MEASURING LIFE SATISFACTION OF FORMER ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

STUDENTS IN IDAHO: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A Dissertation

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AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT

DISSERTATION

This dissertation of Margaret Fortner, submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education with a

major in Educational Leadership and titled "Measuring Life Satisfaction of Former Alternative

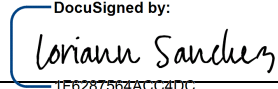High School Students in Idaho: A Qualitative Study," has been reviewed in final form.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated first and foremost to my father, R.J. Reynolds. Though life circumstances made it impossible for him to finish high school, he instilled in me a high regard for education and an expectation that I would complete college. I hope that with this chapter of my education he is as proud of me as I am of him.

I also want to thank my mom, Judy Reynolds, who missed her calling as an editor. Her attention to detail is a trait that I have always envied. I want to thank my children, Kat Roemer, Amy Joe Lopez, and Jonathan Fortner for reminding me, through their own successes, that I excelled in the most important job of my life. Lastly, I want to thank Sean Spagnolo, who continually reminded me that he believed in me when I struggled to believe in myself.

ABSTRACT

The concept of overall subjective well-being has been highlighted in recent years. As society wrestles with mental health struggles, communities often look to schools to fill in the gaps. As such, many schools have added well-being components to their structure. Because many of the most vulnerable students are considered at risk of dropping out of high school, several states have provided an alternative education structure for those students. Alternative schools regularly contain components specifically intended to increase a student's overall well-being. Though subjective well-being is not clearly defined, life satisfaction seems to be a common component. This study measures life satisfaction as a piece of overall subjective well-being in students that have previously attended alternative high schools in a Pacific Northwest state and suggests adding a component of well-being to the current school evaluation tools. Alternative high schools are often evaluated using the same metrics as those used for traditional high schools, but those methods are often not appropriate evaluations because they fail to address intentional well-being components for students in an alternative setting. The study suggestions derive from interviews with five adults who had previously attended an alternative school. The transcripts of those interviews were analyzed to determine current life satisfaction among the participants and how contributors' experiences attending an alternative high school may have influenced current life satisfaction. Analysis revealed shared feelings of displacement at their former traditional high schools, a sense of belonging at the alternative high school, and lasting empowerment as a result of having spent time in an alternative high school setting. These findings offer insight for schools seeking to determine best placement for students, improve traditional schools, and explore meaningful evaluative tools to add to the current measures.

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Introduction

Opening Vignette

Josh's mom was only 16 when he was born. She dropped out of high school shortly after discovering her pregnancy. He never knew his father and had stopped referring to the string of men moving in and out of his mother's life as "uncle." In fact, he stopped referring to them at all. He just continued to hope that this one would not hit him, this one would not touch him.

Once there was a decent guy. He bought Josh things, told him he had worth, and even treated Josh's mom well. His mother's drug addictions and yelling fits drove the man away. Josh was seven at the time and just assumed that it was because he, Josh, was no longer worth it.

In the early years he tried in school. He wanted to do well and be praised by the teachers. Soon he was put in special classes to help with reading. At first, he was excited. He wanted to read like the other children. Then kids began calling him "retard" and told him that he was in the classes because he was "dumb." Josh began to believe them. If he were dumb, then he would never be able to read. Trying was hard. "Why try if it is impossible?" he would tell himself.

With time he got further and further behind in school. By junior high, he had concocted elaborate schemes to get out of going to school at all. Most of the time his clever ideas worked and he was able to get away with it, but sometimes he got caught. At first, he would get in-school suspensions, but then it became out-of-school suspensions. Mom was called. Sometimes, if she was sober, she would come in. Sometimes she would not. The school would make threats about his not being allowed back until she came in, but they would eventually relent when it was obviously not going to happen. The only class he enjoyed was art, but as he began losing core credits, he was put in remedial classes and there was no longer room in his schedule for art.

When he stopped going to school at all, he was reported as truant and entered into the juvenile justice system.

By the time Josh entered high school he was a "delinquent." It did not even matter that some of his teachers and most of the students believed it to be true; all that mattered was that he believed it. He had been smoking pot off and on since he was twelve. It helped to dull the pain, boredom, and lack of self-worth. If something did not change, harder drugs, homelessness, prison, suicide, and the perpetuation of the cycle through his own children were in Josh's future.

Josh's story is not unique. His is the story of many struggling students. Students like Josh are considered at risk of dropping out of school and may qualify to attend alternative high schools. These schools attempt to fill in the gap and repair as much of the damage as possible.

Statement of the Problem

In Idaho, alternative schools are tasked with providing an educational choice for at-risk students. Alternative high schools are a departure from traditional high schools (Flores & Brown, 2019; Hall, 2019; Smith & Thomson, 2014). They are loosely coupled to local districts in that the districts provide basic structure and guidance. However, they are given more freedom to incorporate innovative curriculum (Bascia & Maton, 2015; Williams, 2019). Alternative schools are set apart based on the requirements to attend, typically at-risk criteria, and their unique blend of methods to reach a sometimes difficult population. They use flexible, non-traditional structures which allow for individualized educational experiences, and various programs which address social emotional as well as academic needs (Bascia & Maton, 2015; Caroleo, 2014; Dawes, 2019; Idaho State Department of Education [SDE], n.d.-c; Morrissette, 2018; Rafa, 2018; Roberson, 2015; Schwab et al., 2016). Alternative schools are frequently known for an emphasis on relationship building, independent learning, promoting mindfulness,

and fostering socio-emotional growth (Bascia & Maton, 2015; Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018; Long et al., 2018; Wisner & Starzee, 2016). The advantages of an alternative school can include small class sizes, flexibility within lessons, individualized plans, and building a culture of inclusion and respect (Barrett, 2021; Bokova, 2017; Morressette, 2018; Roberson, 2015).

Though alternative schools are structured in a different way and serve a divergent population, the state measures their success or failure using the same metrics as those used to evaluate traditional schools (Idaho SDE, n.d.-a). Even though the research shows alternative schools are more focused on overall well-being than academics, they are still being measured by the standards set forth for traditional schools (Wang, 2019). In most places, high schools are measured based on graduation rates and standardized tests. There is discussion among educators and lawmakers whether these methods alone are an adequate measure of the effectiveness (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Wang, 2019).

School success in Idaho is measured using testing data from formalized accountability systems, graduation rate, and the rate at which graduates successfully matriculate to college immediately following high school (Idaho SDE, n.d.-a; Piper, 2017; Schulte et al., 2018). Of these traditional measures, standardized tests especially have shown inconsistent reliability, bias against minority or disadvantaged students, or as inappropriate measures for alternative schools (Buras, 2011; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Mould & DeLoach, 2017; Nowicki, 2020; Schulte et al., 2018; Therien, 2018). Other traditional measures may not account for the fact that students in alternative schools are typically behind their peers academically (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Perzigian, 2018). For example, graduation rate, a federally mandated measurement tool, is not an accurate measure for alternative high schools (Davenport, 2016; Dawes, 2019; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Therien,

2018). Often, students who are in jeopardy of not completing high school on time will transfer to an alternative high school during their last year or even last semester (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Therien, 2018). When they enter the alternative high school, they are already lacking the credits needed to graduate on time (Dawes, 2019; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Therien, 2018). As a result, alternative schools typically have low graduation rates (Davenport, 2016; Dawes, 2019; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Schwab et al., 2016; Therien, 2018).

None of the traditional measures used to evaluate schools looks at overall well-being. Though educational leaders and governments have acknowledged the role of well-being in schools, these areas are not universally assessed (Therien, 2018). The current study seeks to add to the discussion by looking at life satisfaction as a component of overall well-being. This was done through exploring former alternative school students' life satisfaction and the impact their alternative schooling may have had on their levels of life satisfaction (Helliwell, 2018; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013; Owen & Phillips, 2016; Richert & Corbin, 2019).

A way to begin to understand well-being is to measure the components of overall well-being. One significant component of well-being is life satisfaction (Helliwell, 2018; Helliwell et al., 2012; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013; Kemp et al., 2014; Tumanishvili, 2017). Life satisfaction is a person's self-assessed judgement of their own life (Helliwell, 2018; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013; Owen & Phillips, 2016). The measurement of life satisfaction can serve as a basis for further research into the effects of alternative school culture on the overall subjective well-being of individuals. By better understanding the experience and impact of the alternative school on former students' overall well-being, educators can be advocates for continuing to serve at-risk students in Idaho through the alternative school model (Biesta, 2015; Frankford, 2007).

Background

Historically, mental health in America has been addressed through institutionalization of those in crisis. In the late 1970s and early 80s, reports of overcrowding and abuse within such establishments in the United States surfaced (Hoppel, 2015). This led to a shift in public opinion that moved mental health care in America away from institutions (Yanos et al., 2017). The void left by such shifts has not been adequately filled. Today's mental health resources have failed to keep up with the needs of Americans (Hoppel, 2015). As society has attempted to cope with the deficiencies in availability, schools have implemented measures in an attempt to fill the gap (Hoppel, 2015; Thorburn, 2015).

Measures schools have implemented include programs stressing student well-being (Barbarin, 2015). This is not just a national issue, but has implications globally. In England, well-being is an optional part of the national curriculum. In Scotland and Australia, it is mandated in schools (Downes, 2018; Thorburn, 2015). In the United States, the call for schools to address mental health often takes the form of character education. Character education programs can be found in many schools in the United States (Wolf, 2015; Williams, 2019).

The purpose of public education is outlined by the government, corporations, and public opinion (Bushaw & Lopez, 2012). Some of these entities are calling for education to help in strengthening overall mental health. As former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated, "…learning is about much more. I hope we won't lose sight of the part of education that focuses on your humanness" (Arnett, 2018 p.62). During discussions of public education, recurring themes of personhood, humanness, well-being, culture, mental health and self-worth are seen (Arnett, 2018. Governments, corporations, and public opinion call for the requirement to produce well rounded individuals and encourage overall well-being (Arnett, 2018; Barbarin, 2015;

Hervás & Vázquez, 2013; Kemp, Page & Wilson, 2014). One of the ways that regional governments have responded to this call, especially for non-traditional students, is by encouraging alternative schools to bridge the gap (Bascia & Maton, 2015; Bushaw & Lopez, 2012; Dawes, 2019; Hall, 2019: Lehr et al., 2003).

Throughout American history, non-traditional students have been acknowledged as needing special consideration (Frank, 2019; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). By 2003, several states had laws governing alternative education in order to meet the needs of diverse learners (Frank, 2019; Lehr et al., 2003). Specifically, Idaho has legislation in place for enrollment criteria, the definition of alternative schooling and at-risk students, funding, curriculum, and staffing (Idaho Administrative Code [IDAPA], 2021; Lehr et al., 2003). Though most states have legislation addressing alternative education, they differ significantly on their view of the purpose for an alternative school.

The term *alternative schools* can be vague (Bokova, 2017; Roberson, 2015). It conjures images of anything from charter, voucher, and magnet schools, to military and disciplinary schools (Bokova, 2017; Frank, 2019). Alternative schools focus on students who are not fully served by traditional schools, particularly those students determined to be at risk of dropping out of high school prior to graduation, through relationship building and the use of diverse curriculum (Bascia & Maton, 2015; Hall, 2019; Williams, 2019). Such students face a variety of challenges that can inhibit success in a regular high school (Lind, 2013; Morrissette, 2018). At-risk students are frequently minority, low-socio economic, and demonstrate mental or behavioral issues (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Hall, 2019; Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018; Lind, 2013; McDaniel, 2017; Szlyk, 2018; Williams, 2019). Many have had poor experiences in their early school years. Those experiences are often compounded by learning difficulties and adverse home

situations (Barrett, 2021; Flores & Brown, 2019; Walker & Graham, 2019). Learning difficulties, teen parenting, drug problems, emotional issues, unstable homes, and ongoing behavioral problems can qualify a student to attend an alternative high school (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Frank, 2019; Hall, 2019).

Reasons students become at risk are varied, but poverty often plays a role (Adamson, Cook-Harvey, & Darling- Hammond, 2015; Flores & Brown, 2019; Williams, 2019). Poverty can result in frequent moves and the need to work, rather than go to school (McDaniel, 2017). Even more alarming, more than half of U.S. children are exposed to violence or abuse each year. Exposure to violence is more prevalent in minority and low-income students (Johnson, 2019; Kataoka et al., 2018). This type of trauma can have effects that reach into all aspects of a child's life. Trauma can affect physical well-being, emotional and psychological health, and academic performance. Exposure to trauma has been shown to affect attendance, concentration, grades, memory, and even IQ (Kataoka et al., 2018). Trauma can also result in truancies, behavior problems, academic difficulties, expulsions, failure of coursework, and other issues (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Lind, 2013; Szlyk, 2018). All of these factors contribute to the need for alternative high schools (Hall, 2019: Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Lind, 2013; Roberson, 2015; Szlyk, 2018).

In Idaho, alternative schools are offered as a school of choice for students who meet at-risk criteria (IDAPA, 2021; Lehr et al., 2003; Raywid, 1994). Students must meet the criteria to be able to attend, but are not forced to attend (Idaho Code 33-1001, 2021; Idaho SDE, n.d.-c). Though not all alternative schools are voluntary, those that are, are typically more effective (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). Idaho's alternative schools are typically Type I alternative schools in that they are voluntary and seek to offer an alternative path toward graduation rather than

being punitive in nature (IDAPA 2021; Raywid, 1994).

At-risk students seem to have an increased need for social emotional development (Domitrovich et al., 2017). This is one of the strengths of many alternative high school programs, with many stressing the need for relationship building (Flores & Brown, 2019; Frank, 2019; Hall, 2019; Williams, 2019). The state of Idaho further emphasizes the need for extra care in educating at-risk youth by requiring academic content that meets minimum state standards and includes components in physical fitness, career technical education, personal finance, parenting, child care, and personal and career counseling (IDAPA, 2021; Idaho SDE, n.d.-c). The state of Idaho demonstrates the necessity of alternative schools by funding them at a higher rate than traditional schools. Traditional high schools in Idaho are funded at a rate of 1:18, meaning that one full time equivalent staff member is funded for every 18 students attending. Alternative schools are funded at a rate of 1:12, meaning that one full time equivalent staff member is funded for every 12 students who attend (Idaho Code 33-1002, 2021.).

The current proliferation of alternative schools can be partially attributed to the appeal of non-traditional learning methods, which can help to fill the needs of at-risk students (Bokova, 2017; Hall, 2019; Roberson, 2015; Schwab et al., 2016). Students report alternative schools are adept at providing help when needed (Flores & Brown, 2019; Modesto, 2018; Williams, 2019). Beyond academic help, they often provide extracurricular help such as childcare, transportation, and social-emotional support (Hall, 2019; Modesto, 2018; Wisner & Starzee, 2016). Some alternative schools provide an avenue to graduate early by offering flexibility and reduced credit requirements, which can be especially helpful for teen parents who must begin earning a living (Modesto, 2018; Morrissette, 2011; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Szlyk, 2018).

Students at alternative high schools report teachers treat them as individuals and seem to

not only care about their education but also about the students as people (Bascia & Maton, 2015; Flores & Brown, 2019; Modesto, 2018; Morrissette, 2011; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Szlyk, 2018; Wisner & Starzee, 2016). Some students highlight social acceptance as a benefit to the alternative school setting (Flores & Brown, 2019; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Many alternative schools also operate as trauma informed schools. As a response to children of trauma, schools have begun to use trauma influenced practices to mitigate some of the harmful effects by using universal prevention, targeted prevention, and screening (Kataoka et al., 2018).

