communities thrive.

Ms. Young believed that engaging her students in the broader community helped her students feel as a part making the community a positive place to live, to make it a place where kids

could contribute positively in the community when they left. Mr. Jessup echoed this idea, stating that students organized food drives for their school and for the community to give back, further helping his students buy into the school as more than a place to learn.

Mr. Peterson referenced a peer court as part of engaging students in the school community. The peer court allowed Mr. Peterson to distance himself from the disciplinarian role, which typically put *him* in charge of student behavior. Instead, the peer court allowed students to take ownership of their behaviors and those of their peers:

> We were still having too much discipline in the school. Always wanted better. So what we did is we started a peer court and what it is is if you're a kid that gets...whatever. It happens for all different of reasons so let's say you're just being squirrely every single day you're just not getting it done I'm not working nobody seems to be doing it.

This peer court was “totally restorative,” which meant that students were the ones to manage their behaviors and the behaviors of their peers. While echoes of restorative practices appeared in other interviews, Mr. Peterson’s model was advanced in that students were engaged in the discipline practices, and as he said, “it put it back on the kids.” By engaging these students in the school community, Mr. Peterson managed students by engaging them.

Mr. Jessup formed a student council, which he regularly went to when proposing new changes: “We let them make some decisions. We know that letting them make more decisions makes them feel more a part of it.” When discussing a new procedure his leadership team was proposing, Mr. Jessup described the process of getting his student council’s views on the proposals. He explained that this practice further motivated students to act appropriately in school, while creating student-centered solutions to issues in the school.

Holding students accountable

While this theme involved engaging students in the school and/or the community, it also required the administrators to hold students accountable. When administrators in this study recognized the need to involve students more, each administrator still referenced discipline as a major responsibility. Discipline in alternative schools, however, looked different that one might envision in a traditional setting. Multiple administrators referenced the shift away from simple student action, with a following school reaction, such as punishments and consequences. Instead of these traditional methods, restorative practices emerged as a common thread when holding students accountable. Mr. Smart summed up his methods when holding a student accountable:

> Most frequently it is a sit-down conversation in my office. So we are really exploring the restorative justice piece of discipline management. We really feel like okay if you did something that you shouldn't have what are you going to do now to make that right? Because that's what we have to do in the real world. If we burn a bridge we have to figure out how to rebuild that bridge with that person. And that's what these kids need to do.

Part of this process, according to several administrators, was that their schools were small enough for this to occur. Mr. Smart noted that in his past role as an assistant principal in a traditional school, his only option was to evaluate the situation briefly and to assign a consequence such as detention or suspension. It was a matter of volume versus time for him. In his current role, he frequently noted the importance of sitting down with students to think through his or her actions, and to help that student make amends to those he or she wronged. Traditional methods, according to Mr. Peterson, had little effect on students, and his similar

methods gave students a chance to handle discipline issues on a human level, rather than an institutional one.

Considering individual cases

Managing students as a collaborative and individualized process also required that administrators considered individual cases each time they made discipline decisions. Throughout the study, it was clear that when restorative practices were not making a difference on the actions of certain students, administrators had to start acting in more of a traditional administrative role: assigning disciplinary consequences. However, the smaller environment of alternative schools continued to provide administrators the ability to assess each issue on a "case-by-case basis," as so many asserted. Where these administrative actions took shape the most was in the issue of school attendance. All of the administrators recognized the need to assess students on a case-by-case basis when looking at attendance issues. Mr. Downs summed up his views on attendance:

> Even though they're not here for all the days so again that's just the case by case. I could have a kid with 20 absences that we keep our rolls and we keep educating and they will graduate and another one with 15 that we let go. Just totally different kids different situation. And different circumstances when they're here…because sometimes there's a legitimate messed up family life and can miss a bunch but when they're here they're smart and they work with their teachers and their respectful of their teachers. And so they're able to get their education.

Mr. Downs' views on considering individual cases appeared throughout participants' responses, and all of them referenced the need to serve the best interests of students if those students with attendance issues were still contributing positively to the school environment.

Several administrators also explained that their conversations with families, mentors, and teachers helped them feel more confident in dropping a student from the school or keeping them if serious attendance issues existed. Mr. Peterson reported "It's the mindset of the kids" that helped determine when administrators finally had to step in and act as a traditional disciplinarian.

Putting student safety first

In considering individual cases, there was little disparity among the interviews in one critical area: putting student safety first. When asked about a line that they have, each administrator referenced that student and staff safety was a key factor when making the decision to suspend or expel a student. While every participant recognized his/her school as a probable last chance, they recognized the need to put the safety of other students first, regardless of the challenging issues that some students who were in trouble faced. While Mr. Peterson said he "hardly ever tried to give a punishment," he would expel a student if he/she was "not safe for the building."

Mr. Downs felt similarly, but he said that his flexible learning environment helped him hold students more accountable when they were not contributing to a safe environment. As they were making changes in the school, he surveyed his students, asking them what their least favorite part of the school was:

> We said what do you hate about our school? They said it was the other students. It was the ones who disrupt class and disrespect. So we promised them that we built that will never happen again; the student will never be allowed to sit in a classroom and disrupt it and cause issues and make other people have to put up with their behavior…immediately they're removed and there's plenty of time that they can go

> back and do one-on-one help. So we're not denying them an education we're just stopping them disrupting other people from being educated.

It was evident that Mr. Downs believed in the greater good of the other students in his school, and when the environment was not a safe place to learn, he took on a more administrative role by removing disruptive students.