Though alternative schools are using these interventions, when using state evaluation tools, alternative schools continue to perform low (Idaho SDE, n.d.-a). But not all performance is being evaluated, because though social emotional well-being is an area of focus, it is typically not measured as a part of school evaluation (Downes, 2018; Hall, 2019). Public schools' success is traditionally measured using standardized testing, student grade point averages, and graduation rates (Idaho SDE, n.d.-a; Lehr et al., 2003; Mould & DeLoach, 2017; Piper, 2017; Roberson, 2015; Schulte et al., 2018; Therien, 2018). Though these methods may measure some of the stated purposes of education like decision making and skill acquisition, they fail to address overall well-being (Kemp et al., 2014; Therien, 2018; Tumanishvili, 2017). In addition, most at-risk students are already academically behind, so these traditional measures may not be appropriate or accurate to measure the effectiveness of alternative high schools (Dawes, 2019; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Therien, 2018).

One possible opportunity to determine well-being and address the disparity for alternative schools can be undertaken by using a measure of success that is not currently gauged in Idaho alternative high schools: overall post high school life satisfaction (Helliwell, 2018; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013; Kemp et al., 2014). This study uses a qualitative approach to explore

former alternative school students' overall life satisfaction and the impact their alternative schooling may have had on levels of life satisfaction.

Research Questions

The best judge of how a phenomenon is affecting a person is the person being affected (Klitmøller, 2016; Navarro et al., 2017). This study explores two questions in order to better understand the overall well-being of former Idaho alternative high school students. The first concentrates on the outcomes and the second on perceived value.

1. What beliefs do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates have about their current life satisfaction?

2. How do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates perceive their experience at an Idaho alternative high school to have impacted their current life satisfaction?

Description of Terms

In order to understand the phenomenon of alternative high schools and their capacity to address overall well-being, it is helpful to understand the associated terms. Below is a comprehensive list of relevant terms used in this study and definitions as provided by research based sources.

Alternative school. An alternative school is located in a separate building from a traditional high school or operates outside of the regular school hours (Idaho Code 33-1002, 2021). It is considered a school of choice (Idaho SDE, n.d.-c). The purpose of an alternative school is to provide an alternative route to graduation for students deemed at risk of not graduating high school (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; IDAPA, 2021).

At-risk students. Students considered unlikely to graduate from a traditional high

school program. Students meet specific criteria in order to be considered at risk. Those criteria include, but are not limited to, being pregnant or a parent, having recurring behavior problems, having attendance issues, having deficiencies in credits, having failed one or more core subjects, having been in trouble with the juvenile justice system, or having significant emotional or personal problems (Idaho Code 33-1001, 2021).

Every Student Succeeds Act. A bipartisan federal law designed to improve public schools in the United States (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

Four-year cohort. Students who begin high school together in the ninth grade (freshman) and are expected to graduate four years later with the other students from their class. Graduation rate is measured by the percentage of students graduating on time with their four-year cohort (Davenport, 2016; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

IDAPA. Idaho Administrative Procedure Act. A common term used to identify the administrative code created by Idaho's state board of education. The board creates administrative code for school districts to follow (IDAPA, 2021).

Life satisfaction. Life satisfaction refers to "global judgements of one's life" (Diener, 2000, p. 34) or a person's self-assessed appraisal of one's overall level of happiness (Helliwell, 2018; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013; Owen & Phillips, 2016). Life satisfaction is a component of overall well-being (Lau et al., 2018).

Social competence. How well a student is able to conform to cultural norms and expectations (Perzigian, 2018).

Subjective well-being (SWB). Subjective well-being is a term that indicates how individuals appraise their own lives. It includes an appraisal of the good and the bad and allows individuals to self-appraise the results. It can be an indicator of how satisfied one is with one's

life (Diener et al., 2017; Reid & Smith, 2018; Tumanishvili, 2017).

Type I alternative school. Type I alternative schools refer to those that can be characterized as a school of choice (Raywid, 1994). Typically, students who are not successful in a traditional high school and meet specific at-risk criteria can choose to attend an alternative school site (IDAPA, 2021). Type I alternative schools often provide flexibility and individualized attention (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Raywid, 1994).

Significance of the Study

There has been a recent emphasis on mental health and overall well-being in society. Much of the burden for ensuring overall well-being has been placed on schools (Barbarin, 2015). Alternative schools house many of the most vulnerable students. Many alternative schools recognize the need for relationship building in order to best serve the needs of these students. As such, they have developed and adopted programs specifically intended to strengthen relationships, build empathy, and improve overall well-being (Hoppel, 2015; Klitmøller, 2016; Navarro et al., 2017; Thorburn, 2015). Though schools attempt to measure academic indicators such as grades, standardized test scores, and graduation rates, they do not routinely measure student well-being (Rappleye et al., 2020). However, as more information is gathered from studies such as this one, educators who help make sense of public policy can be empowered to make change and influence policy (Harris & Jones, 2019; Oyen et al., 2019; Rom & Eyal, 2019). This type of advocacy is needed, especially as it deals with student mental health (Oyen et al., 2019). By looking at the mental health component of life satisfaction, educators can campaign for more appropriate measures of success. Education professionals can further use information gathered in this study to advocate for continued implementation of the alternative school model (Harris & Jones, 2019).

Overview of Research Methods

A qualitative approach was used in this study. Historically, qualitative research was not considered as valid as quantitative data because it was not considered as readily measurable. However, the focus of researchers to intentionally code qualitative data in a systematic way has helped to improve perceived validity (Williams & Moser, 2019). Qualitative research methods can help researchers to obtain a deep understanding of a central phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Kozleski, 2017). In this case, that phenomenon is former attendance at an alternative high school. Using a qualitative approach for this study did not restrict the views of participants to pre-coded responses and allowed for contributors to self-identify the quality of their current life satisfaction and the experiences that may have contributed to it (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; DeLyser & Potter, 2013; Helliwell, 2018; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013).

Participants in this study were limited to adults who had previously attended an alternative high school in the state of Idaho. Participants were asked to describe both their current life satisfaction and their feelings on how their alternative high school experiences may have influenced their current life satisfaction. Individual audio recorded interviews with participants were utilized in order to measure their subjective views of their own overall life satisfaction (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; DeLyser & Potter, 2013; Helliwell, 2018; Kozleski, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Care was taken to establish rapport with the respondents and to word opening statements in such a way as to not create initial bias (Johanssen, 2016; McGrath et al., 2019).

The purpose of this study was to allow respondents to evaluate their own life satisfaction (DeLyser et al., 2013; Helliwell, 2018; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013). Interviews were used for understanding an individual's experiences (McGrath et al., 2019). Individual interviews allowed

participants to respond using their own interpretations of their own experiences (Creswell &

Guetterman, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being (SWB) is a measure psychologists use to look at various components of mental health. There is no one, standard definition of SWB (McLellan & Steward, 2015; Thorburn, 2015; Tumanishvili, 2017; Vinney et al., 2019). However, researchers agree on some common characteristics. In its simplest terms, SWB is a term that indicates how individuals view their own lives. It includes a look at the good and the bad in a person's life and allows individuals to self-appraise the results. It can be an indicator of how satisfied one is with one's life (Diener et al., 2017; Reid & Smith, 2018; Tumanishvili, 2017). Well-being is more than the absence of negative emotions or absence of poor mental health. It is multidimensional including both positive and negative emotions (Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 2017; Kern et al., 2015; McLellen & Steward, 2015; Moksnes et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2017; Reid & Smith, 2018; Tumanishvili, 2017). SWB increases when pain experiences decrease and pleasant activities increase. It is a balance where the positive outweighs the negative. Well-being theory includes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment; it includes believing that a person is valuable and that there is something greater than one's self (Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 2017; Kern et al., 2015; McLellen & Steward, 2015; Moksnes et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2017; Reid & Smith, 2018; Tumanishvili, 2017).

Some researchers use the terms happiness, life satisfaction, and SWB interchangeably (Diener, 2000; Helliwell, 2018; McLellan & Steward, 2015; Reid & Smith, 2018; Tumanishvili, 2017). Others see life satisfaction as a component of overall SWB (Moksnes et al., 2016). Life satisfaction includes self-awareness and self-management of mental health. Though life

satisfaction can be affected by mood at a given time, SWB is more encompassing (Diener, 2000;

Kern et al., 2015). Characteristics of a happy person include high levels of positive emotions

such as high energy, strong social orientation, loving relationships, and emotional stability.

Happy people also indicate low levels of negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and anger

(Kern et al., 2015; Michalos, 2017). Well-being can be measured as a snapshot or by looking

over one's full life. A person's current mood can build into long-term moods such as

contentment, resentment, or other emotions (Diener et al., 2017).

Though exact definitions and measures may vary, there is an international consensus of

the importance of well-being (Diener, 2000; Halliwell, 2018; Thorburn, 2015). Positive

subjective well-being can contribute to good health and longevity (Diener et al., 2017). Increased

well-being is associated with reduced negative impacts such as substance abuse, depression, and

suicidal tendencies (Lau et al., 2018). SWB also has an impact on physical health. There are

positive associations between SWB and cardiovascular health, boosted immune function, wound

healing, and the positive effects of certain hormones (Kern et al., 2015). In the same way,

negative SWB is associated with negative physical effects. For example, stressful conditions

have a negative effect on telomeres, the caps that protect DNA. Low life satisfaction can have

psychological effects and are a predictor of suicide rates (Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 2017; Kern

et al., 2015).

The Role of Schools in Improving Student Well-Being

In addition to expecting a system that allows students to learn academic skills, many

educators, government officials, and citizens also include an appeal to address student well-being

(Graham et al., 2015). There is a call for students to be treated as human beings with a well-

rounded education that is both flexible and individual in order to promote overall SWB

(Barbarin, 2015; Biesta, 2015; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013; Kemp, Page & Wilson, 2014). Because education can influence happiness, (Downes, 2018; Tumanishvili, 2017) schools are an important contributing factor in shaping a student's mental health. School stressors, academic pressures, and negative peer relationships all contribute to a lack of well-being. Students who report school stress are more prone to depression and less likely to report positive life satisfaction (Moksnes et al., 2016). Girls seem to be more prone to the negative effects than boys. Students feeling negatively about life also indicate inadequacy at academic performance. Negative feelings by students are compounded when they feel teachers do not respect them as individuals, feel they are not being heard, or have a perception of being targeted by teachers. Alienation and negative feelings toward school contribute to lower feelings of well-being (Downes, 2018; Flores & Brown, 2019; Moksnes et al., 2016). These interrelationships show that there is a significant positive relationship between students' perceived school climate and their subjective well-being (Johnson, 2019; Moksnes et al., 2016; Reid & Smith, 2018). This is corroborated by other research that has shown school climate as being a target for improving student well-being.

Positive school climates include a safe and supportive place for students socially, emotionally, and physically (Barbarin, 2015; Johnson, 2019; Reid & Smith, 2018). The mitigating factors of a positive school environment are compounded by the number of students experiencing trauma (Johnson, 2019). More than half of U.S. children are exposed to violence or abuse each year. Exposure to violence is more prevalent in minority and low income students (Johnson, 2019). Trauma can have effects that reach into all aspects of a child's life. Trauma can affect physical well-being, emotional and psychological health, and academic performance (Downes, 2018; Flores & Brown, 2019; Johnson, 2019). Academically, exposure to trauma has

been shown to affect attendance, concentration, grades, memory, and even IQ (Flores & Brown, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Kataoka et al., 2018).

As a response to children of trauma, schools have begun to use trauma influenced practices to lessen some of the harmful effects (Kataoka et al., 2018). The importance of trauma-informed schools can be seen in the willingness of states to endorse such programs in policies and recommendations to state departments of education (Rafa, 2018; Kataoka et al., 2018). Trauma-informed schools use three tiers of support for their students. The first tier includes universal prevention. Universal prevention is characterized by creating policies and funding sources that are designed to be consistent and sustainable (Kataoka et al., 2018). The second is targeted prevention and screening, which includes school-wide initiatives. School-wide initiatives include outreach to families and creating a physically and mentally safe school environment. The third, intensive treatment, is at the apex of the trauma-informed school principles (Kataoka et al., 2018). Trauma is further mitigated by the ability of teachers to build caring relationships with students (Morrissette, 2018; Perzigian, 2018; Piper, 2017).

Trauma mitigation improves life satisfaction, which is important in assessing emotional health in teens (Kern et al., 2015; Moksnes et al., 2016). A problem with measuring well-being, however, is that there is no real standard as to what it means (McLellan & Steward, 2015; Thorburn, 2015). Different interpretations include a variety of subjective measures such as happiness, relationships, health, utility, welfare, desire fulfillment, accomplishment, and enjoyment. Additionally, according to life satisfaction theories, there is value in self-assessment of well-being.

The combined challenge for desire fulfillment and life-satisfaction theories is to indicate how self-beliefs can provide an account of values and worthwhileness that moves beyond

satisfying individual needs and preferences. The claimed advantage of desire fulfillment

theories is that they can enable individual variability at the same time as fitting within an

overarching unified theory. (Thorburn, 2015 p. 4)

Life-satisfaction theory also equates genuine happiness with well-being (Thorburn, 2015).

Because of the various interpretations and theories, subjectivity is part of measuring well-being. Even though there is a push for self-assessment, a constraint is that these subjective measures are dependent on some objective information that people use to make decisions. There is no set standard scale for objectively measuring subjective well-being because measuring one's own well-being is going to be diverse. Everyone's criteria are dissimilar because everyone's desires are different (McLellan & Steward, 2015; Thorburn, 2015).

Alternative Schools: Structure and Necessity

Part of addressing student well-being is acknowledging the role of poverty. A large obstacle to high school graduation is poverty (Johnson, 2019; McDaniel, 2017). The federal government attempted to mitigate that in 1965 when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed. The landmark legislation provided federal guidelines for education nationwide and established the program commonly referred to as Title I. Title I of ESEA provided funding to schools in order to better meet the needs of students in poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2018)). Alternative schools have high rates of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, including Title I students (Barrett, 2021; Rubens et al., 2018).

Other graduation obstacles were earlier addressed when the Smith-Towner Bill (1920) established the United States Department of Education. Besides establishing the department and the parameters of the office of the Secretary of Education, the bill broke down the budget priorities for the department. Within that budget, legislators specifically earmarked money

prioritizing illiteracy and immigrant education (The Smith-Towner Bill, 1920). The Smith-Towner Bill (1920) acknowledged these needs as the department's first and second priorities.

Acknowledgment of the needs of diverse learners continued when schools underwent another major change as the Supreme Court desegregated schools with their decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). That sentiment was further solidified when Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (1964) was passed prohibiting discrimination based on race and ethnicity. Because alternative schools have large minority populations, these laws have a direct effect on alternative schools today (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Perzigian, 2018).

Other subjugated groups continued to garner protections when in 1972, gender discrimination was added to prohibited practices in federally funded institutions (Title IX of the Education Amendments Act, 1972). Later, President George W. Bush signed an updated version of ESEA known as Public Law 107-110 or more commonly, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). No Child Left Behind (2002) included several sections that specifically addressed underserved populations including specific provisions for alternative education programs.

No Child Left Behind outlined the need for alternative education programs in several ways. First, it called for programs meant to address the needs of students that have been expelled or suspended from regular high schools. These include programs specifically designed for students'eventual re-entry into the traditional high school setting. The law also called for specific academic intervention programs in order to meet the needs of students deemed at risk of not completing high school (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002).