Ms. Harrison echoed a similar stance, explaining that in her first year, several students were causing significant issues in her school. After working with them over the course of several months, these students did not improve, and many of her staff members began to feel unsafe. "I made a decision early on that if that student made our environment unsafe and uncomfortable that they were going to have to go. For the protection of my staff myself and for other students." Across the participants, similar issues like this arose, and each time, administrators voiced the need to keep others safe in the classroom and outside of it to protect the whole of their school.

Working with families

Working with families was the final factor that contributed to managing students as a collaborative and individualized process. Mr. Banks' words indicated that working with families contributed immensely to the development of this theme:

> Our parents have been notorious in the past for not being involved because they're at-risk kids a lot of single parents and they work until 6 or 7 o'clock at night and so they're not as involved. We really really want to do a better job about getting these parents involved so we'll start to look at some things. We host parent-teacher conferences every 9 weeks and that's been awesome. We feed them; it goes a long way.

While other administrators did not reference the lack of involvement from parents as a major obstacle, it was evident throughout the research that these many students did not typically have family supports at home. Ms. Harrison even referred to students' lives outside of school as "their crazy outside worlds, as I call them."

Mr. Downs recognized the importance of working with families when managing students because having them bought into the school made a difference. In referencing his meetings with parents that had certain requests, he noted that he tried to come to mutual decisions that worked for the best interests of the family and the student:

> When the parents come in and they have a gripe or if they want something, I try to always start off with the mindset: what is it you want? Can I give you what you want…Instead of well there's a policy so no you can't get it no we don't operate that way you're going to have to do it our way. I don't like that way of dealing with people. If they have an idea and I can make it happen, then we'll go the extra mile to make it happen.

This "extra mile" also appeared in my observation of Mr. Banks' family meeting (see APPENDIX C). He continually made statements such as "I appreciate your coming in to share your thoughts," and "you know me and I know you; I have the utmost respect for you." Between both Mr. Downs and Mr. Banks, helping families in whatever way possible emerged, along with other administrators' reflections. Doing so, according to Mr. Peterson, encouraged parents to support the school: "You know the parents they come in and people talk to the parents, and the parents, they talk about us this is what we do and this is how."

When administrators initially responded about managing students, discipline became a key factor. However, as we delved further into the topic, their thoughts revealed other factors

when managing students—factors that further explored the perspectives of alternative school leaders. Within managing students, administrators took students' lives, actions, and families into account to best meet their needs. By managing students in this way, administrators built a rapport with members of the community that was critical to helping students continue their education at an alternative school.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter reflected the perspectives of alternative school leaders based on the literature review format. The first section of the literature review explained the characteristics of effective alternative schools and creating a culture. Therefore, the first section of this chapter—findings that support utilization of national professional standards in practice—illuminated the perspectives of administrators in implementing these standards and practices in an alternative school. The second section—ethical decision-making—identified the process of making ethical decisions in alternative school leadership because the literature review highlighted several models for making decisions about students, staff, and programs. After discussing the conclusions, this chapter revealed recommendations for administrators in alternative schools, policy makers, professional organizations, and for those who work in educational leadership preparation programs. These recommendations materialized through the perspectives of the eight alternative school administrators and the literature review, and they may be significant for these four groups in further formulating effective alternative programs.

Creswell (2013) explained "interpretation in qualitative research involves abstracting out a process beyond the codes and themes into the larger meaning of the data" (p. 187). To develop these broader concepts, the interpretation process began "with the development of the codes, the formulation of themes from the codes" (Creswell, 2013, p. 187). This chapter, then, explained the conclusions based on "the organization of themes into larger units of abstraction to make sense of the data" (Creswell, 2013, p. 187). From the three research questions, processes appeared as conclusions, which related to concepts derived from the literature review. In coordination with this literature, the research findings revealed seven

themes of alternative school leaders' perspectives: (1) creating a culture of high standards, (2) personalizing leadership, (3) utilizing professional resources for making decisions, (4) managing staff through active engagement, (5) accessing and using innovative practices, (6) establishing teaching and learning norms, and (7) managing students as a collaborative and individualized process.

The answers to the three research questions were interwoven throughout the next two sections because the perspectives were multifaceted. For example, administrators' decisions about students, the staff, and the school often led to answers to all three questions because of the "complexities of being an educational leader in today's society (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 26).

A visual representation of the process administrators underwent to make decisions in an alternative school (Figure 1.1) was outlined below. In this representation, ethical principles interwove with decisions about students and decisions about staff, illustrating the interconnectedness of making ethical decisions as an alternative school leader. While the illustration was a broad summary of the processes alternative administrators used to create student-centered schools, the small narratives captured the essence of the participants' perspectives. Each circle represented a small "answer" to the three research questions in this study. However, the hidden and underlying commonality that existed between the three interwoven circles were the best interests of students. The three circles, then, represented how administrators in this study made decisions, but altogether, the circles united to ensure that the students' best interests remained at the forefront of any decision or of any process that administrators called on in this study.