By 2003, several states had laws governing alternative education (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Lehr et al., 2003). In 2003, 94% of states had legislation specific to alternative education to varying degrees. Specifically, Idaho had legislation in place for enrollment criteria,

the definition of alternative schooling, at-risk criteria, funding, curriculum, and staffing (Lehr et al., 2003).

Alternative schools can be structured in several different ways (Bokova, 2017; Roberson, 2015). They can be broken into three distinct types, which helps clear up confusion surrounding use of a single term. Type I alternative schools refer to those that can be characterized as a school of choice (Raywid, 1994). Voluntary programs are typically more effective, and students are chosen for attendance at an alternative high school based on how likely they are to complete the program (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Wisner & Starzee, 2016). Often, students that are not successful in a traditional high school and meet specific at-risk criteria can choose to attend an alternative school site (IDAPA, 2021). Type I alternative schools often provide flexibility and individualized attention (Raywid, 1994). Type II alternative schools are frequently disciplinary in nature (Raywid, 1994). Students are placed involuntarily and temporarily in order to either correct behavior and return to a traditional environment or as a step toward expulsion (Raywid, 1994). Type III alternative schools are designed for students with specific disabilities (Raywid, 1994). In Idaho, based on Idaho Code 33-1001(2021) at-risk criteria and IDAPA 08.02.03 Section 110 (2021) school of choice status, only Type I alternative schools would be considered in this study (Raywid, 1994).

Though most states have legislation addressing alternative education, they have historically differed significantly on their view of the purpose of an alternative school . Thirty-four states saw alternative schools as punitive, what Raywid (1994) would describe as Type II (Lehr et al., 2003). Some states saw alternative schools as a temporary placement where successful students could earn their way back into a traditional school. Still, others offered alternative schools as a school of choice after students met at-risk criteria (IDAPA, 2021; Lehr et

al., 2003). Regardless of their purpose, alternative schools authorized by various states were often charged with providing statistics on dropout rates, behavior issues, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy to state and local agencies (Lehr et al., 2003).

Today, the United States Department of Education's definition for alternative schools specifically delineates between alternative and traditional education (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). The Department of Education refers to alternative schools as alternative educational settings. Alternative educational settings are typically populated by students with specific deficiencies in life circumstances as well as academic issues (Schwab et al., 2016). States build on the federal definition of at-risk students in order to build their own programs (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; IDAPA, 2021; Schwab et al., 2016).

In Idaho, IDAPA provides the framework for alternative education. IDAPA rules, under authority of Idaho Code, allow for and regulate alternative high schools in the state. The rules allow students to earn a regular high school diploma based on minimum Idaho graduation standards (IDAPA, 2021). IDAPA lays out qualifications for being considered an at-risk student who is therefore eligible for enrollment in an alternative school (see Table 1). These include repeating a grade, chronic absenteeism, a GPA below 1.5, failure of one or more core subjects, being behind on credits, having a documented drug or behavior problem, being pregnant or a parent, having previously dropped out, or experiencing serious physical, emotional, or personal problems (Idaho Code 33-1001, 2021). The state further mandates components that must be included in an alternative program including parenting classes, physical fitness, personal finance, and counseling (IDAPA, 2021). Alternative school students who meet the state requirements are granted a regular high school diploma and must meet the state minimum requirements for high school graduation which include language, math, science, humanities, social sciences, and health

courses (IDAPA, 2021).

Though there are no specific federal guidelines, Idaho's guidelines are similar to that of Texas (see Table 2). The Texas guidelines that are similar to those in Idaho Code include identifying eligible students as those who have failed in two or more subjects during the previous year, have been retained, scored poorly on assessments, are pregnant or parents, have been previously expelled, are on probation, have had criminal issues, or have dropped out of school previously. The federal definition also includes students with limited English proficiency, who are considered homeless, or who are with a parent who is incarcerated. Idaho includes a section that indicates a student with severe personal, emotional, or physical problems as being considered at risk (Idaho Code 33-1001, 2021). This provision encapsulates the federal criteria that includes students in residential placement facilities, detention facilities, substance abuse treatment, emergency shelters, foster homes, or psychiatric hospitals (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

Table 1

Idaho State At-Risk Youth Criteria

Per Idaho Code 33-1001 (2021), an at-risk youth is any secondary student, who meets any three (3) of the following criteria in Column A, or any one (1) criteria in Column B.	
Column A	Column B
Has repeated at least one grade.	Has a documented or pattern of substance abuse.
Has absenteeism that is greater than 10% during the preceding semester.	Is pregnant or a parent.
Has an overall grade point average that is less than 1.5 (4.0 scale) prior to enrolling in an alternative secondary program.	Is an emancipated or unaccompanied youth.
Has failed one or more academic subjects in the past year.	Is a previous dropout.
Is below proficient, based on local criteria and/or state standardized tests.	Has serious personal, emotional, or medical issue(s).
Is two or more credits per year behind the rate required to graduate or for grade promotion.	Has a court or agency referral.
Has attended three (3) or more schools within the previous two (2) years, not including dual enrollment.	Demonstrates behavior that is detrimental to their academic progress.

Table 2

Texas At-Risk Youth Criteria

Under Texas law (2010) "students at-risk of dropping out of school includes each student who is under 21 years of age and who:

1. is in prekindergarten, kindergarten or grade 1, 2, or 3 and did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year;
2. is in grade 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12 and did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum during a semester in the preceding or current school year or is not maintaining such an average in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum in the current semester;
3. was not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more school years;
4. did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered to the student under Subchapter B, Chapter 39, and who has not in the previous or current school year subsequently performed on that instrument or another appropriate instrument at a level equal to at least 110 percent of the level of satisfactory performance on that instrument;
5. is pregnant or is a parent;
6. has been placed in an alternative education program in accordance with Section 37.006 during the preceding or current school year;
7. has been expelled in accordance with Section 37.007 during the preceding or current school year;
8. is currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or other conditional release;
9. was previously reported through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) to have dropped out of school;
10. is a student of limited English proficiency, as defined by Section 29.052;
11. is in the custody or care of the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services or has, during the current school year, been referred to the department by a school official, officer of the juvenile court, or law enforcement official;
12. is homeless, as defined by 42 U.S.C. Section 11302, and its subsequent amendments;
13. resided in the preceding school year or resides in the current school year in a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility, substance abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital, halfway house, or foster group home.
14. has been incarcerated or has a parent or guardian who has been incarcerated, within the lifetime of the student, in a penal institution as defined by Section 1.07, Penal Code" (PEIMS Data Standards, 2010).

Because of the specific needs of their students, alternative high schools are a departure

from traditional high schools (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Not only

are they set apart based on the requirements to attend, which are typically at-risk criteria, but

they also incorporate a unique blend of methods to reach a sometimes difficult population. Some of those methods include providing students with small class sizes, good relationships, and the ability to become independent learners (Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018; Long et al., 2018; Szlyk, 2018). Students are taught to distinguish between what they are doing in class and what they are learning (Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018). One way this is done is through mastery-based education programs in which students are expected to learn specific skills, also called competencies, and use various methods to demonstrate that they have mastered the skill (Idaho SDE, n.d.-b). Thus, the emphasis is no longer on completing a task, but instead on showing competency.

Not all alternative schools are voluntary for students to attend. However, those that allow students to choose to attend are typically more effective. (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). Students report alternative schools are adept at providing help when needed (Modesto, 2018). Beyond academic help, they often provide extracurricular help such as childcare, transportation, and social-emotional support (Modesto, 2018; Wisner & Starzee, 2016). Some alternative schools provide an avenue to graduate early by offering flexibility and reduced credit requirements; this can be especially helpful for teen parents who must begin earning a living (Modesto, 2018; Morrissette, 2011; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Szlyk, 2018). Students at alternative high schools have often reported teachers treated them as individuals and seemed to not only care about their education but also about them as people (Modesto, 2018; Morrissette, 2011; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Szlyk, 2018; Wisner & Starzee, 2016). Some students highlight social acceptance as a benefit to the alternative school setting. (Smith & Thomson, 2014).

Various types of schools are referred to as alternative schools. (Bokova, 2017; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017). Private and public schools, including magnet schools, charter schools,

special education schools, and voucher schools are often denoted as alternative education (Bokova, 2017). For the purpose of this study, the following description of alternative schools is used: schools being initially intended to provide students at risk of dropping out with an alternative setting that allows for more elasticity and innovation in educational practices (Caroleo, 2014; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Nowicki, 2020).

This description is based upon research into the efficiency of alternative schools, which shows several common characteristics including flexibility, the opportunity for personalization, and learner-centered approaches (Bokova, 2017; Wisner & Starzee, 2016). Teachers and administrators in alternative schools claim teaching in an alternative school is more effective than in a traditional school (Bokova, 2017). Students who dropped out but then returned have supported that claim (Morrissette, 2018).

When describing their school, alternative students cite several elements of well-being, including a comfortable, caring environment. They further indicate they feel safe physically and emotionally (Morrissette, 2018). Students with previous attendance problems say they like school, and several would rather be at school than at home. Students also cite the flexibility of staff and general structure as encouraging them to continue to strive toward success (Morrissette, 2018; Nowicki, 2020).

Alternative Schools and Overall Well-Being

Worldwide, the need for student well-being in education has been acknowledged. New Zealand and the United Kingdom have both reviewed well-being for secondary schools. England has included it as a part of the National Curriculum but does not require it. Scotland has made it a key responsibility of teachers. Australia includes a form of well-being that they call personal and social capability in their cross-curricular learning plan. Most countries see well-being as

being supportive to their academic curricula (Downes, 2018; Thorburn, 2015).

In the United States, alternative schools address student well-being in part by using a variety of strategies in order to help students learn who were not previously successful in a traditional setting (Flores & Brown, 2019; Nowicki, 2020; Schwab et al., 2016). Student success can be affected by the attitudes of both students and their instructors (Downes, 2018; Flores & Brown, 2019; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). When educators believe students' abilities are limited by outside factors such as apathy, negative characteristics, laziness, and home situations rather than educator responsibility, those beliefs transfer to the students (Barrett, 2021; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). Many educators believe these factors are beyond their control and that they have no responsibility to help students overcome these perceived obstacles. Educator beliefs about the students transfer to students' beliefs about themselves and their peers, creating barriers to success (Barrett, 2021; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). Students not only believe that they are inherently defective but also that their life situation has created an insurmountable obstacle. One student felt that "teachers were openly hostile to him and did not care about whether he was there or not" (Anderson & Baggett, 2020, p. 11). When educators believe that the students have deficits that cannot be overcome, they blame parents and propagate the belief that some students should just be removed from school altogether for the greater good (Anderson & Baggett, 2020; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). Not all educators share this institutionalized deficit thinking. Some educators attempt to challenge common thinking and advocate for a more holistic approach. Unfortunately, educators can still be met with opposition from colleagues in the school and rigid imposition of rules (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018).

Conversely, many students in alternative schools report caring and flexible attitudes from their instructors (Morrissette, 2018). Some of the students may have felt uncomfortable in

traditional schools. They can experience anxiety and feelings of marginalization (Morrissette, 2018). In alternative schools, these feelings are reduced partially through small class sizes and individual attention (Bokova, 2017; Roberson, 2015). Alternative schools offer a perceived place of safety and comfort. Students indicate a feeling of equality as students are not made to feel "less than." This helps to create settings that encourage safety and a sense of value (Barbarin, 2015; Morrissette, 2018).

At-risk students are often in homes experiencing poverty (McDaniel, 2017). This can create a multitude of issues that contribute to lack of academic success. Among these issues are challenges associated with a lack of understanding the social norms found among the middle class. That lack of social competence paired with an increased risk of bullying and/or victimization can lead to reduced achievement (Payne, 2013; Perzigian, 2018; Rubens et al., 2018). In addition, poor health behaviors can also be associated with a lack of social competence, especially in peer-to-peer relationships (Johnson, 2019; Rubens et al., 2018). Poor health behaviors can contribute to poor sleep hygiene leading to daytime sleepiness. Daytime sleepiness can contribute to poor academic achievement, attention problems, and trouble maintaining healthy relationships. Students in poverty are particularly vulnerable to daytime sleepiness, which can further impede academic success (Johnson, 2019; Rubens et al., 2018).

Alternative schools are often uniquely equipped to mitigate students' lack of social competence (Perzigian, 2018). Many teachers in all venues are from middle class families. As such, they may not be sensitive to the discrepancy between socio-economic classes. Alternative school teachers are often aware of students' perceived lack of social competence and allow it to influence their teaching with a focus on building social skills (Payne, 2013; Perzigian, 2018; Roberson, 2015).

Several states have recognized the need for social competence building rather than traditional discipline strategies in supporting student success (Rafa, 2018; Welsh & Little, 2018). By 2016, eight states had passed legislation acknowledging the need for alternatives to punitive discipline. Most of the states involved called on the state departments of education to study various programs, suggested specific intervention programs, or established grants that would allow individual districts to create innovative programs designed as an alternative to traditional punitive discipline in all public schools (Rafa, 2018). Traditional discipline strategies tend to excessively disadvantage minority students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Welsh & Little, 2018). Minority students are referred for discipline issues at a higher rate than their white, middle-class contemporaries even when the infractions were the same (Anyon et al., 2014; Rafa, 2018; Welsh & Little, 2018). As a result, alternative schools, particularly Type II schools (Raywid, 1994) are disproportionately serving minority students (Anderson & Baggett, 2020; Anyon et al., 2014; Perzigian, 2018; Welsh & Little, 2018).

To address issues with traditional discipline practices, several states have specifically named programs such as restorative practices, trauma-informed schools, and positive behavioral supports and interventions (PBIS) as desirable alternatives to punitive justice (Anyon et al., 2014; Darling- Hammond et al., 2021; Rafa, 2018). Colorado, Maryland, and Virginia all passed alternative discipline laws in 2017. Colorado's new law establishes funding for district-led programs which were previously piloted in Denver, Colorado schools (Anyon et al., 2014). Maryland's law creates a commission that is tasked with studying the issue (Rafa, 2018). Virginia has enlisted a particularly proactive approach in requiring the state board of education to establish state guidelines for alternatives to punitive suspensions including PBIS, peer-to-peer intervention, and community service (Rafa, 2018).

Measuring School Success

In looking at the effectiveness of alternative school practices, researchers have turned to interviews and surveys of educators, (Bokova, 2017; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Roberson, 2015) as well as questioning of current students who have returned to school after having previously dropped out (Morrissette, 2018). Overall, educators have determined alternative education programs to be effective, (Roberson, 2015) though they have not believed them to be as academically rigorous as traditional high schools (Piper, 2017). Piper (2017) describes educators' beliefs that alternative school students are not college or career ready and that there is little expectation for them to be. Kennedy and Soutullo (2018) reiterate this fact with their study on deficit thinking in which educator attitudes indicate that they do not believe alternative students are as capable as their traditional contemporaries.

The effectiveness of educational practices in all types of schools is frequently analyzed. For example, the practice of standardized testing is debated as exemplified in the following:

1. Standardized testing has not improved student achievement. After No Child Left behind (NCLB) passed in 2002, the U.S. slipped from 18th in the world in math on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to 31st place in 2009, with a similar drop in science and no change in reading. May 26, 2011, the National Research Council report found no evidence test-based incentive programs are working: "Despite using them for several decades, policymakers and educators do not yet know how to use test-based incentives to generate positive effects on consistently achievement and to improve education."