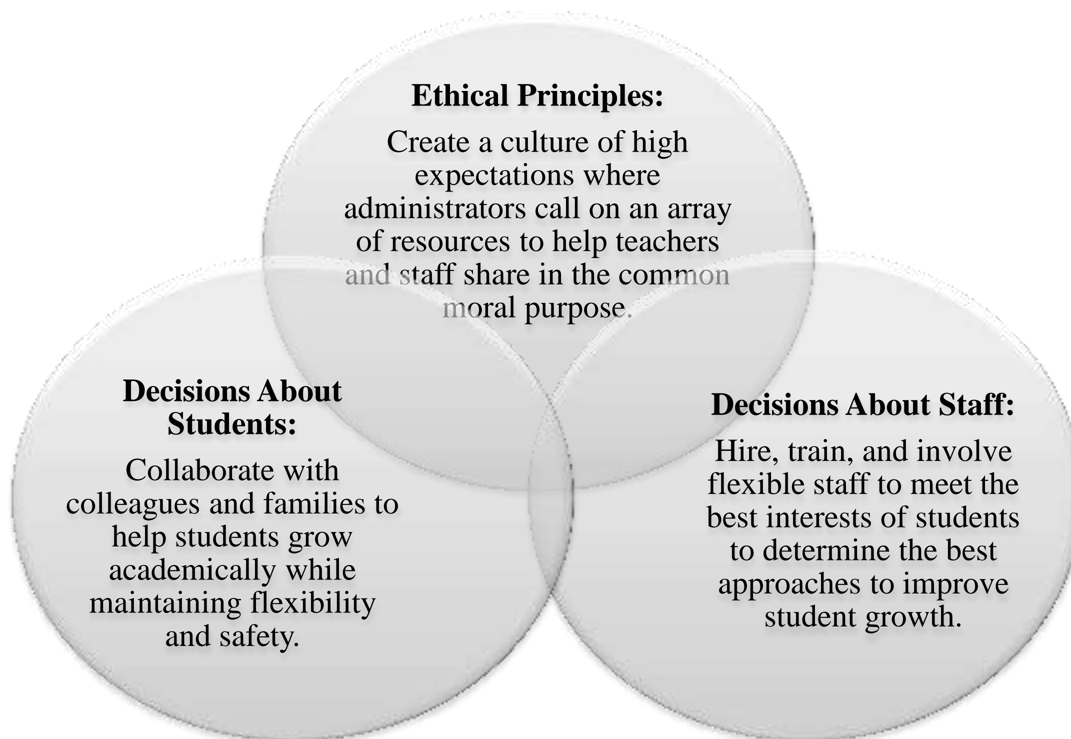

Figure 1.1: Decision-making process in alternative schools.

Findings that examine utilization of national professional standards in practice

The vision and mission of an alternative school was something that most administrators believed as critical to the foundation of any systematic change or process in their schools. This finding supported the research from Mottaz (2002) and the PSEL (2015) and NAEA (2014) standards. Creating a culture of high standards, a main theme in the findings, appeared throughout the data in this study. Wagner and Simpson (2009) referred to this culture as the moral architecture of the school, and the administrators in this study generally exhibited a focus on a strong moral architecture as the foundation of their school's success. According to the findings, creating a culture of high standards—perhaps a moral architecture—started with the staff. Multiple administrators referenced the need to involve staff in actively creating the mission and vision of the school, which echoed Tenuto's (2014) DPPE sentiments. Some

administrators took their staff on retreats, while others spent professional development days to work collaboratively as a staff—or with other schools sometimes—on a shared mission and vision. Common themes in the study revealed that administrator statements reflected a need to help students empower themselves to learn and to become better citizens after school, which is a direct relation to Tenuto's (2014) tenet of shared responsibility. Administrators in this study regularly voiced the importance of staff in creating a culture that would allow students to succeed beyond their high school years.

Revisiting this process was just as important. One administrator referenced the mission and vision as something that simply hung on the wall, but the process of living that mission and vision was far more important. Other administrators returned to the mission and vision when making programmatic changes to teaching, citing those statements as the compass to help guide the decisions of the school. Still other schools went as far as to hire life coaches to help them develop a strong culture in their schools. The most important factor was that the staff, if on board, would pass that mission and vision on to the students. Wagner and Simpson (2009) and Tenuto (2014) shared this notion in that the culture developed in the staff—one of persistent learning and betterment—would trickle down to students to aid them in their success. The process of developing strong leadership in schools also appeared in the data. In support of Mottaz' (2002) research stating alternative schools to have "passionate, innovative, competent, and experienced…" leaders (p. 5), the administrators in each school brought four years or more of administrative experience to their schools. Each administrator voiced the need to stay ahead to best meet students' needs. Whether it was through researching best practices and implementing new approaches, or encouraging their staff to take risks in the classroom, administrators in this study emphasized a process of continual improvement in

their schools. They also took responsibility for their decisions, and consistently referenced a care for their staff, citing the staff as the conduit to the students.

Another element to leadership, according to Mottaz (2002) was that administrators of successful alternative schools developed leadership capacity of staff. PSEL (2015) also held this concept in high regard. Developing leadership in the alternative schools in this study appeared as an empowering process, where teachers were encouraged to head up new programs or classes to best meet the needs of students. Some administrators simply gave a concept to teachers and let them create a program or a class, while others developed school-wide teams to assist in making shared decisions. Tenuto (2014) echoed this finding in her discussion about sharing leadership, and this concept of shared leadership emerged in the findings from this study.

The hiring process emerged as a key finding because, as mentioned above, staff interact with students daily, and their mindset about teaching, learning, and students directly influenced the culture of the school. Administrators mostly used the district hiring process, but each administrator referenced that the hiring process needed to emphasize the type of staff they wanted: flexible, engaging, and collaborative, which mirrored the NAEA (2014, p. 7) standard. Other administrators actively recruited teachers, using connections in other school districts to “steal” staff that would add value to their school. Whatever the process, hiring was one of the key decisions that administrators made about staff that influenced their students.