2. Standardized tests are an unreliable measure of student performance. A 2001 study published by the Brookings Institution found that 50-80% of year-over-year test score

improvements were temporary and "caused by fluctuations that had nothing to do with long-term changes in learning…."

3. Standardized tests are unfair and discriminatory against non-English speakers and students with special needs. English language learners take tests in English before they have mastered the language. Special education students take the same tests as other children, receiving few of the accommodations usually provided to them as part of their Individualized Education Plans (IEP).

As one can see, the purpose of the test versus the outcome is indeed debatable. (Couch et al., 2021, p. 3)

Despite the debate about testing effectiveness, traditionally, school success is measured using testing data from formalized accountability systems (Piper, 2017; Skedsmo & Huber, 2019). Since the inception of No Child Left Behind, testing has not improved student learning (Couch et al., 2021). Studies show when testing is used to measure success, multiple models must be used in order for the results to be appropriate (Schulte et al., 2018). Standardized tests are also delegitimized because they are often biased against both minority and disadvantaged students (Couch et al., 2021; Gagnon & Schneider, 2019; Mould & DeLoach, 2017). "Current measurement and accountability systems largely ignore aspects of student physical, social, and emotional health emphasized by schools" (Gagnon & Schneider, 2019, p.3).

Graduation rates are another traditional measure of school success. Federal law requires the tracking of the four-year cohort graduation rate as a measure of success for all high schools (Davenport, 2016; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). In Idaho, high school success is often measured by the four-year cohort graduation rate (Therien, 2018). The four-year cohort measure is not an accurate measure for alternative high school success, because no matter where students

begin their high school career, the school that is measured by a student's on-time graduation rate is the final school attended (Davenport, 2016; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Therien, 2018). And when students enter the alternative high school, they are already lacking the credits needed to graduate on time (Dawes, 2019; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Therien, 2018). Therefore, alternative schools typically have low cohort graduation rates (Davenport, 2016; Dawes, 2019; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Schwab et al., 2016; Therien, 2018).

An incomplete or inappropriate measure of the effectiveness of alternative schools can affect the future of such schools (Buras, 2011; Therien, 2018). In districts across the country, low performing schools are penalized and in some cases shut down entirely. School closures often affect poor and minority students disproportionately (Buras, 2011).

Prior to 2001, several states had separate measures for alternative high schools (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017). However, with the introduction of NCLB, those measures were abandoned because of the provisions requiring all schools, regardless of demographics or at-risk status, to measure and meet the same criteria (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017). Those stringent requirements have lessened since NCLB was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act which gives some control back to states and local entities (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017). Several states have subsequently established alternative criteria for measuring alternative high schools' success (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017). Most notably, Colorado has established yearly measures based on four criteria. The gauges include academic achievement (which can involve test scores or credit completion rates), academic growth, student engagement, and postsecondary and workforce readiness. North Carolina uses measures based on student persistence (including enrollment continuance, attendance, and punctuality), achievement, and academic growth (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017).

This current study suggests that student well-being should also be included in the criteria used to evaluate alternative schools. A problem, however, is that without a common, accepted definition, there is no consistent way to measure well-being (Cooke, Melchert, & Connor, 2016). Well-being is subjective. Persons in similar circumstances could have vastly different levels of well-being (Diener, 2000). There is no one factor that can be used to measure well-being. Balance between positive and negative emotions is one dimension of well-being (Cooke, et al., 2016; McLellan & Stewart, 2015). Another is the use of one's own subjective measures of happiness, which is defended as legitimate based on the fact that happiness can only be self-determined (Diener, 2000; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Helliwell, 2018; Klitmøller, 2016; Navarro et al., 2017). Indeed, because perception is important in guiding behavior, the perceptions of the students are important in guiding their attitude and well-being (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Reid & Smith, 2018).

Students should define their own subjective well-being (SWB). Since the individual students are most affected by their own life satisfaction and SWB, they should determine how to measure it for themselves. Inasmuch as the self-determined SWB measurements have the ability to help drive public policy, and that public policy has an effect on students' lives, students should have a voice in the research that is creating that policy (Navarro et al., 2017). Student voice is essential since they are the primary consumers of the educational experience. Because SWB is a self-appraisal, not including the students in the discussion is ethically problematic. (Joshi & Dube, 2019; Klitmøller, 2016).

Part of SWB is happiness. The word happiness is used in both gathering evidence and reporting. Researchers use the word happiness rather than social indicators because happiness is a commonly understood word. Participants can easily translate the word happiness into

something they can define in their own lives. Researchers can then use people's own statements about their own lives rather than more objective data when drawing conclusions. Happiness can predict overall life satisfaction (Helliwell, 2018), and it can have an impact on physical health, mental health, job stability, and many other factors (Diener, 2000; Helliwell, 2018; McLellan & Steward, 2015; Reid & Smith, 2018). The phrases well-being, subjective well-being (SWB), life satisfaction, and happiness are used interchangeably in this study (Diener, 2000; Helliwell, 2018; McLellan & Steward, 2015; Reid & Smith, 2018).

Life satisfaction is a measure of success that can be an indicator of overall SWB (DeConing et al., 2019; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013; Ng et al., 2018). High levels of life satisfaction can lead to better health, more meaningful work performance, elevated social relationships, and ethical behavior choices (DeConing et al., 2019).

Conversely, not completing high school can lead to low life satisfaction including hopelessness that comes from the reduced life options (Morrissette, 2018). In one study, students who dropped out of school but later returned to finish at an alternative high school recognized the need for a high school diploma, not only because of the opportunities it afforded them, but also because they recognized the sense of self-worth that can accompany the accomplishment. Students repeatedly spoke about the renewed sense of purpose and the elevated mood that returning to school afforded them. Feelings of pride, happiness, hopefulness, looking toward the future, caring, and the ability to conquer obstacles accompanied their narratives (Morrissette, 2018).

The recognition of the value of finishing high school is supported by the fact that life satisfaction is disproportionally lower among poor and uneducated individuals (Owen & Phillips, 2015). Even when aggregate life satisfaction increases, the increase is significantly smaller for

people who are considered poor and/or uneducated (Owen & Phillips, 2015). Many alternative school students fit this profile, and in fact, alternative school students are more likely to participate in behaviors that increase poor health and engage in physical violence leading to innate lack of well-being (Rubens et al., 2018).

While dropping out of high school takes a toll on the individual and on intergenerational mobility, its impact can also be seen on society as a whole (Flores & Brown, 2019; Levin & Rouse, 2012). Those who do not complete high school have greater health issues which lead to higher public health costs (Flores & Brown, 2019; Levin & Rouse, 2012). They are more likely to receive services from social programs, are more likely to be incarcerated, and are less likely to participate in the democratic process (Flores & Brown, 2019; Levin & Rouse, 2012).

A person's overall well-being can also be adversely affected by unemployment (Helliwell et al., 2012). A simple reduction in unemployment is not enough in itself to increase happiness, but workplace satisfaction also plays a major role (Helliwell et al., 2012). There is also a relationship between wage satisfaction, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction (DeConing et al., 2019). All three are related, though the correlation between wage satisfaction and life satisfaction is more pronounced for higher wage earners than for those in lower level wage categories (DeConing et al., 2019). Some alternative schools acknowledge employment and employability as a measure of success (DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Perzigian, 2018). Some even design their school structure around providing practical job experience (Silver Creek High School, n.d.; Union High School, n.d.).

Conclusion

Subjective well-being (SWB) is a measure that psychologists use to look at various components of mental health. SWB is a comparison of the positive and negative effects in someone's life including positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 2017; Kern et al., 2015; McLellen & Steward, 2015; Moksnes et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2017; Reid & Smith, 2018; Thornburn, 2015). Schools are called to improve overall student well-being (Biesta, 2015; Graham et al., 2015; Klitmøller, 2016).

It is difficult to measure success. The meaning of success is very personal (Helliwell, 2018). Traditional indicators to measure success in schools have been shown to be inadequate for the purpose of this study. Standardized test scores have been shown to be inconsistent and biased against minority students (Mould & DeLoach, 2017; Schulte et al., 2018). Grade point average is not a reliable indicator (Mould & DeLoach, 2017). Because of the nature of alternative schools, the four-year cohort graduation rate is not a legitimate measure of success (Davenport, 2016; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Therien, 2018). Therefore, other measures must be used.

A good indicator of success is overall life satisfaction (DeConing et al., 2019; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013). Life satisfaction is subjective and is best measured by the words of individual respondents (Helliwell, 2018; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013). High school graduation can contribute to overall life satisfaction, and alternative schools are a big part of helping at-risk students graduate from high school (Davenport, 2016; Owen & Phillips, 2015; Morrissette, 2018).

Alternative schools can be structured in many different ways but often fall into three distinct types (Raywid, 1994). The focus of this study is on Type I alternative schools, because Idaho law defines alternative schools as a school of choice (Idaho Code 33-1002, 2021; Raywid,

1994). In looking at the effectiveness of alternative school practices, researchers have turned to interviews and surveys of educators as well as questioning of current students that have returned to school after having previously dropped out (Bokova, 2017; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Morrissette, 2018; Roberson, 2015). Overall, educators have determined alternative education programs to be effective, though they have not believed them to be as academically rigorous as traditional high schools (Piper, 2017; Roberson, 2015).

Studies have been done to measure teachers' and staffs' perceived satisfaction with alternative schooling (Bokova, 2017). In one study, students were interviewed as eighth graders and five years later as adults on their attitudes toward education (Harnischfeger, 2018). However, no studies have been found that specifically measure the well-being of former alternative school students. The current study is designed to fill that gap by measuring the well-being of former alternative school students through use of their own appraisal of life satisfaction. This study would add to alternative educators' understanding of their potential impact on student well-being (Cain & Allan, 2017).

Chapter III

Design and Methodology

Introduction

Overall well-being is important, and schools are attempting to fill in the gaps when it comes to student well-being and mental health (Downes, 2018; Hall, 2019; Hoppel, 2015; Kern et al., 2015; Oyen et al., 2019; Thorburn, 2015). Unfortunately, many schools fall short in their attempts to address student mental health (Oyen et al., 2019). One tool that states use to further the well-being needs of at-risk students is alternative schools. Alternative schools often focus on relationship building, a culture of belonging, and social emotional programs to attempt to improve overall student well-being (Bascia & Maton, 2015; Caroleo, 2014; Dawes, 2019; Hall, 2019; Morrissette, 2018; Rafa, 2018). In order to further look at the effect of Idaho's alternative schools, this study seeks to explore former alternative school students' overall life satisfaction and the impact their alternative schooling may have had on their levels of life satisfaction (Flores & Brown, 2019; Helliwell, 2018; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013; Stasulane, 2017; Tumanishvili, 2017).

Educators and researchers have attempted to determine whether alternative schools are effective by using traditional measures of success (Bokova, 2017; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Morrissette, 2018; Piper, 2017; Roberson, 2015; Therien, 2018). Typical traditional measurements of effectiveness include standardized test scores, graduation rates, and post-secondary "go on" rates (Davenport, 2016; Idaho SDE, n.d.-a; Piper, 2017; Therien, 2018). None of these measures are fully appropriate for alternative schools because they do not measure well-being (Davenport, 2016; DeVelasco & Gonzales, 2017; Therien, 2018). This study strives to add to current research by measuring school success based on post-high

school life satisfaction as a component of overall subjective well-being (Hervás & Vázquez, 2013).

Research Questions

The best judge of how a phenomenon is affecting someone is through self-assessment (Diener, 2000; Hall, 2019; Thorburn, 2015). In order to determine the life satisfaction of former alternative school students in Idaho, two questions are explored. The first concentrates on the outcomes and the second on perceived value. In this study, the research questions explored are:

1. What beliefs do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates have about their current life satisfaction?

2. How do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates perceive their experience at an Idaho alternative high school to have impacted their current life satisfaction?

Research Design

A qualitative approach using personal interviews of participants was appropriate to this study, because the phenomenon was best interpreted by those who experienced it (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Life satisfaction as a component of overall subjective well-being is personal and best measured by the individual (Diener et al., 2017; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013; Thorburn, 2015). Qualitative research can take on various forms including written descriptions, interviews, observations, and allowing the researcher to best interpret what a respondent is thinking rather than guiding them through pre-created answers (Chowdhury, 2015).

Historically, qualitative research was not considered as valid as quantitative because it was not as readily measurable (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). However, it has gained respect in recent years (Williams & Moser, 2019). Qualitative research methods can go beyond looking

into what is happening and help researchers to begin to see some of the reasons why a phenomenon is occurring (Kozleski, 2017). By allowing respondents to evaluate their own life satisfaction, the researcher gained a clearer understanding of the participants' subjective well-being (Helliwell, 2018; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013). Interviews allowed participants to respond using their own interpretations of their experiences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018).

The study utilizes individual recorded interviews with participants (Maxwell, 2021; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; DeLyser & Potter, 2013). Those interview recordings were then transcribed in order to have access to complete information (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; DeLyser & Potter, 2013). The interview protocol was designed to identify common themes pertaining to life satisfaction among respondents. Interviews were used for understanding of individuals' experiences rather than group data gathering. The researcher was mindful of the interviewee's time and, as an ethical consideration, limited the interviews to one hour in length (McGrath et al., 2019). The interviewer was fully prepared before the interview with questions that had been previously tested for validity; the interviewer kept close consideration of the power dynamics of the interview space and built rapport with respondents at the onset of the interviews (McGrath et al., 2019). In the event that the interviewer was unable to meet face to face with a participant, Zoom or another mediated synchronic communication medium was used (Harnischfeger, 2018; Janghorban et al., 2014). The advantages of a mediated synchronic interview include convenience, and all parties feeling comfortable in their own space (Janghorban et al., 2014). The ethical considerations of a mediated synchronic interview are similar to those found in a face-to-face interview (Janghorban et al., 2014).

The validity of the interview protocol was established in order to lessen validity threats, especially that of researcher bias (Maxwell, 2021; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Since the

researcher has a long history of working in or with alternative schools in Idaho, extra caution

was taken in establishing the validity of the interview protocol (Marshall & Rossman, 2016;

DeLyser & Potter, 2013). By incorporating a protocol that avoided students that were known to

the researcher and included member checking along with respondent validation, threats to

validity were reduced (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Harnischfeger, 2018; Maxwell, 2021;

Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Williams & Moser, 2019).

Participants

Participants included former Idaho alternative school students between the ages of 18-40.

Sampling was done by contacting the principals of all current alternative high schools in the state

via email. Schools were identified and email addresses obtained from the public alternative

school contact list on the Idaho State Department of Education website. The principals were

asked to forward an email asking for participants (Appendix A). Social media was also used to

increase sample size and improve diversity of the sample. A message was posted on the

researcher's Facebook page asking friends to pass on a link to the initial survey to anyone they

knew that may fit the requirements for the study (Appendix B). Those who self-identified as

former Idaho alternative school students used the embedded link to fill out an online survey

designed to establish eligibility (Appendix C). Those respondents were then contacted by the

researcher to give informed consent (Appendix D) and schedule an interview.

Participants all attended one of Idaho's 62 alternative schools (Idaho SDE, n.d.-c). As

Idaho limits students attending alternative high schools to those that meet at-risk criteria, all

participants met the Idaho state requirements for being in the at-risk category while they were

attending (IDAPA, 2021). Students must have completed at least one semester at an Idaho

alternative high school in order to be eligible for the study. Though there are some virtual

alternative schools in Idaho, like the Idaho Connects Online Alternative School, only students who actually attended a school building that included interaction with teachers and who were physically in the building (regardless of whether the students used online components while at school) were included in the study.

Data Collection

Six procedural components were used to complete the study. In order to test for reliability and validate the interview protocol, piloting was conducted. The interview protocol was presented to three participants with similar demographics to those in the target study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Maxwell, 2021). Participants in both the test and target study were adults who had previously attended an Idaho alternative school. Participants in the target study were not taught by the researcher; participants in the test validation group were former students of the researcher. Pilot interviews were not transcribed, and data from the pilot study were not used in the results and conclusions of this study. Participants in the pilot group were members tested at the conclusion of the interview.

An initial email (Appendix A) of introduction and request was sent to alternative high schools in the state. The email included an explanation of the study as well as a request to disseminate a link to a Google form questionnaire (Appendix C). This initial survey was created for the sole purpose of identifying appropriate participants. Once participants were identified as eligible for the study, the researcher contacted them directly and the school no longer served as an intermediary. To further diversify and increase the sample, a Facebook post was made to the researcher's page asking those on the page to pass the researcher's contact information on to individuals that may be eligible (Appendix B).

Once the eligible participants were identified, the researcher contacted the participants

directly to obtain informed consent (Appendix D) and set up 60-minute interviews. Because face-to-face interviews were not possible due to COVID-19 considerations, the researcher used a mediated synchronic communication medium to interview participants (Janghorban et al., 2014).

Interview questions (Appendix E) were validated through the use of test participants and member checking. Three individuals identified through the initial request for participants were asked to participate in a pilot interview that was not recorded and not used in the study. These individuals were those who had responded to the initial request but had been former students of the researcher. These individuals were asked the interview questions as though they were participating. Afterwards, they were checked verbally to clarify whether they felt the questions answered the research questions (Appendix F).

The interview protocol was then followed beginning with informed consent to participate including consent to be audio-recorded (Appendix D) (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; DeLyser et al., 2013; Harnischfeger, 2018; Maxwell, 2021). By audio recording the interviews and transcribing them later, the data is more accurate and the interviewer is not preoccupied with note taking (DeLyser & P, 2013). The interview was focused on researching *with* the participants rather than doing research *on* them. The researcher was cognizant of the potential failures of interview experiences, particularly how an interview can be damaged by the use of language that could potentially offend or upset participants (Johanssen, 2016).

Five interviews were initially conducted. Participants were chosen from those who responded to the survey based on qualification (they attended an Idaho alternative high school for a minimum of one semester) and diversity of the population. The researcher attempted to create as much diversity with regards to geographic region as the pool allowed. A common protocol was followed including specific interview questions (Appendix E). The researcher

continued the interview process by adding one participant at a time until saturation, the point in which sufficient data had been collected, was achieved (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Lowe et al., 2018). Saturation is characterized by a lack of new data; at the point of saturation, no new themes emerge, no new coding is possible, and the information repeats itself to a point that the study can be replicated (Fusch & Lawrence, 2015; Lowe et al., 2018).

The interviews were transcribed by a third party whose confidentiality had been agreed upon (Appendix G). Participants were given pseudonyms that were used during analysis. Participants were then member checked. The researcher created an email to participants including themes and patterns that emerged. Participants were asked if they felt their voice was adequately included and if they had anything more to add (Appendix H).

Analytical Methods

Data was analyzed through a combination of categorizing responses and identifying patterns (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Responses were coded, compiled, and analyzed (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Maxwell, 2021; Saldana, 2016; Stuckey, 2015). The researcher began precoding by reading through the transcriptions in order to form a complete picture of the data. At that point, initial coding was used to divide features of text into detailed parts and search for patterns by identifying recurring sequences or combinations of events (Gläser & Laudel, 2013; Stuckey, 2015). Focused coding was used in order to categorize data, making identifying patterns in the research possible (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Saldana, 2016; Stuckey, 2015). Finally, axial coding was used to determine relationships between the categories and to define the strength of each category (Saldana, 2016).

Transcriptions were made as quickly as possible following each interview. They were then coded line by line followed by coding larger events (Harnischfeger, 2018; McGrath et al.,

2019). While being aware that race, gender, and national origin all create complexities and some of these complexities intersect, the researcher was careful to avoid additive thinking when analyzing the transcriptions (Windsong, 2018). Additive analysis explores the concept of seeing a person's race and gender as a score on an oppressed/ privileged continuum; the idea is to avoid this type of thinking and look at respondents as individuals (Windsong, 2018).

Study conclusions were based on the patterns that emerged from the interviews (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Maxwell, 2021). Further attention was given to analysis of how items below the surface can influence those observable events, allowing the researcher to extrapolate some of the deeper reality based on the empirical observation and identifying dominant codes before analyzing the data (Fletcher, 2017).

Limitations

Possible weaknesses within this study could highlight areas for future study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Among these is the possibility that because participants were volunteers, they may have an unknown agenda when answering subjective questions. An additional weakness includes lack of ethnic diversity (Foster et al., 2019).

This study was limited to the Idaho alternative high school community. Idaho's program is uniquely designed to serve at-risk students in an exclusive school choice environment. This system differs from many other states that may require students to attend alternative schools for behavioral or academic reasons. The school choice aspect largely avoids the militarism of many alternative schools nationwide which may be punitive in nature.

A voluntary process was employed in finding participants for the study. Those identified may have been people whose experiences were naturally more positive, which has the potential to skew the results. Additionally, all of the volunteers were female, which further limits the

study. Lastly, the practice of excluding those who are incarcerated from the study could have

exposed a different experience.

Chapter IV

Results

Introduction

Though Idaho alternative schools serve a different population than traditional high schools, their effectiveness is still measured using the same methods as all Idaho high schools. Traditional measures such as test scores and graduation rates are inadequate as they do not consider the challenges faced by at-risk students (Kemp et al., 2014; Therien, 2018; Tumanishvili, 2017). Measuring post high school life satisfaction is one way to address former alternative high school students' overall well-being. Life satisfaction is defined and measured by the individual (Klitmøller, 2016; Navarro et al., 2017). By studying the post high school life satisfaction of former alternative school students, educators and policy makers can have a better understanding of the impact that alternative high school has had on the lives of these adults and potentially use that knowledge to help develop more appropriate measures.

This study explores two questions in order to better understand the overall well-being of former Idaho alternative high school students. The first concentrates on outcomes and the second on perceived value.

1. What beliefs do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates have about their current life satisfaction?

2. How do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates perceive their experience at an Idaho alternative high school to have impacted their current life satisfaction?

This chapter explores the data collected from interviews with five former Idaho alternative high school students. The five contributors had not been former students of the

researcher, but had attended alternative high schools in various regions of the state. The data collection process began with interviews of these five adults. Each signed an informed consent form (see Appendix D) and agreed to the recording of the interview. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted using a synchronous computer mediated platform. Recorded interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes in length and followed a uniform protocol (see Appendix E). Participants were member tested via the protocol established in Appendix E.

Result of Participant Interviews

Humans all have unique life experiences. Though they vary, there are similarities woven throughout (Sikkink, 2019). The five interview participants in this study are no exception. All attended an alternative high school and all are now adults. All five are Caucasian women. Two describe themselves as ethnically Hispanic. The terms Hispanic, Latino, or Latinx are a description of a person's ethnicity rather than race. A person identifying as Hispanic can be White (Caucasian), Black, Native Islander, or have another racial identity (Gimenez, 1989). In this case, they identified their race as Caucasian and their ethnicity as Hispanic.

This study used the experiences of five former Idaho alternative high school students who are now adults. Of the five, all but one graduated from an alternative high school in Idaho. The fifth dropped out of school at the age of 16. Participants ranged in age from 18- 40. Two of the contributors completed college degrees. Of those, one completed a master's degree and an education specialist degree. Two others are currently in college, and the fifth has not completed high school. Of the four that have gone back to college, none completed college in the four years after high school. All four started college, then left due to life circumstances. Participants were given pseudonyms based on the order in which they were interviewed (see Table 3).

Table 3

Study Participants

Name	Age	Alternative High School Attendance	Highest College Level Attained	Race/ Ethnicity	Marital Status	Occupation
Abby	37	1999-2002	Currently enrolled in a BA program	Caucasian	Unmarried	Student
Beth	36	1999-2002	AA and some work toward a BA	Caucasian	Unmarried	Community outreach coordinator
Carol	40	1996-1998	Ed.S	Caucasian/ Hispanic	Married	School district level administrator
Deb	33	2013, 2014	Has not completed	Caucasian/ Hispanic	Married	Operations specialist
Ellen	18	2017-2018	None	Caucasian	Unmarried	Campground manager

Abby is a single mother with a 10-year-old daughter. Expelled from a traditional school, Abby was left with alternative school as her only option for achieving her "uncompromising goal" of completing high school. Currently a full-time student working on a bachelor's degree, she lamented that it was difficult to go back to school at the age of 37 but felt that it was important. Her goals include pursuing a master's degree once she has completed her bachelor's. Abby bemoaned the fact that she had not completed college immediately following graduation, but she appreciated the need for her degree in order to fulfill her career objectives. Even though she and her daughter have everything that they need, as a full-time student and single mother, Abby worries about money and dreams of the day that they will be able to buy a home.

Like Abby, Beth graduated from an Idaho alternative high school in 2002. She is also unmarried, but does not have children. Beth has completed an associate's degree and started work on a bachelor's before deciding it was not the right course of action for her. She mentioned

that finances were a limiting factor on her ability to finish college. Beth grew up in Idaho, but

pointed out that she had always felt like an outsider. Those feelings are still a struggle for her.

Beth chose to move to an alternative school because she did not feel like she fit in at the

traditional high school. She discovered she could complete school in an alternative setting if she

first dropped out of the traditional high school, which she did. Her persistent feelings of

estrangement were mitigated during her time at an alternative high school, but they still haunt her

in adulthood. Beth expressed those feelings of estrangement and the value of her alternative high

school experience when she stated, "I really think I need to find a bigger version of alternative

school, where people are allowed… [to be different]."

Carol is the only one of the five participants of this study to have completed advanced

degrees. She is currently an administrator in an educational setting and has completed both a

master's degree and an education specialist degree. Now married with two children, Carol

experienced early years that were a stark contrast to her current success. Her early high school

education was defined by a constant stream of fights. Prior to attending an alternative high

school, she lived and socialized on the periphery of gang life. Encouraged by her 1998 high

school graduation, she chose to go on to college right out of high school and "bombed." Later,

she tried again and was successful. When asked how her experience in an alternative school may

have influenced how she felt about not completing college in the expected four years after high

school, she stated, "It gave me a totally different outlook on how things should be."

Deb, a 33-year-old married mother of two, originally dropped out of a traditional school

and enrolled at an alternative high school in an effort to graduate early. She graduated in 2014

but struggled with an addiction to methamphetamines, which postponed college. She got clean

when the court allowed her to serve a rider, which required her to fulfil some court requirements

including mandatory counseling and drug cessation measures. The rider allowed her to avoid jail time. She returned to college but has not yet finished. Today Deb finds happiness in her family and her career. She states that her family brings her "joy every single day." Her current frustration is a lack of life/work balance. She enjoys her job, but they are currently understaffed leading to long hours. Deb appreciates that her time at an alternative school taught her there are different ways to accomplish her goals, and success does not always look the same for every person.

At 18 years old, Ellen is the youngest participant in this study. She initially resisted transferring to the alternative high school because she believed that was where the "bad kids" went to school. Throughout her interview, she spoke often of the inaccurate stigma associated with alternative schools. When she got in trouble at her home school and was moved to the alternative high school, she learned that it was nothing like she had believed. Today Ellen is unmarried and has not yet completed her high school education. Though she dropped out of the alternative high school, she is attempting to get a GED. After leaving high school, she temporarily moved to another state to work but has since returned to Idaho. Ellen spoke about her family, her relationship with her boyfriend, her dog, and her work as a campground manager.

When asked to define life satisfaction, all five participants spoke of the enjoyment or contentment of life, indicating they are mainly content with their current life situations. Participants were asked about contributing factors to their current level of life satisfaction. They uniformly specified that family and relationships were positive factors. Other factors that emerged were satisfaction with their careers. Four of the five are employed; the fifth is a full-time student.

Though participants switched to the alternative school setting for a variety of reasons, as

they described the traditional school environments they were leaving behind, there were several commonalities. Universally, they described feelings of not belonging among peers and lack of support from the school. When talking about peers and teachers at the traditional high school, Abby detailed "…previous school I was [at], it was so emotionally rough for me that I didn't get an opportunity to explore my own strengths." Ellen described the pressure of having to "conform to society's norms." Because of extensive gang activity in her area, Carol expressed that she "needed to get away from those people that I was surrounded with."

Throughout the interviews, community attitudes about alternative schools were revealed. During the course of each interview, all five used the exact words "stigma," and "bad kids" to describe community attitudes toward the alternative schools. Participants described events ranging from not wanting to attend to having family members advocate for them to not attend. In Ellen's words, "Well, originally, I wasn't really with the idea of going to an alternative school. Cause I've heard a lot of bad things like, it's just for kids who get bad grades. It's for like the trouble kids, the ones that do drugs and stuff." Though all five participants were aware of the stigma, all eventually relented and were surprised by how different their experience was from what they had expected. As Deb stated, "I actually really, really loved high school there. They, it felt like they were treating me more like an adult."

The former students described the structure of the alternative schools they attended. One school used a "block system" where students would attend the same class all day every day for three weeks to earn a credit. Others allowed students to work at their own pace. Some included computer mitigation. A couple of interviewees talked about having a daycare on site. One school held classes at the regular high school at night using teachers who had already taught all day at the regular high school. The participants discussed the differences in structure between the

traditional and alternative high schools in terms of advantages. Benefits included support for teen

parents, support for students with life challenges, the ability to accelerate and graduate early, and

the flexibility of scheduling. Every participant interviewed spoke of the relationships built with

teachers and between students as positive experiences.

Life satisfaction is a component of overall well-being. Individuals define and assess their

own life satisfaction based on their own interpretations of what it means to them (Helliwell,

2018; Hervás & Vázquez, 2013). In this study, participants were first asked to define life

satisfaction (see Table 4). They were then asked to rate their own life satisfaction. Their

responses were overwhelmingly positive with exceptions occurring in specific realms of their

overall lives. One participant expressed stress over money issues, another over being

understaffed at work, and another over the political climate in the town where she is currently

living.

Table 4

Participants' Definition of Life Satisfaction

Participant	Definition of Life Satisfaction
Abby	I would say that life satisfaction in a broad sense is the ability to enjoy where you're at in your life and to have opportunities to strive to, you know, improve your life conditions.
Beth	I would say probably say something along the lines of like are you content in your life and in how your life has played out for you.
Carol	Being happy with what you're doing in life, and your career, your family. Just being satisfied, I guess.
Deb	Overall enjoyment that you get out of life. Work-home balance. Enjoying what you do. Having good family relationships.
Ellen	To me it basically means how content you are with your life and what you have been doing. And what you are doing to continue to meet your goals.

Overall, participants rated their current life satisfaction as good. Ellen stated "Right now,

I actually really enjoy where I'm at in life. I'm working a pretty good job, I'm satisfied like with

my whole family situation, the people close around me and…honestly, I'd say I'm pretty satisfied with my life." Carol's words echoed those of Ellen "I'm pretty satisfied with where I'm at and what I'm doing. I'm currently…I'm sure someday I will want more and probably go into superintendent. But right now, I'm good where I'm at."