In addition to hiring, most administrators in this study preferred to take proactive approaches to professional development. The process of planning professional development, according to one administrator, was better suited as proactive rather than reactive because

often, in a reactive process, administrators were already well into a program or initiative that could wear teachers out if they were not being successful. Additionally, some administrators encouraged their teachers to find conferences, and in turn, bring back concepts from those conferences to share with the rest of the staff. All of these processes, however, emphasized the need, as PSEL (2015) put it, to meet the needs of diverse learners. Finally, the concept of the administrator as an instructional leader appeared in Ms. Young's interview, as she described passing on new research and best practices as taking abstract concepts and translating them into implementable methods for teachers. Tenuto (2014) explained this finding as sharing leadership and sharing expertise. Many of the administrators in this study referenced their staff as the driving force to instructional improvements, either through PLCs or through other processes. The results, however, similarly translated to the perception that these shared efforts were leading to improved student performance and success.

The process of implementing curriculum and instruction looked similar in each school, as the common goal in all schools was to identify effective practices and to teach the curriculum to meet the standards. All of the members of this study emphasized the need to reflect, constantly, on how the school was helping students to become independent learners. The role of the administrator then, and key to the process of implementing curriculum and instruction, was to provide the time, resources, and feedback to implement best practices. As mentioned earlier, encouraging staff to work together while taking risks in the classroom emerged as a key element to administrators in this study. The goal, in Mottaz' (2002) words, was that "the curriculum is delivered in a manner that is different than at the local high school… [and] the curriculum must hold meaning for the students" (p. 37). As an example, several schools were in the process of changing to mastery-based learning using a blended model of instruction.

This method, according to the administrators, helped students to take charge of their education and to work at their own pace. The process of making this change involved staff input, touring other schools that already used this model, and organizing professional development to support teachers.

The literature review on PSEL (2015) and the NAEA (2014) standards also emphasized the need to monitor student assessment, or sharing data (Tenuto, 2014). Administrators all recognized that assessing students and helping them grow was critical to their decision-making process. Some schools used screening assessments to identify student benchmarks, while others used informal processes. However, the process of emphasizing growth versus achievement, as multiple administrators recognized that their students, by a mere history of struggles on standardized tests, needed to be encouraged to grow rather than to hit a certain benchmark. It was evident that administrators appeared to perceive data as a way to motivate staff and students to improve, and as several administrators noted, the teachers trusted them enough to be honest about the data and what it meant, which was another key element to Tenuto's (2014) sharing data tenet.

How alternative school administrators approached student achievement data in this study varied. Two administrators referenced gap filling—or the process of testing and then filling gaps in learning—as an antiquated method for their students. Additionally, these two administrators recognized that instead of providing instructional interventions, they would intervene by providing strengths-based assessments to help build their students' capacities to use compensatory strategies when there were knowledge gaps. Other administrators adhered to traditional methods of intervention, citing the RtI process as a way to use student assessment data to help students improve. Regardless, both sides of the spectrum exhibited

the standards from PSEL (2015) and NAEA (2014) as a way to assess and measure student success.

Continuing with the standards and Mottaz's (2002) work, administrators also referenced the process of involving parents "beyond parent/guardian-teacher meetings" (NAEA, 2014, p. 11). This process looked different among the schools. While some schools focused heavily on involving parents by communicating with them regularly about attendance and behavior reporting, other schools sought more involvement with the families. Mr. Banks developed a process of meeting regularly with parents at night, providing food and refreshments, to bring in as many parents as possible. He felt this process was effective because it helped parents understand the changes that his school was making. Other schools sought to get their students and families engaged in the local community by encouraging students to volunteer in community parades or in community clean-up events. Mr. Jessup attempted to involve families by holding donation drives for students at the school. Regardless of the methods, the process of involving families and the larger community was evident in multiple cases.

Program evaluation was more of a tacit process, although it perhaps existed more formally, but that did not appear as a formal process in the research. In establishing teaching and learning norms, schools had to devise ways to understand if the school was meeting goals. Some administrators used graduation rates and credits earned to assess school effectiveness. Some used assessment benchmarks to establish growth measures. However, a common element in all of the research was that administrators developed processes to assess school effectiveness.

School counseling, the final element to the literature review on effective alternative school programs, emphasized the need for students to have access to individualized

counseling and/or academic support (Mottaz, 2002). The administrators in this study went through the process of creating class times or mentoring programs to meet the social, emotional, and educational needs. Several schools implemented mentoring programs to provide students with academic and goal-setting support. Others referenced the social skills programs to develop these skills. Others used advisory or homeroom periods to connect staff to students, while also focusing on goal-setting and academic progress. Regardless of the specifics, administrators all shared the common practice of making time in the school day to emphasize meeting the needs of students both within the classroom and in their lives.

As noted earlier, this section of Chapter 5 attempted to connect the characteristics of successful alternative school programs based on research and professional standards to the process of implementing these approaches in the schools. Even though, as mentioned later, the resources in the literature review were not directly mentioned by participants, the processes of implementing these characteristics were evident. The next section will attempt to explain how administrators arrived at these processes.