Most then broke their responses down into categories. As expected, family was rated high. The only exception was Beth who only mentioned her parents and only in terms of their political beliefs. Abby's relationship with her 10-year-old daughter is paramount to her life and identity. Relationships within Carol's family are a source of pride. Deb described her relationship with her husband as wonderful and that her children are a "joy." In addition to mentioning her boyfriend, Ellen talked about the positive relationships she has with her parents and her dog.

Workplace, or career, came out as another dominant concept. Abby is going back to school to improve her career and expressed that she is grateful for that opportunity but nervous about her financial situation. When asked about her current life satisfaction, Abby specified:

It's…that's a complicated question. Because I would say if I objectively look at what I'm doing in my life, it's amazing. It's…I feel so grateful to have the opportunity to go back to school. And you know I have secure shelter, and you know, food security and my daughter's doing fine. But I think that underlying all of that is a sense of anxiety about you know…getting to a better place. You know, financially.

When first asked, Beth described her life satisfaction as "not great" but then elaborated further.

Even so, I would still say like I'm satisfied with the person that I am. I'm satisfied with the person that I've become in my life. Like I like what I stand for. I like what I do as far

as like my volunteering. And I like my, you know, my activism. And I like my, you

know, ability to kick ass and take names and get stuff done. Which I think all directly

came from partly that…that decision in high school to be like, you know what, I don't

care if I'm different. I don't care if you stigmatize me. I'm gonna do what's best for me.

And I'm gonna do the right thing. You know. And yeah, I just think that my life

satisfaction as far as like, where I'm at and that kind of thing is less than ideal. But my

satisfaction with who I am as a person is incredibly high. Like, I've never doubted for a

second like my own worth or value because my…my teachers at alternative school

believed in me. My editor at the newspaper believed in me. You know, they…they saw

my potential. And I see it too.

Though Deb loves what she is doing, she is overwhelmed by the current amount of work

she is putting in.

I have a wonderful husband and my children are, you know, going through that crazy

difficult phase but they bring me joy every single day. And I actually really love what I

do. It's just we're so understaffed and we're incredibly busy, so it's just contributing to a

lot of long hours, and that…that's making it difficult right now. But other than that,

overall I can't complain.

To understand the relationship between current life satisfaction and former alternative

school attendance, the researcher asked participants about the factors that they felt were

contributing to their life satisfaction and specifically what impact they believe their alternative

school experience had on their current life satisfaction. The participants felt that these

characteristics of the alternative schools gave them strengths that served them in their lives. They

talked about feeling supported, learning to be more self-confident, and developing a different

outlook. Participants specifically talked about the alternative school's showing them that it was

ok to do things differently from what they believed society expected of them. They further

recognized that not realizing achievements in the order and time expected did not equal failure,

as they had previously believed.

Themes

One way to look at qualitative data is through the analysis of words through the use of

coding (Creswell, 2019). Coding consists of studying the language used within a set of data and

symbolically assigning a word or phrase that captures the essence of the language used. There

are many established coding methods available (Saldaña, 2016). In this study, the researcher

encoded the text of a series of five interviews to establish common themes found within the data

(Creswell, 2019).

The researcher first utilized precoding opportunities to form an initial impression of the

data (Creswell, 2019). The researcher then returned to the data using Initial Coding as a method

to extrapolate meaning. Initial Coding is sometimes referred to as Open Coding. As the name

suggests, Open Coding is not restricted by a specific process but allows the researcher to divide

features of the text into detailed parts. The researcher then used those parts to distinguish

similarities by grouping similar words or phrases together (Creswell, 2019). Qualitative coding

requires the researcher to make analytical judgement calls when establishing groups (Saldaña,

2016). In this case, the researcher chose the following groupings. The words large, displacement,

disrespected, frustration, overwhelmed, mental health, lack of confidence, feelings of failure, and

emotional distraction were grouped together as Group 1. The words parents, family, identity, and

school pride were designated Group 2. Supports, caring teachers, relationships, safety, fairness,

belonging, inclusivity, community, connections, and acceptance constituted Group 3. Group 4

included self-worth, empowerment, gratitude, confidence, buy-in, achievement, perspective, independence, and value. The words of money, structure, flexibility, and meaning did not fit in the groupings and were set aside.

The researcher chose to use Focused Coding as a second cycle coding method to condense the codes found in the first cycle into meaningful categories (Creswell, 2019; Saldaña, 2016). Four distinctive groupings emerged. Group 1was labelled Feelings of Displacement. Group 2 described A Sense of Belonging. Group 3 spoke to an Individual's Identity. Group 4 was labelled Empowerment. One's identity is closely related to whether or not a person feels accepted within a group (Barrett, 2021; Mackey et al., 2021). With further analysis, the researcher chose to collapse Groups 2 and 3 into a single group called A Sense of Belonging. Three themes, then, emerged: Feelings of Displacement, A Sense of Belonging, and Empowerment. Table 5 shows the number of responses for each theme, and Figures 1, 2, and 3 show word clouds for each theme.

Table 5

Number of Responses Per Theme

Number of Responses by Participant Broken Down by Theme						
Participant	Abby	Beth	Carol	Deb	Ellen	TOTAL
Feelings of Displacement	6	27	7	2	4	46
A Sense of Belonging	17	20	5	13	17	72
Empowerment	23	24	12	12	10	81

Figure 1

Feelings of Displacement

Figure 2

A Sense of Belonging

Figure 3

Empowerment

Using the three themes—Feelings of Displacement, A Sense of Belonging, and Empowerment—the researcher employed Axial Coding to explore the interconnectedness of the three categories. Axial Coding allows the researcher to determine the strength of specific categories (Saldaña, 2016). In so doing, the researcher discovered a feeling of belonging is what students reported to have found in an alternative school setting that contributed to their eventual life satisfaction. The strongest category to emerge from the data was that of Empowerment.

Chapter V

Discussion

Introduction

Over the past several years, the school districts have demonstrated an increased reliance on alternative high schools (Duke & Tenuto, 2020). These schools were created and are legislated for the purpose of serving students deemed at risk of dropping out (Duke & Tenuto, 2020; Idaho Code 33-1001, 2021). Students qualify for a variety of reasons but are often students in poverty, those with undiagnosed learning difficulties, students who have had traumatic life experiences, or a combination of factors (Johnson, 2019; McDaniel, 2017; Rubens et al., 2018). The alternative high schools in Idaho employ a variety of methods to help students successfully complete high school. Some of these methods include reduced class sizes, accelerated coursework, and programs that focus heavily on relationship building (Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018; Long et al., 2018; Szlyk, 2018).

Though the alternative high schools in Idaho take a different approach to meeting student needs, they are evaluated on the same criteria as traditional schools in Idaho (Idaho State Department of Education website, n.d.-a) School effectiveness is measured by four-year cohort graduation rates, standardized test scores, and whether or not students go on to college immediately following their senior year. These measures are not appropriate for alternative high schools (Lehr et al., 2003; Mould & DeLoach, 2017; Piper, 2017; Roberson, 2015; Schulte et al., 2018; Therien, 2018).

More appropriate measures could include an assessment for student well-being. In the United States, as mental health issues become more concerning, overall well-being is increasingly important (Graham et al., 2015). Research into well-being at alternative high

schools has been limited and only measures perceptions of students currently enrolled. By interviewing former alternative school students who are now adults, the following questions have been explored.

1. What beliefs do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates have about their current life satisfaction?

2. How do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates perceive their experience at an Idaho alternative high school to have impacted their current life satisfaction?

This chapter analyzes the results of this inquiry and offers implications for further study.

Summary of the Results

This study explored the life satisfaction of former alternative high school students. Because life satisfaction is a subjective term that can mean something very different for every person, an interview protocol was established in which participants were asked to self-assess their current life satisfaction and the effect they personally perceive their former alternative school attendance has had on their current life satisfaction. Participants were identified based on the following criteria:

- A former student at an Idaho alternative high school for at least one semester (regardless of graduation status)

- Over 18 years of age

- Not currently incarcerated

A sample of five former alternative school students was interviewed using a semi-structured query method. Permission to interview and record the participants was obtained both in writing and orally at the start of the interview. Interviewees were all female and between the

ages of 18 and 41. Interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed, and then analyzed using

Open coding in the first cycle to divide features of the text into detailed parts. The researcher

then used Focused Coding to condense the codes into meaningful categories. This revealed three

distinct themes: Feelings of Displacement, A Sense of Belonging, and Empowerment. Using

Axial Coding that focused on the interconnectedness of the established themes, the researcher

observed a progression through the themes. Individuals disengaged from high school largely due

to feelings of displacement. They found a sense of belonging at the alternative schools that led to

empowerment in their adult lives. Thus, Empowerment emerged as the dominant theme.

Discussion of the Themes

Feelings of Displacement

> Students being forced to not only conform and adapt to a society in [*sic*] which wants
>
> them to be something they are not, but also being ignored and having the fear of not
>
> being enough or less than. (Mackey et al., 2021, p.75).

The above quote comes from a 2021 study of urban youth in which researchers asked

students to define displacement within their own school (Mackey et al., 2021). The words found

here closely echo those of the participants in the current study.

To understand how a student's experience in an alternative high school may have

affected their post high school life satisfaction, examining what drove the student to choose to

attend an alternative high school is essential. In this study, Feelings of Displacement stood out as

a central theme for all of those interviewed. Feeling like outsiders led contributors to make

decisions which ultimately steered them to attendance at an alternative high school.

Feelings of displacement include more than just not fitting in. They can produce an

overarching feeling that one simply does not belong which can negatively affect ones' self-

worth. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire world has seen the damage that feelings of displacement can produce (Lafferty et al., 2021). Looking at these effects has only recently begun, but the current studies reinforce previous studies on belonging and displacement. By and large, feelings of isolation take an emotional toll on humans (Diener et al., 2017; Lafferty et al., 2021). Participants in this study indicated feelings of displacement in traditional schools. Abby said that traditional high school was "emotionally rough" for her. She stated she felt she did not have "adequate support" from teachers and from the system. She perceived that teachers in the traditional school were not as invested in her as a student. This response is similar to that found in other studies where students felt that "students would be visibly struggling and there would be no acknowledgement or response from staff or her fellow students" (Barrett, 2021, p. 153). In traditional settings, educators can believe some students are incapable of success. They blame parents and encourage students to be removed from school altogether because they are a drain on educators' time and resources (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018).

In Beth's experience, those feelings of not belonging extended well beyond the walls of the high school. She stated that though she was born and raised in Idaho, she felt disconnected from life in the state. She called herself "one of the weird kids." She felt disconnected from her entire community. She believed that her political views and lack of participation in organized religion played a key factor in her estrangement from peers, teachers, and the community in general. Ellen spoke of "trying to conform to society's normal." She expressed a lot of feelings of being different and frustrated that her differences were something to be ashamed of as opposed to something to celebrate. She focused on the need for people to be accepted. This echoes the literature stating that relationships are an important part of overall well-being (Diener et al., 2017; Reid & Smith, 2018). Carol's experience of living on the fringe of gang life and

feeling like she needed to fight to find her place speaks strongly to feelings of displacement (Diener et al., 2017; Lafferty et al., 2021). "I needed to get away from those people that I was surrounded with." She grew up in a low socio-economic community where people looked out for one another through the structure of gangs. Though she never fully belonged to a gang, her friends and family members did. That meant she had to fight to retain her place. There was a lot of "fronting", pretending and proving she was tough enough to be left alone. Eventually, it was just too much. Carol maintained, "Well, so, there was a lot of gangs… gang activity where I was from, and I wasn't in a gang necessarily, but I hung out with people that were from gangs and like I said, I spent some time fighting and that was kind of a choice because the gangs were still in the school and I needed out of there."

It is difficult for people to feel comfortable in place where they perceive they are not welcome. When they do not feel welcome, it is nearly impossible to work beyond the emotions connected with being an outsider in order to concentrate on any type of achievement (Downes, 2018; Flores & Brown, 2019; Pedler et al., 2021; Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021). The more these feelings grow, the harder it gets to prioritize anything else, making poor mental health central to all thoughts. In addition, adolescents are predisposed to an inward focus, thus magnifying any sense of otherness (Tomova et al., 2021). When those feelings are exacerbated by rejections or exclusions, students disengage further and become at risk (Barrett, 2021; Johnson, 2019; Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021). Beyond being at risk of dropping out of school, students in these types of situations are at increased risk of drug use, sexual promiscuity, behaviors that put them at odds with the law, suicide, and entering into abusive or unhealthy relationships (McNeely & Falci, 2004; Payne, 2013; Perzigian, 2018; Tomova et al., 2021). These effects can be seen in this study as well, as three of the contributors were removed from their previous school because of

behavior problems including fighting, and two participants disclosed frequent drug use including marijuana and methamphetamines. Deb detailed her path into drug addiction.

"That's where I went wrong. Oddly enough it had nothing to do with the people that…well I say oddly enough, but that's kind of stereotypical I guess because I feel like the people who go to alternative schools are stereotypically like the bad kids or whatever. And all of my friends from there were great and it was an old friend from [the traditional] high school that I ran into while I was in…ended up getting addicted to meth and then it was kind of a few years of craziness and I eventually got caught and did a rider. And then after that my life got on track. But yeah, it definitely changed tracks and I didn't do the pre-med thing obviously."

Feelings of displacement can take many forms. In this research, participants consistently referenced feeling like they did not belong during their time at a traditional high school (*n*=46). Contributors indicated political differences between themselves and the community at large. They further cited gang affiliation (or lack thereof), cliques, and teacher expectations to behave a certain way. Participants lamented that they "never felt like I really belonged there" when referencing their traditional high school. Beth stated that she "politically [doesn't] fit in" continuing with "I never fit in." Though she was born in Idaho, her parents were originally from California. They considered themselves politically moderate, but Beth felt that her beliefs and those of her family were far more liberal than the community at large. Complaints from all participants about the life prior to attending an alternative high school included that there was "no built-in social support network," "failing my classes," "too many people, it's too loud, there's too much noise," and they were "miserable all the time." Contributors indicated feelings of hopelessness "because I was just like, you know screw it, like I don't fit in here anyway."

They further indicated that they did not feel comfortable with teachers and peers stating "I'm already stigmatized" and "one of the weird kids." They spoke of "trying to fit in in a place where I don't fit in." One of the participants in this study, Beth, described deep feelings of not belonging that extended well beyond the school.

> Just because like, I've always been the kind of person, like I was just different. I've always been different than the people that I grew up around. Cause I grew up in [a small town] and everybody in [that small town] is like, especially way back then is like related to each other or part of a church or whatever. And my family wasn't related to anyone. [My parents] came here from California back in the 70s and we weren't related to anyone. There were no built-in friends. There was no built-in social support network with a church or whatever. And the majority of the classmates that I was around were all very religious and all related for the most part. And so even though I was born here and grew up here, like I never…never quite fit. And plus, like all of the people I was around were very conservative like very, very conservative. That's not how I was raised. Cause like I said my parents are super middle of the road, like just normal you know, go along to get along sort of people. So, me being just that little bit different definitely made a difference in my life as far as like what I believe. And why? Because when you're different from other people growing up and you don't have the same supports. And you don't have the same indoctrination, I guess from a young age. Like you really start to think about what it is you believe and why. And where that comes from. And where you're getting those messages. When you start that process, it never really stops.