Ethical decision-making

While the first section of this chapter explained the processes that administrators used implement effective characteristics of alternative programs, making challenging decisions in an alternative school appeared to be a process that had no distinct definition. Based on the several themes from the study—particularly utilizing professional resources for making decisions and accessing and using innovative practices—conclusions about making decisions in an alternative school were reflected in Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) ethic of the profession. In Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) model, several factors influenced the decisions of administrators: individual professional codes, standards of the profession,

professional code of ethics, ethics of the community, and personal codes of ethics (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 26). At the center of this process were the best interests of the student; however, in their paradigm, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) referenced other factors—professional decision-making, clashing codes, and professional judgement—to identify the complex process of administrative decision-making.

Within this research, the data suggested that administrators in alternative schools used parts of Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) more regularly when making decisions. For example, administrators in this study all verbalized their own codes of ethics (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011) when answering questions about dilemmas in their schools, particularly in the clashing codes of policy and practice that served the best interests of students. Throughout the research, the data indicated that administrators in alternative schools expressed a strong desire to make the best decisions for students in their schools. In doing so, administrators often used individual professional codes and personal codes of ethics (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011) to navigate decisions about their schools—and particularly their students—to help students remain in school and to be successful beyond. The hurdles that administrators referenced were policies that did not suit their non-traditional students, particularly in attendance requirements and maladaptive behaviors, such as drug use. According to Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011), administrators were "coming to grips with clashes that may arise among ethical codes and making ethical decisions in light of their best professional judgement…that places the best interests of students at the center" (p. 23). In these instances, administrators noted the need to use a case-by-case process, which involved input from the school community and families, to make decisions about the best interests of students. Administrators in this study did note that state and district policies—standards of

the profession—were typically guides, and that at times, it was necessary to go against or seek to modify policy to serve a student or students. However, all administrators acknowledged the need to know policies inside and out, because not doing so, as one administrator explained, would be negligence.

When policy did not match the best interest of a student, several different contingencies appeared from the data. Some administrators took time to verbalize to district and board leadership that the policy would not work for their students. While that course did not immediately result in the best interests of that particular student, polices were changed after to better suit the nontraditional students at alternative schools. Other administrators, however, took direct approaches to making decisions, citing research and student performance data to district leaders to justify instances that they diverged from policy. Doing so immediately helped the individual students in question. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) confirmed this discrepancy because "it is not always easy to separate professional from personal ethical codes" (p. 23), and that one administrator may act differently in the same situation than others might.

As discussed in the literature review (Wagner & Simpson, 2009; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011) professional codes of ethics, while important for general explanations of how administrators should manage, did not directly influence day-to-day decisions of administrators. The PSEL (2015) standards, although newly adopted at the professional code for administrators, remained nebulous for administrators. In fact, no administrator referenced these standards by name. Participants also did not mention the standards as newly adopted, which suggested that the communication of these standards did not occur on an intentional scale. Because of this factor, administrators relied more regularly on personal codes of ethics

and individual professional codes, or "moral purpose," to make decisions. Tenuto (2014) referenced the DPPE as the way for administrators to imbue their staff with that sense of moral purpose as well, citing the process of sharing responsibilities as a key building Wagner and Simpson's (2009) moral architecture.

What also appeared in the findings was the concept of holding alternative schools to the same standards as traditional schools, or the standards of the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Some administrators in this study struggled to understand how alternative school students, who had not succeeded under traditional evaluation methods and policies, could be expected to meet the same achievement standards and graduation timelines as traditional peers. Testing requirements appeared in multiple responses as clashing codes for administrators. During this study, the state was transitioning to a different testing system. Multiple participants welcomed the freedom from achievement standards for their students and staff. During that time, several schools decided to undergo instructional shifts to meet the best needs of students, particularly while the testing requirements were not in place to create failing labels for their schools. To improve staff and student morale, these administrators developed different success indicators for students. Most participants referenced credit achievement, mastery of content, and growth as success indicators. Growth on achievement data, rather than achievement, appeared to be a key decision that administrators made to continue promoting success of their programs and of their students. This data sharing (Tenuto, 2014) emerged as a method for administrators to encourage staff to improve for the benefit of students.

The standards of the profession also appeared in a different form in this study, however, as accreditation standards far outweighed standards such as the NAEA (2014) standards for

alternative schools. Some administrators welcomed the accreditation process as a way to look at the school in a broader sense, while others expressed a need to focus on different success indicators, such as growth and/or credit achievement during this process. It was evident that the NAEA (2014) standards had little influence on the decisions of administrators; most administrators did not even mention these standards by name, saying that the standards were not different for their schools. While the NAEA (2014) was merely an organization of alternative school standards, the principles in the NAEA (2014) standards did not directly appear to influence the decisions of administrators.

One final element of Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) model—the ethics of the community—was less evident in this study. While two administrators in particular explained that the school called upon the surrounding community to change the direction of the school, other administrators referenced families as community members that influenced decisions. Perhaps the school community factored into this broad term, and in that case, administrators' decisions reflected Wagner and Simpson's (2009) moral architecture and Tenuto's (2014) DPPE, where administrators emphasize not only retention of information, but also establishing a community of learners "engaged in their own learning" (Wagner & Simpson, 2009, p. 53). In this sense, all administrators in the study worked to create a community that helped students take charge of their education (mastery learning) or actions (restorative justice). And in line Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011), administrators all expressed that these decisions to change the school community were intended to serve to the best interests of their students.

This study did not compare leadership in alternative schools to leadership in traditional schools, but it did attempt to understand the perspectives of alternative school leaders in the

broader expectations of all administrators. The findings in this study revealed that alternative school leaders must make decisions based on the best interests of their students, and at times, the traditional expectations, or the "default culture," (Roberson, 2011) created challenges that alternative school administrators had to overcome. Because the traditional standards of the profession and professional code of ethics were the same for administrators, despite having non-traditional programs and students, administrators had to rely more frequently on personal codes of ethics to make professional judgements about their schools and students. Having a strong knowledge of research and policy helped administrators in this study make those professional decisions based on personal ethics because they were, in all instances, focused on the best interests of their students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations emerged for different individuals and groups. First, this study's original purpose of exploring perspectives of alternative school leaders regarding professional ethics and standards, was intended to serve several purposes. First, as an aspiring administrator, having a guide to look to understand the process of creating a successful alternative school based on standards would be a useful tool because it would incorporate practical applications of research and standards. Additionally, understanding the perspectives of individuals with experience in the field could help to guide decisions for administrators in need of direction. Beyond the practical use, this study formulated recommendations to districts and to policy-makers about the challenges that remain in the field of alternative school leadership. Providing these perspectives offered useful recommendations that could remove barriers or ensure practices that meet the best interests of alternative school students. While these recommendations may not be transferrable to all

alternative school programs and policies, the hope was to give voice to those administrators in the field, so that their triumphs and struggles resonate with those who make budgetary and policy decisions about alternative programs.

Current or prospective alternative school leaders

Findings in this study provided additional knowledge for advancing leadership in alternative schools. However, only a small portion of the voices and observations of alternative school administrators appear in this study. The vast array of experiences, perspectives, and processes created a small sample of leading an alternative school in today's ever-changing educational environment. This study highlighted several factors that appeared in the research and in the voices of alternative school leaders, but nothing was more valuable than visiting multiple schools, talking to the leaders, and understanding how their perspectives fit together. Doing so offered several recommendations for current or prospective alternative school leaders. Traditional school leaders may also benefit from this study as the PSEL (2015) standards were applicable across contexts in educational leadership. Regardless, the focus of this study emphasized alternative school leadership concepts and findings.

Among the most critical aspects of alternative school leadership, and perhaps school leadership in general, was the focus on the best interests of students. Each administrator in this study continually referenced their students as the ultimate goal and the ultimate product of their school's focus. All decisions, from the mission and vision, to the development of teaching schedules, revolved around what was best for students. When organizing programs and professional development, administrators in this study continually referenced the best interests of students as the focal point of their decision-making process. But that was only the beginning.

The administrators in this study also focused on particular elements about their staff. In some schools, it was so important for the staff to recognize that no person was bigger than any other, including the principal. This humble and often selfless stance helped administrators to justify to their teachers and staff decisions that might not typically be popular with staff, particularly scheduling practices and teaching assignments. But with an emphasis on personalizing one's leadership style—that is caring for staff, owning decisions, helping staff become leaders, and working as a team—administrators in any environment could instantly improve morale and buy-in from staff, which directly affects the culture of the students.

Leading an alternative school could often be a lonely experience. Several participants in this study referenced the challenges of leading a school of students who traditionally have not been successful in school. Many participants specifically talked about the horrendous experiences and pasts that the students experienced, each more heartbreaking than the next. But what was important, more than anything, to the administrators in this study, was to never let the staff or students see the isolation and complete heartache that leading an alternative school can cause its leaders. Just as administrators wanted the staff to take care of themselves, it was also important for participants to remind themselves of their moral purpose to help students and staff become the best they could.

It was also evident that not all decisions were simple. What many administrators did to combat this uncertainty in what to do was to stay ahead in research and knowledge of best practices. Some went to other schools to see how they could improve their own schools, while others used colleagues in the district as a guide. Some even found research and going to conferences as a critical component to knowing how to decide what was best for students. Regardless of the methods, the process remained the same: strive for excellence and do not

settle for good enough. The students in the schools and, to a large extent, the staff, required a leader that would do whatever it took to help everyone in the school community to be successful.

Finally, many standards and requirements continue to exist for the masses—the traditional student and schools. Because of this, alternative school administrators in this study were often forced to work within a system that had already failed the nontraditional students. There was never any finger-pointing; instead, administrators took this idea and attempted to work within the system as best they could. Some of them joined incubator programs to receive more funding, while others attempted to implement their own student success indicators to help their programs make a difference. Whatever it was, the processes found in this study were a window into how other administrators could decide to work in the same traditional system with non-traditional students.

Districts and policy-makers

A potential faulty assumption arose while writing these findings in that district leaders and policy-makers would view the responses of participants and these recommendations as an airing of grievances or an indictment of current practices. This could not be further from the truth. Instead, the intent was to provide the perspectives of those who work in the schools as a guidepost for any person or group in charge of creating policies for alternative schools to reference. As one participant put it, "there is enough research out there that most gut feelings have been answered." While policy makers are presumably faced with their own difficult decisions about budgets and mandates, this study, with hope, provided recommendations for any person or group looking for possible suggestions to enhance or to revitalize alternative

school programs under their purview. Because of that mission, this section provided suggestions based on the conclusions in the study.