Feelings of displacement are serious and can have repercussions beyond success or failure in a classroom. Humans suffering from displacement face physiological changes that can

alter physical and mental health (Logel et al., 2021; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010; Roupetz et al., 2020). A 2013 study shows that displacement can alter the prefrontal brain through the degradation of dopamine (Hernaus et al., 2013). A reduction in dopamine production can cause severe mental health issues. Students who already struggle with traumatic episodes in their past are further at risk by the compounding of mental health issues.

A Sense of Belonging

As expected, based on previous literature, the effect that the change to an alternative school setting had on students' life satisfaction was the result of the ability of alternative schools to create a sense of belonging (Barrett, 2021; Morrissette, 2018; Roberson, 2018). In contrast to feelings of displacement felt in the comprehensive public high school, participants had a strong sense of belonging in the alternative setting. All participants spoke of strong relationships and feeling respected. Deb described a "different atmosphere" and educators "treating me more like an adult." Schools that nurture quality relationships between teachers and students are more likely to experience positive outcomes (Johnson, 2019; Reid & Smith, 2018; Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021). Deb lauded the "small, close knit type of feel to it" and the lack of cliques. Ellen felt like her alternative high school was a place where she could express herself, a place where she could be authentic. She speaks of it as a "family." Alternative school gave Abby an opportunity to explore her "own strengths." Beth felt that "teachers that I had there really believed in me and wanted me to succeed and made it very clear that they thought that I would." These types of emotional supports allow for student growth and are more likely to promote positive academic outcomes (Barrett, 2021; Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021).

When asked to share a description of the school environment, Abby stated:

Kind of intimate. Because everybody knew each other, we all knew our stories. We all

knew each other's personalities and we spent so much time together because the classes were all day classes. And then, you know, the fact that there weren't enough tables in the lunchroom for everybody to sit down at the same time. So we'd all like, you know, spill out into the hallways and have these very like…I don't know…it was like bonded through scarcity. Kind of. And I feel like people took school more seriously. The kids that were there were like, you know, I'm not here for my friends, I'm not here for, you know, the…the…like silly reasons that high school kids sometimes show up for.

In the text above, Abby is showing how strong that sense of belonging was for not only her but her classmates as well. She demonstrated that because she felt like she was allowed to be herself, was celebrated for being herself, she was able to focus on things that really mattered to her future. Feeling comfortable in an environment is closely associated with a sense of well-being. Students who feel like they belong are more likely to reach out when they need help both emotionally and academically (Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010). Because they are willing to seek help when it is needed, students who are comfortable in their school are more likely to have increased positive outcomes.

The feeling of finally being accepted was strong with every participant (n=72) in this study. Contributors felt like they learned "social ways of being in a group." Participants indicated that the alternative schools "create more support" and that they wanted "to be there with you." Much of the work was "self-directed" with "everybody moving at their own pace." Students were "not being penalized for not understanding the concepts quickly enough." Contributors appreciated the "flexibility" and felt that staff and students "treated each other like a big family." Teachers were largely supportive with statements like "I knew you could do this." Students felt that "teachers that I had there really believed in me" and were "excited and proud of me." Others

commented that "teachers were just really open, communicated well." They "made me want to actually interact more... learn more." It was a "different atmosphere." What participants are describing here is a documented strength of alternative schools. Small class sizes, good relationships, and the ability to become independent learners work together to create a sense of belonging (Jaaskelainen & Deneed, 2018; Long et al., 2018; Modesto, 2018; Szlyk, 2018).

Ellen described the flexible environment found at the alternative high school as contributing to her feelings of belonging.

So, when I was over at (the alternative high school), it was actually really nice. It wasn't the whole like every 30-45 minutes the bell would ring and then you go to a different class. It was very much that you did whatever you could on your own time. It was very lax, and it was easier to get things done because you could do it on your own timeline. Most of the classes that I was taking…they were online, or at least your work was presented online. Which was also nice. Again, cause you could do it on your own time. I really enjoyed my time in [the alternative high school]. I liked how supportive the alternative schools were. All of the other people…they were all very…I don't know, everybody could relate in some way and so everybody got along.

A relationship between belonging and feelings of safety is well established. When a person feels safe, they can more confidently explore their world. They are less afraid to take chances and, as a result, are more likely to eventually succeed. Belonging is also closely correlated with engagement, achievement, and motivation (Barrett, 2021; Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Belonging can take the form of connectedness, acceptance by others, acceptance of self, and personal value.

Having a sense of belonging is important for humans. It is associated with resilience and

is considered a protective factor for physical and mental health. Belonging gives humans a safety net that allows them to confidently explore life (Barrett, 2021; Downes, 2018; Hindley, 2019; Thorburn, 2015). Participants indicated that belonging can lead to a sense of empowerment.

Empowerment

The biggest surprise found in the study was lasting empowerment. Contributors seemed to find their voice and were no longer afraid of what others thought of them. None of the literature suggested empowerment might be an expected result. However, empowerment can be seen as a result of positive life satisfaction and is important in overall well-being. Studies show that overall well-being has an impact on physical and mental health (Diener et al., 2017; Kern et al., 2015; Lau et al., 2018).

Empowerment is a theme which occurs many times in the data and best illustrates the strength of current life satisfaction in the contributors to this study. All five participants show indications of empowerment and a strong sense of self. Abby is "setting out on a new career path" and believes that she has "the capacity to excel." She further speaks of "confidence." She is applying for honors college this semester and wants to "break the stigma" that alternative schools often have. Abby talked about the "sense of confidence" that her alternative high school experience gave her. "I actually learned like, oh I can excel like, it taught me that I have the capacity to excel and that was really gratifying." Beth became student body president and felt confident in her ability to talk with adults and ended up writing for the local newspaper. She likes her "ability to kick ass and take names and get stuff done." Carol's alternative school experience "gave me confidence" and now she has advanced degrees and a determination to further her career "I will want more and probably go into superintendent."

Participants indicated feelings of empowerment (n=81) both explicitly and implicitly.

Participants indicated that they developed an "emotional endurance." They stated that they were "grateful to have the opportunity" and developed feelings that "[they] have the capacity to excel." They further stated that the alternative school experience "gave me a sense of confidence." The need to excel was repeated through phrases such as "I absolutely had to graduate," "this is my goal," and a feeling that their alternative school experience "boosted my confidence." Participants talked of empowering decisions like going back to college after years off, completing advanced degrees and life choices like "moving to New York." The confidence gave participants an appreciation for their own strengths. One participant stated that it "helped me realize I was actually kind of smart."

Part of the reason alternative schools were successful in empowering students was because it let them know that it was acceptable for things to "look" different. School did not have to be completed in four years, and college did not have to happen right out of high school. Not being married right away did not make one a failure. As Carol stated, "It [the alternative school experience] gave me a totally different outlook on how things should be." The lasting effects are "joy every single day" and people who" really love what [they] do."

Conclusions

From the results, three conclusions can be made.

- Students were placed in an alternative setting largely due to feelings of displacement.

- Alternative schools' success lies in providing a sense of belonging.

- The lasting benefit of attending an alternative school is empowerment.

Displacement occurred for a variety of reasons. This study agreed with the literature that struggling students feel disconnected (Barrett, 2021; Flores & Brown, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Williams, 2019). Lack of connectedness causes multiple problems in school including a lack of

motivation, depression, delinquency, and dropping out (Ketover, 2021; Wagle et al., 2021). In the current study, Beth illustrated the feeling of not wanting to continue in her traditional high school when she said, "…you know screw it, like I don't fit in here anyway." This study indicates that the primary barrier for students to be successful in a traditional high school comes from feelings of displacement.

The current research asks, "How do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates perceive their experience at an Idaho alternative high school to have impacted their current life satisfaction?" This question can be answered by looking at what happens once the disconnect is made. Alternative high schools provide a sense of belonging. Belonging can include feelings of acceptance, support, inclusion, and connection to the school community (Wagle et al., 2021). Having a sense of belonging is important for humans. Connectedness makes one feel responsibility toward the community. It encourages effort, which results in better grades and fewer behavior and attendance issues (Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021). In addition, a sense of belonging can strengthen psychological health and overall well-being (Wagle et al., 2021). The literature shows that alternative schools create a sense of belonging through flexible scheduling, programs targeting social-emotional learning, and building relationships (Modesto, 2018; Morrissette, 2011; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Szlyk, 2018). This study agrees with the research that alternative schools can help students feel more connected to the school, their teachers, and each other.

Appropriate relationships are cultivated between educators and learners as well as peer to peer (Barrett, 2021). The current study indicated an average of over 14 references to feelings of belonging from each participant. Ellen described the alternative setting as "a family setting." The data collected here supports the literature by showing a direct link between student belonging

and future life satisfaction. As Carol said about her alternative school experience, "It gave me confidence… It kind of opened my eyes up to different viewpoints and different ways that people live and their struggles and how they are overcoming them." Ellen stated:

So, going to an alternative school, it really brought me out of my shell a little bit more and so I was more able to get into like better jobs, and meet better people rather than trying to conform to society's normal.

One of the questions driving this research is, "What beliefs do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates have about their current life satisfaction?" This question is answered through looking at individual empowerment of the now adult participants.

According to the participants in this study, alternative schools facilitate the transformation from disengaged student to empowered adult. Ellen explained that the alternative high school "was very comfortable, I mean it was very open. You were able to express yourself. You were able to, like everybody else was able to express themselves" and that "all supported each other." Through the present study, it is evident that empowerment seems to grow as students feel validated.

Participants that indicated an average of more than nine references to feelings of displacement prior to their attendance at an alternative high school specified an average of over 16 mentions of empowerment after changing their academic setting. This phenomenon was shared by participants regardless of whether they eventually graduated or not. Even though she did not end up completing high school, one of the participants in this study, Ellen, shared that the alternative school "brought me out of my shell" and that "it was easier to be accepted and so now, it's personally like I don't mind how I am…. It's just made everything a lot easier to accept and be able to move on." An empowered person is able to feel control in their own life. They feel

like they can have a say, influence social decisions, and be respected as humans equal to others (Mahbub, 2021). As Beth, who became student body president at her alternative school, said, the alternative school gave her "opportunities I wouldn't have had otherwise."

Abby pointed out that "teachers who taught there [at the alternative high school] were invested in their students." The impact of those relationships can be seen through the empowerment that every participant indicated they now have as a direct result of their time at an alternative high school. Abby described the result of her teachers' creating an inviting environment as instilling "a sense of confidence" in her. Empowerment is a desired outcome and can be achieved through building a sense of belonging. Therefore, it is appropriate to measure students' sense of belonging when assessing school effectiveness (Bokova, 2017; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Roberson, 2015).

In this study, individuals showed a clear shift from feeling like they had little control over their own lives to making decisions and taking back their power. Empowerment has positive consequences for individuals and for entire societies. Empowered individuals are psychologically and physiologically healthier. A society with an empowered populace has decreased incidences of violence, improved employment rates, an increased standard of living, and better overall social development (Mahbub, 2021).

Alternative high schools are an important part of public education (Bokova, 2017; Hall, 2019). They fill a vital need and do it in a way that is different from most traditional schools. All schools in Idaho are measured based on traditional data such as test scores, graduation rates, and the rate at which students go on to college. Because these are the measures used to determine success, traditional schools are structured in ways that make sense in order to achieve these goals. Alternative schools are by and large not achieving these same standards (Idaho SDE, n.d.-

a; Therien, 2018). This does not mean, however, that they are not a success (Barrett, 2021; Gonzales, 2017; Therien, 2018). This study shows that when using life satisfaction as a measure, it is clear that alternative schools are successful at empowering individuals. Empowerment is created when the disenfranchisement that students feel in the traditional school system is replaced with a sense of belonging. Many alternative schools in Idaho are adept at creating a safe place where students and faculty can interact in a way that forms positive relationships. As Abby described it, "We all knew our stories. We all knew each other's personalities, and we spent so much time together."

Recommendations for Further Research

It will be important to continue to research the impact of alternative high schools on overall well-being. A quantitative study, possibly using the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner et al., 1998), Positive and Negative Activation Schedule (PANAS), or Diener's 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (McLellan & Steward, 2015) would broaden the scope of understanding and further strengthen the discoveries made in this study.

Broader comparisons of traditional school students, alternative school students, and those who have dropped out of school or are currently incarcerated would improve understanding of the role of alternative schools in the fabric of public education. Including those populations in future research may help increase understanding of populations traditionally feeling displaced in public schools.

Because Idaho law classifies alternative high schools as schools of choice, students are given the choice to attend (Idaho State Department of Education website, n.d.-c). In other states, alternative school attendance can be compulsory because of behavior, learning difficulties, or other criteria. Comparison could be made between structures similar to those found in Idaho and

the more discipline focused schools found in other states (Haywid, 1994).

This study concentrated on volunteers for the study and excluded those who are currently incarcerated. A study of the life satisfaction of former alternative school students who are currently incarcerated could potentially show a contrast or further strengthen the findings in this research. Including more racial, ethnic, and gender diversity among the participants would help researchers to gain a clearer overall understanding of the lived experience of former alternative high school students.

Implications for Professional Practice

There is little research dedicated to the study of life satisfaction as it pertains to former alternative school students. Life satisfaction is a component of overall subjective well-being and is becoming increasingly important in academic environments (Barrett, 2021; Biesta, 2015; Graham et al., 2015). In understanding the impact that an alternative school can make on a student's future life satisfaction, educators can better identify students that would potentially benefit most from an alternative high school experience. This study postulates that providing a sense of belonging is one of the key components in the success of an alternative high school. That knowledge can lead to better practices or the strengthening of already existing practices to potentially create improved success.

In traditional high schools, students are often punished by taking away opportunities that connect them to the school. For example, a student who fails math often loses electives in order to make up that credit. A student who does not maintain an acceptable GPA (grade point average) cannot participate in sports. The very thing that has the potential to connect a student to the school community is taken away. The difference between participation and non-participation contributes to belonging or displacement, which ultimately helps determine success or failure in

a school setting (Barrett, 2021). This study suggests that one of the key components of failure to thrive in a traditional school is a lack of connectedness to the school community. This idea could provide the evidence necessary to eliminate or alter alienating practices.

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Appendix A

Initial Email

Subject: NNU Doctoral research study

My name is Maggi Fortner, and I am a doctoral candidate at Northwest Nazarene University in Educational Leadership. I am currently researching the life satisfaction of former alternative high school students. The study consists of a one-hour interview discussion of a participant's current life satisfaction and former experience at an alternative high school. If you attended an alternative high school in Idaho, whether you graduated from there, or not, and are willing to participate in the study, please follow this link to a short 5-minute survey. The purpose of the survey is to determine eligibility for the study. All responses will be kept confidential. If you know of someone else who may be interested in participating in this study, please feel free to forward this information to them as well.

To participate in this study, simply click the link below and fill out the survey. Your consideration of this research study is greatly appreciated!

Most Sincerely,

Maggi Fortner, Ed.S.

Appendix B

Facebook Announcement

Hey friends, as you probably know, I'm working on my doctorate in education. My study is about adults who have previously attended an alternative school in Idaho. If you know anyone who went to an alternative school here in Idaho but didn't have me for a teacher (I can't include people that I already know), can you have them message me or email me at mfortner@nnu.edu? It doesn't matter whether they graduated or not and it doesn't matter how long ago they went. If you can share this message I would really appreciate it.

Appendix C

Initial Survey

Alternative School Survey

Form description

What is your first name?

Short answer text

Do you consent to have the researcher contact you if you qualify for the study?

○ Yes

○ No

What is your email address?