Participants in this study consistently referenced the importance of staff in their schools as the channel to reaching their students. An even larger factor, however, appeared to be the enthusiasm and dedication displayed by each administrator in this study. These innovative leaders reported a steadfast dedication to students and to staff, and putting a person in place with the experience and ability to lead in a dynamic way was a critical factor. One participant referenced the fact that when she went to state meetings, it seemed that continuity in the leaders of alternative schools around the state was low, meaning that there were seemingly new administrators constantly turning over in those positions. While this was one perspective, this study—devised of administrators who all had at least four years of administrative experience—highlighted the importance of leadership continuity in alternative schools. These participants were all able to speak in detail about the process of changing the culture of their school, which took far more than a year or two to occur. Encouraging the right leaders to stay in alternative school positions could have broad, positive results for the students in those schools.

Beyond the leaders in those positions, it was also evident that many administrators appreciated flexibility and support from the district, the school board, and the state. Whether it was assurance from the board that they recognized achievement scores would likely never match those of traditional students, or recognizing the school's exceptional work to show growth in their students, the administrators all voiced that support and flexibility as key. One administrator mentioned the MAP test specifically because it used achievement norms of their non-traditional peers as measure of success. The elimination of that test, this administrator

feared, would lead to comparisons of traditional student norms that might never be achievable, which could devastate morale of students and staff. Perhaps, as the state begins to formulate future measures for alternative schools, varying methods of showing growth could be expanded to the alternative schools are not constantly stuck in "improvement" status.

Finally, one administrator referenced research on policy as a significant impediment to alternative school students' success. This deserves future investigation, as this study referenced several instances about attendance and drug policies that can often obstruct the betterment of the whole child in an alternative school. This study was not suggesting that no policy should exist, but a potential route for flexibility or appeal—if one does not already exist—might benefit alternative school students, and more importantly, leaders, who were focused on the best interests of their students.

Professional organizations

From this study of alternative school administrators, it became evident that professional organizations, in their efforts to standardize exceptional practices and ethics, may need to communicate more regularly with administrators and to consider flexibility for alternative schools and administrators.

First, this research revealed that the PSEL (2015) and NAEA (2014) standards were not as well-known as the organizations developing these standards may desire them to be. When asked about these standards, most of the administrators in this study did not reference them directly. This could be indicative of several factors. First, the interview questions did not use these standards by name. Perhaps if the interview referenced these standards directly, more participants would have spoken about them. However, most administrators voiced that their standards were no different from those of traditional school administrators. This indicated

that administrators were not fully aware of these standards and the potential for further education and promotion of these standards may produce more specific reference to and usage of them.

A second issue came in the form of accreditation standards. Several administrators voiced the need for more flexibility or even different standards when evaluating an alternative school. While accreditation standards hold significance to schools, particularly the process of conducting a self-study, findings in this study suggest the need to examine how accreditation standards could be developed for the non-traditional school environments such as the alternative schools in this study.

Those who work in formal educational leadership preparation programs

Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) ethic of the profession paradigm was written with the university professor and student in mind. Their text indicated a call to those in educational leadership preparation programs to use this paradigm as a method to teach students aspiring to become educational leaders a research-based approach to decision-making. As a result, this study could be used in accordance with the text to examine the practical applications of this model in real-world contexts.

Using this study as an examination of actual administrators making decisions in the context of their schools might strengthen the course that attempted to use the ethic of the profession as a model for decision-making. According to the findings in this study, tenets of the ethic of profession appeared more frequently than others. For instance, the ethics of the community—one of the five pillars of the ethic of profession—was not as prevalent in this study as the other tenets. Therefore, professors and students studying this paradigm may find

value in examining how administrators can more readily access the ethics of the community when making decisions.

Beyond what was missing, this study could also provide direction to those students wondering how to incorporate the other four pillars into their decisions. For instance, reflecting on and examining one's personal code of ethics might serve those students well when preparing to become an administrator. After all, Wagner and Simpson (2009) spent a great deal of time emphasizing the importance of evaluating various moral principles that could best serve leaders when faced with challenging decisions. This study provided a small window into the processes that administrators used to make decisions that do not have clear-cut answers.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study offered a glimpse into the world of alternative school administration. While several findings appeared about the perspectives of alternative school leaders, more research is necessary to develop an in-depth view into being an alternative school administrator. First, this study focused on a relatively small group of administrators in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, all within the same state system. It is possible that other programs in different districts or in different states may have produced different findings. Therefore, a further study might advance the findings, or provide contradicting evidence from this study. Additionally, other states likely have different standards and/or expectations for alternative school programs. The purpose, scope, assessment and other factors may look completely different from those in this area, so further studies in different educational systems may provide a broader view to add to the body of research in alternative school leadership.

Finally, this study attempted to add to a small body of research on alternative schools in general. Some districts have alternative junior highs or middle schools, while others use experiential and/or service learning models to meet the needs of non-traditional students. Therefore, since this study only focuses on traditional alternative schools, an examination of more diverse programs might also provide insight into different perspectives from different programs.

Final Thoughts

One superintendent, in providing approval for this study, expressed that the research process was the best part of the doctoral project. It was this sentiment that drove me to meet with administrators in this study with an open and enthusiastic mindset. They did not disappoint. As an aspiring administrator, this study reaffirmed my belief that administrators can be both caring and have high expectations for staff and students. The administrators in this study all reached me in different ways, but mostly in their willingness to open their school doors to me and to show me what solid leadership looked like. I cannot thank these individuals enough for taking the time out of their busy schedules to share some of the secrets of a complex trade. They all made this process so much more enjoyable and rewarding, and I am forever grateful to them for helping me reach my goals of completing my Doctorate of Education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Questions

A Multi-Case Study of Professional Ethics in Alternative Education: Exploring Perspectives of Alternative School Administrators

RT Duke

1. Tell me about your school.
2. What is the mission/vision of your school, and how do you support it?
3. Tell me your beliefs about building a sense of community among students and staff.
4. How is your school environment similar to or different from a traditional school?
5. What types of decisions do you make about students in your school?
6. What types of decisions do you make about staff in your school?
7. Tell me what you know about standards for alternative schools and for school leaders.
8. What professional standards do you rely on to make decisions about students and staff?
9. Tell me about diversity in your school.
10. What would you and your staff do when the rights of one student may conflict with the rights of other students?
11. What would you and your staff do when factors conflict with the best interests of a student or students?

Appendix B

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Please take a few minutes to complete this form, which will help to capture information specific to you and to your experiences efficiently. This specific information will only be used in general terms to differentiate participants from one another. As assured in the Informed Consent Agreement, your information will remain confidential.

1. Your age range (please circle one):
   Below 25 **25-35** **36-45** **46-55** **56-65** **65+**
2. Please identify your ethnicity. (You may circle more than one):
   White/Caucasian **African American** **Hispanic** **Asian/Pacific Islander**

   Native American **Other:**______________
3. Total years teaching: ______________________
4. List your teaching experience (grade level, subjects etc.) Please do not specify the names of schools and/or districts. ____

   ____

   ____

   ____

5. Total years working as an administrator: ____________________
6. List your administrative experience (grade level(s), years in each position, etc.). Please include information about your current position: ____

   ____

   ____

   ____

7. What is the approximate size of your student body?________________________________

8. What is the approximate size of your teaching staff?________________________________

9. What is the approximate average class size in your school? ____________________________

10. Please list all the non-instructional support staff positions that you can recall (counselors, social workers, transition counselors, etc.):____

    ____

    ____

    ____

For Researcher Use Only:
Pseudonym:

Date interviewed:

Appendix C

Observation Protocols

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Date:
Time:
Site:
Pseudonym:
Special Event?:</td></tr>
<tr><td>Context Description:</td><td>Document Review:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Observation:

Best interests of students:

Community relationships:

Leadership capacity of staff:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Reflective notes:</td></tr>
</table>

Appendix D

This research is has been approved by the University of Idaho Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent for Research Participation

Purpose of Research: The purpose of the research is to explore alternative school leaders' perspectives of professional ethics and standards.

Procedures: This qualitative study will require a face-to-face interview, if possible, and it will take approximately one hour. These interviews will be recorded and transcribed. There will be an opportunity to clarify statements in follow-up interviews, if necessary. This project will also require some observation of you in your working environment. Finally, a review of relevant documents will help to triangulate any findings from observations and interviews.

Risks/Discomforts: There are few risks in participating in this project. You may feel uncomfortable evaluating some of the experiences that you have encountered, but the interview questions are designed to have you recall generalities rather than specific incidents. You have the right not to answer any questions that you do not want to. Your time is an obvious cost, and I thank you for you participation. Finally, your students will not be involved in this research.

Benefits: The findings could result in better understanding for you and for your colleagues about how professional ethics guide decisions.

Confidentiality: All information in this project will remain confidential. I will keep all recordings, transcripts, and/or other artifacts in secure locations (i.e. locked cabinets, password-secured computers, etc.). In the final report, your name, school name, and district will not appear on any documents. Instead, all participants and their work environments will be assigned pseudonyms. You have the right to withdraw your participation at any time.

Contacts: If you have any questions about this survey, please contact me or my major professor.

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_____________________________ Signature of Researcher

_____________________________ Signature of Major Professor

Participant Consent:
Signature below indicates consent to participate in the research. I will be given a copy of the signed consent form.

_____________________________/ _________________________/_________________________

Signature of Participant | Printed Name | Date

Appendix E

University *of* Idaho
Office of Research Assurances
Institutional Review Board
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Moscow ID 83844-3010
Phone: 208-885-6162
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irb@uidaho.edu

To:	Penny Lee Tenuto
Cc:	Richard Thomas Duke IV
From:	Sharon Stoll Chair, University of Idaho Institutional Review Board
Date:	November 23, 2016
Title:	A Multi-Case Study of Professional Ethics in Alternative Education: Exploring Perspectives of Alternative School Principals
Project:	16-109
Review Type:	Expedited
Approved:	11/23/2016
Renewal:	11/22/2017

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Idaho, I am pleased to inform you that the protocol for the research project A Multi-Case Study of Professional Ethics in Alternative Education: Exploring Perspectives of Alternative School Principals is approved as offering no significant risk to human subjects. This approval is valid until 11/22/2017.

This study may be conducted according to the protocol described in the application. Research that has been approved by the IRB may be subject to further appropriate review and approval or disapproval by officials of the Institution. Every effort should be made to ensure that the project is conducted in a manner consistent with the three fundamental principles identified in the Belmont Report: respect for persons; beneficence; and justice. As Principal Investigator, you are responsible for ensuring compliance with all applicable FERPA regulations, University of Idaho policies, state and federal regulations.

Federal regulations require researchers to follow specific procedures in a timely manner. For the protection of all concerned, the IRB calls your attention to the following obligations that you have as Principal Investigator of this study.

1. For any changes to the study (except to protect the safety of participants), an Amendment Application must be submitted to the IRB. The Amendment Application must be reviewed and approved before any changes can take place.