Short answer text

What is your cell phone number?

Short answer text

What is the best way to contact you?

Suggestions: Add all | Email   Phone   Mail

○ email

○ text

○ phone call

What is your current gender?

○ Female

○ Male

○ Other...

In what city do you currently live?

Short answer text

What is the name of the Idaho alternative school you attended?

Short answer text

In what city is your school located?

Short answer text

What years did you attend an Idaho alternative high school?

Short answer text

Appendix D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND
Maggi Fortner, Ed S, in the Department of Graduate Education at Northwest Nazarene University is conducting a research study related to former alternative high schools in Idaho and life satisfaction. We appreciate your involvement in helping us investigate how to better serve and meet the needs of Northwest Nazarene University students.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a former alternative high school student volunteer, over the age of 18.

B. PROCEDURES
If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

1. You will be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form, volunteering to participate in the study.

2. You will be asked to participate in a recorded one-hour interview with the researcher in person, via phone, Zoom, or Facetime.

3. You will answer a set of interview questions and engage in a discussion on life satisfaction. This discussion will be audio taped and is expected to last approximately 60 minutes.

4. You will be asked to reply to an email at the conclusion of the study asking you to confirm the data that was gathered during the research process.

These procedures will be competed at a location mutually decided upon by the participant and principal investigator and will take a total time of about one hour.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS
   1. Some of the discussion questions may make you uncomfortable or upset, but you are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer or to stop participation at any time.

   2. For this research project, the researchers are requesting demographic information. Due to the make-up of Idaho's population, the combined answers to these questions may make an individual person identifiable. The researchers will make every effort to protect your confidentiality. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you may leave them blank.

   3. Confidentiality: Participation in research may involve a loss of privacy; however, your records will be handled as confidentially as possible. No individual identities will be used

in any reports or publications that may result from this study. All data will be kept on the researchers' private password protected computer. In compliance with the Federalwide Assurance Code, data from this study will be kept for three years, after which all data from the study will be destroyed (45 CFR 46.117).

4. Only the primary researcher and the research supervisor will be privy to data from this study. As researchers, both parties are bound to keep data as secure and confidential as possible.

D. BENEFITS
There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information you provide may help educators understand the life satisfaction of adults who have previously attended alternative high schools.

E. PAYMENTS
There are no payments for participating in this study.

F. QUESTIONS
If you have questions or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the investigator. Maggi Fortner can be contacted via email at mfortner@nnu.edu, via telephone at ▇▇▇▇▇▇▇ or by writing: ▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇

Should you feel distressed due to participation in this, you should contact your own health care provider.

G. CONSENT
You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status as a student at Northwest Nazarene University.

I give my consent to participate in this study:

Signature of Study Participant	**Date**

I give my consent for the interview and discussion to be audio taped in this study:

Signature of Study Participant	**Date**

I give my consent for direct quotes to be used in this study:

Signature of Study Participant	**Date**

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	**Date**

THE NORTHWEST NAZARENE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD HAS REVIEWED THIS PROJECT FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH.

Appendix E

Interview Procedures and Questions

Interview Procedures and Questions
- Hi, I'm Maggi Fortner. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me today.
- I have the consent form that you emailed me giving permission for this interview and permission for audio recording the interview.
- Before we begin, I'd like to ask if you have any questions.
- I want to remind you that you do not need to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable.
- Tell me a little about yourself.
- When I use the term life satisfaction, what does that mean to you?
- How would you describe your own life satisfaction right now?
- What things would you say are contributing to that description?
- Can you tell me a little about your experience in an alternative high school?
- How do you feel your alternative high school experience may have affected your current levels of life satisfaction?
- Can you tell me caused you to choose to attend an alternative high school?
- Can you describe the school environment?
- Did you end up graduating from the school?
- Tell me about your life after graduation.
- (At 50 minutes) I'm going to ask a few questions for demographic purposes only, remember that you do not have to answer anything that makes you uncomfortable and that all of your answers are confidential.
  - What is your gender?
  - How old are you?
  - In what year(s) did you attend an Idaho alternative high school?
  - Are you a high school graduate? If not, did you obtain a GED?
  - Have you attended college? If so, what degree(s) have you completed?
  - What would you consider your race and ethnicity?
  - What is your occupation?
  - What is your current yearly income?
- Do you have any questions for me?
- In the next few weeks, I will be sending you a brief summary of our conversation via email. At that time, if you have any questions or comments about the data we've collected today, please let me know.

*Participants are member checked through email. They are given a copy of the transcript of their interview, the data spreadsheet (with no names), and a pdf of the data analysis.

Appendix F

Member Checking for Validity

Do you feel that the following questions prompted you to give a clear picture of your current life satisfaction?

- When I use the term life satisfaction, what does that mean to you?
- How would you describe your own life satisfaction right now?
- What things would you say are contributing to that description?

Do you feel that the following questions prompted you to give a clear picture of the impact your experience in an alternative high school had on your current life satisfaction?

- Can you tell me a little about your experience in an alternative high school?
- How do you feel your alternative high school experience may have affected your current levels of life satisfaction?
- Can you tell me caused you to choose to attend an alternative high school?
- Can you describe the school environment?
- Did you end up graduating from the school?
- Tell me about your life after graduation.

Appendix G

Confidentiality Agreement (Transcriptionist)

I, Barbara Anderson, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audio-recordings and documentations received from researcher, Margaret Fortner, related to her research study titled "Measuring Life Satisfaction of Former Alternative High School Students In Idaho- A Qualitative Study"

Furthermore, I agree:
1. To hold in strictest confidence, the identification of any individual who may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-recorded interviews and any associated documents.
2. To not make copies of any audio-recordings or computerized titles of the transcribed interviews, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher, Margaret Fortner.
3. To store all study-related audio-recordings and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession (i.e., in a password-protected computer, password-protected external drive, or locked file cabinet).
4. To return all audio-recordings and study-related materials to Margaret Fortner in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any back-up devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally responsible for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audio-recordings and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber's Name (printed) _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Transcriber's Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's Name (printed)_____

Researcher's Signature _____Date _____

Appendix H

Member Checking of Transcript and Themes

Email transcript:
Hi,
I wanted to thank you again for your participation in my interview. I am attaching a couple of documents to this email for you. The first is a transcript of our conversation. The second is a spreadsheet of the data that I collected from five of the participants in the study, and the third is my analysis of that data. Please take a look and let me know if you see anything that you believe I have misinterpreted or if you have anything that you would like to add. You will note that for confidentiality reasons I have changed the names on the data analysis and have omitted identifying information in the analysis. Thank you again for all of your help!
Maggi

Attachment:

This study used the experiences of five former Idaho alternative high school students who are now adults. Of the five, four graduated from an alternative high school in Idaho. The fifth, dropped out of school at the age of sixteen. Participants range in age from 18- 40, all are female. Two of the contributors have completed college degrees. Of those, one has completed a Master's degree and an Education Specialist degree. Two others are currently in college and the fifth has not completed high school. Of the four that have gone back to college, none had completed college in the four years after high school. All four started college, then left due to life circumstances, and returned later to finish.

Table H1

Abby	"…the ability to enjoy where you're at in your life and to have opportunities to strive to …improve your life conditions."

Beth	"…content in your life and in how your life has played out for you."
Carol	"Being happy with what you're doing in life, and your career, your family."
Deb	"Overall enjoyment that you get out of life. Work-home balance. Enjoying what you do. Having good family relationships."

Ellen	"…how content you are with your life and what you have been doing…continue to meet your goals."

When asked to define life satisfaction, all five participants spoke of the enjoyment or contentment of life (see Table). All five indicated that they are overall content with their current life satisfaction. Participants were asked about contributing factors to their current level of life satisfaction. They uniformly indicated that family and relationships were positive factors. Other factors that came out were satisfaction with their careers. Four of the five are employed, the fifth is a full time student. One participant indicated that money is currently a stressor in her life and another stated that, though she loves her career, her business is understaffed leading to an unbalance between work and life.

Though participants switched to the alternative school setting for a variety of reasons, as they described the traditional school environments that they were leaving behind common themes were revealed. Universally, they described feelings of not belonging among peers and lack of support from the school (see Table).

Abby	"Previous school…so emotionally rough for me that I didn't get an opportunity to explore my own strengths."

Beth	"…never really felt like I belonged… I never fit in…I was just different… failing my classes…miserable all the time… I don't think I had adequate support…"
Carol	"…gangs…gang activity where I was from… I needed to get away from those people that I was surrounded with."
Deb	"…high school cliques…"
Ellen	"…trying to conform to society's normal…getting in trouble in my former school…"

During the interviews, community attitudes about alternative schools were revealed. All five indicated that there was a stigma associated with alternative schools and that prior to attending, people had indicated that alternative schools were for "bad kids". During the course of the interview, all five used the exact words "stigma", and "bad kids" to describe community attitudes toward the alternative schools. Participants described events ranging from not wanting to attend to having family members advocate for them to not attend. All eventually relented and were surprised by how different their experience was from what they had expected.

The former students described the structure of the alternative schools they attended. One school used a "block system" where students would attend the same class all day every day for three weeks to earn a credit. Others allowed students to work at their own pace or self-directed with or without computer mitigation. A couple of interviewees talked about having a daycare on site. One school held classes at the regular high school at night using teachers from the regular high school. The participants talked about the differences in structure between the traditional and alternative high schools in terms of advantages. Advantages included support for teen parents, support for students with life challenges, the ability to accelerate and graduate early, and the flexibility of scheduling. Every participant interviewed spoke of the relationships built with teachers and between students as a positive experience (see Table).

Abby	"…created more support…less overwhelming…bonds with the people that I went to school with, and my instructors…more capacity to be there with you…"

Beth	"…everybody was moving at their own pace…if you needed to take longer on something like math is my weakness. So, I could take…a couple months longer on math…not be penalized for not understanding concepts quickly enough…", "…the experience that I was having was really supportive and really accepting of people who had various learning disabilities and backgrounds and family issues. And everybody there kind of treated each other like a big family…teachers that I had there really believed in me and wanted me to succeed and made it very, very clear that they thought that I would…"

Carol	"…teachers were just really open, communicated well… knowledgeable about their students and the difficulties they were facing…"
Deb	"…more relaxed…they treat you with a little more responsibility… I didn't wake up in the morning and be like, ugh I have to go to school…it was actually an enjoyable experience…treating me more like an adult…small close-knit type of feel to it…"

Ellen	"I liked how supportive the alternative schools were….everybody could relate in some way and so everybody go along…easier to be accepted…family setting when it came to the classmates and the staff… got along… supported each other…"

Results for Research Question One

1. What beliefs do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates have about their current life satisfaction?

Life satisfaction is a component of overall well-being. Individuals define and assess their own life satisfaction based on their own interpretations of what it means to them. In this study, participants were first asked to define life satisfaction (see Table). They were then asked to rate their own life satisfaction (see Table). Their responses were overwhelmingly positive with exceptions occurring in specific realms of their overall lives. One participant expressed stress over money issues, another over being understaffed at work, and another over the political climate in the town where she is currently living.

Abby	"…if I objectively look at what I'm doing in my life, it's amazing. It's…I feel so grateful to have the opportunity to go back to school. And you know I have secure shelter, and you know, food security and my daughter's doing fine…a sense of anxiety about…getting a better place…financially…cramped space…careful with money…remind myself about how grateful I am for what I do have…"
Beth	"Not great… never felt like I belonged here… I don't politically fit in to this place… I think that has hampered me more than anything. But even so, I would still say like I'm satisfied with the person that I am. I'm satisfied with the person that I've become in my life. I like what I stand for…my life satisfaction"
Carol	"I'm pretty satisfied with where I'm at and what I'm doing. I'm currently…I'm sure someday I will want more…But right now, I'm good where I'm at… my family, and where I'm at in life right now. I have a good family, a good home life…"

Deb	"Like an 8 out of 10. It's pretty good. Right now my work-home balance is a little unbalanced but other than that it's good. It's very good... wonderful husband…my children…joy every single day… really love what I do… It's just we're so understaffed and we're incredibly busy so it's just contributing to a lot of long hours…but other than that overall I can't complain…"
Ellen	"Right now, I actually really enjoy where I'm at in life. I'm working a pretty good job, I'm satisfied like with my whole family situation… pretty satisfied with my life."

Several themes emerged from this data. Participants rated their overall life satisfaction as good. Most participants then broke their responses down into categories. Family was rated high by all participants except Beth who only mentioned her parents in terms of their political beliefs. Abby spoke of her daughter and expressed satisfaction with that relationship. Carol expressed a lot of satisfaction with her family and family situation. Deb described her relationship with her husband as wonderful and that her children were a joy. Ellen talked about her relationship with her parents, her boyfriend, and her dog as overwhelmingly positive. Workplace, or career, came out as another dominate theme. Abby is going back to school to improve her career and expressed that she is grateful for that opportunity. Beth is in the middle of a move and did not mention her career. Carol indicated that she was satisfied with her current career and that she has aspirations to go further in the future. Deb stated that she liked what she is doing though she is overwhelmed by the current amount of work she is putting in. Ellen

commented that her job is good. Only Abby mentioned financial worry, and Beth is unhappy with the political climate where she lives. All seemed to indicate that they are happy with who they are as people.

Results for Research Question Two

The second question considered in this study was designed to establish whether or not there is a relationship between participants' alternative school experience and their current levels of life satisfaction.

2. How do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates perceive their experience at an Idaho alternative high school to have impacted their current life satisfaction?

To understand the relationship between current life satisfaction and former alternative school attendance, the researcher asked participants about the factors that they felt were contributing to their life satisfaction and specifically what impact they believe their alternative school experience had on their current life satisfaction. The participants felt that these characteristics of the alternative schools gave them strengths that served them in their lives. They talked about feeling supported, learning to be more self-confident, and developing a different outlook (see Table).

Abby	"…helped me realize that I was actually kind of smart…learned …I can excel…I have the capacity to excel…and it was really gratifying…"

Beth	"…raised my GPA from like a low D average, to a high B average… it gave me a lot of opportunities I wouldn't have had otherwise…student body president… got to talk to the city council… I ended up writing for the local newspaper…I like my ability to kick ass and take names and get stuff done. Which I think all directly came from partly that…that decision in high school to be like, you know what, I don't care if I'm different. I don't care if you stigmatize me. I'm gonna do what's best for me."
Carol	"…it gave me confidence…It kind of opened my eyes up to different viewpoints, and different ways that people live and their struggles and how they overcome them."
Deb	"…it made me want to actually interact more…and learn more from, not just their curriculum but from their life experiences…"
Ellen	"…brought me out of my shell…get better jobs, and meet better people…just made everything a lot easier to accept…it was easier to be accepted and so now…I like who I am…"

Summary of Results

The data collected in these interviews gives insight into the research questions explored in this study:

1. What beliefs do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates have about their current life satisfaction?

2. How do Idaho alternative high school graduates and non-graduates perceive their experience at an Idaho alternative high school to have impacted their current life satisfaction?

Participants were interviewed regarding their current life satisfaction and their experiences in an Idaho alternative high school. Five participants, all women, between the ages of 18-40 indicated high levels of life satisfaction. All five indicated positive reactions to their time as alternative school students. They further indicated that they saw a positive relationship between their time in alternative school programs and their current life satisfaction. Contributors described feelings of belonging, feelings of independence, and positive relationships with peers and instructors as helping them to develop a more positive sense of self. Participants indicated that increased confidence contributed to their current life satisfaction.