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Professional development in Massachusetts' public alternative schools

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Dissertation

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN MASSACHUSETTS' PUBLIC ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

by

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Saint Augustine wrote, “The higher your structure is to be, the deeper must be its foundation.” I have been blessed throughout my life to have a deep and strong foundation, built by the many teachers in my life.

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In, *You Learn by Living*, Eleanor Roosevelt asserts, "Success must include two things: the development of an individual to his utmost potentiality and a contribution of some kind to one's world" (p. 118); I hope that in some way both my work as a teacher and my work as a doctoral student meet this criteria.
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN MASSACHUSETTS' PUBLIC ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study utilized 102 open-ended questionnaires and 15 semi-structured interviews to examine the professional development offered in 27 Massachusetts public alternative schools by answering the major question: What form do professional development programs take in Massachusetts' public, alternative schools? There were many opportunities for professional learning: topic-driven seminars, mentoring or coaching, and collaborative learning experiences. However, these opportunities were scattered, highly variable in quality, and limited in scope and time. Moreover, they were not owned or embraced by teachers or administrators and focused primarily on students' social emotional needs and behaviors rather than on instructional matters. Few administrators or teachers elaborated in depth about goals for professional development programs at their schools, suggesting that goals were not clearly formulated and articulated in their programs. Without clearly defined goals, the programs could not implement a coherent and focused approach to improving instruction and the effects of professional development could not be measured. More than half of administrators and teachers perceived themselves as prepared for working in alternative schools because of
prior experience working with at-risk students and a belief that they had found their niche. Reliance on experience and trait-based theories of competency could explain the lack of engagement with issues of curriculum and instruction and the lack of movement toward a cohesive, data-driven professional development program. Lastly, when compared to the characteristics of high-quality professional development programs as defined by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC, now Learning Forward), the programs described by administrators and teachers were infrequent, scattered, not led by the principal or teachers, not guided by data analysis or clear goals, and not assessed for effectiveness. What was stressed was experience and dialogue about students, not instructional matters—an imbalance that hinders teacher development, instructional improvement, and student achievement. When alternative programs begin to own their own professional development, leverage the inherent strengths in their communities, and depersonalize practice, then they will begin to improve their instruction, and offer professional development that is coherent, data-driven, and goal oriented.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

And each one [success] began, I noticed, remarkably simply: with a readiness to recognize problems and a determination to remedy them. Arriving at meaningful solutions is an inevitably slow and difficult process. Nonetheless, what I saw was: better is possible. It does not take genius. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity. And above all, it takes a willingness to try. (Gawande, 2007, p. 246)

Introduction

Kohl (1994) asserts that educators must “repudiate all categories and assume responsibility for changing their practice until it works for the children they have previously been unable to serve” (p. 152). One such way of heeding this directive has been through the creation of public alternative schools and providing options to traditional schools. Although alternatives to public education have existed since the inception of public education in the United States, it is within the last forty years that they have become more prominent on the educational horizon due to increasing dropout rates, the movement to restructure comprehensive schools into smaller learning communities, rising illiteracy rates, and the increased focus on meeting the diverse needs of all learners within the educational system of the United States (Aron, 2003; Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Young, 1990). Today’s public alternative schools are designed to provide choice for students and families; promote equity; supply educational opportunities distinguished by a difference in curriculum, beliefs, and
purpose; combat the dropout rate; serve populations for whom school is not working; seek innovative and creative ways of educating; and, decrease harmful competition among students (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006; Young, 1990).

Due to the multitude of purposes they are supposed to serve, most research on public alternative schools focuses on classifying, characterizing, or defining alternative schools; and, there is limited research concerning the effectiveness of alternative schools (Aron, 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Tissington, 2006; Tobin & Sprague, 2000) or, examining their practices. Although more than 20,000 public alternative schools are now operating (Lange & Sletten, 2002), according to Kleiner, Porch, and Farris (2002) “it is evident that many districts were falling short with respect to available capacity and the ability to enroll new students in their alternative schools and programs for at-risk students” (p. 15). As the number of public alternative schools continues to grow due to “zero-tolerance policies, changes in the Individuals with Disabilities Act, increase in youth violence and school failure, and knowledge of the developmental trajectories leading to antisocial behavior” (Tobin & Sprague, 2000, p. 1), it will become essential to have more data about the schools charged with educating these students. This study of professional development in Massachusetts’ public alternative schools adds to the growing body of research on public alternative schools.

**Problem Statement**

Dewey (1899/1974) asserts that “what the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our
schools is too narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy” (p. 295). It is a democratic belief that education empowers individuals, enabling them to overcome social and economic inequalities and to become educated citizens who can adequately govern themselves. However, Rose (1995) suggests

We have a tendency in American education to classify our students in ways that have significant consequences for how they’re taught and what they’ll learn. We believe that students who are deemed “bright” or “gifted” must be challenged and stimulated, pushed to the limits of their capacity—and we define that capacity generously… The sad thing is that we do not think as rigorously, as creatively, with the same generosity of intellect about the rest. And this defect in imagination easily plays off an antidemocratic strain in the American character, a desire to keep the really good things—in this case, superior education—for the few. An issue of instructional delivery takes a quick and ugly shift to the politics of privilege. (p. 191)

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (United States Department of Education, 2001) counters what Rose (1995) terms the “defect in imagination” and draws upon both the moral imperative for education equality as well as the unwavering belief that an educated citizenry is integral to a democracy: “The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (p. 15). The writers of the legislation claim

This purpose can be accomplished by—
(1) ensuring that high-quality academic assessments, accountability systems, teacher preparation and training, curriculum, and instructional materials are aligned with challenging State academic standards so that students, teachers, parents, and administrators can measure progress against common expecta- tions for student academic achievement;

(2) meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in our Nation’s highest-poverty schools, limited English proficient children, migratory children, children with disabilities, Indian children, neglected or delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance;

(3) closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers;

(4) holding schools, local educational agencies, and States accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students, and identifying and turning around low-performing schools that have failed to provide a high-quality education to their students, while providing alternatives to students in such schools to enable the students to receive a high-quality education;

(10) significantly elevating the quality of instruction by providing staff in participating schools with substantial opportunities for professional development.

(United States Department of Education, 2001, pp. 15-16)

NCLB not only demands that all children have access to a high-quality education but also outlines the methods for obtaining it: assessment, accountability, superior instruction, and
professional development (United States Department of Education, 2001). However, rather than inspiring creativity, these mandates launched an era of reform focused narrowly on structural change that had been percolating in the educational world since the 1980s, when research and scholarship began to focus on how schools could be more effective at improving student achievement for all students. Structural change, until recently, was the panacea of the reform movement supported by the “[belief] that changing the way schools [were] organized [would] cause teachers to teach differently; hence students [would] learn differently, and the overall performance of schools [would] increase” (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996, p. 1). Elmore, Peterson, and McCarthey (1996) argue

School reformers persist in making structural reforms because they believe that the way schools are organized exerts a potent influence—or a potent constraint—on how teachers teach. We find little evidence in our schools of such a connection, but we do think it is possible that structural change operating in tandem with other kinds of change might have the effect reformers hope for. (p. xi)

Darling-Hammond (1997) concurs, contending that “bureaucratic solutions to problems of practice will always fail because effective teaching is not routine, students are not passive, and questions of practice are not simple, predictable, or standardized” (p. 67). As such, current literature on school reform has moved away from relying merely on structural changes to improve student achievement and has begun to focus more on how to effect actual changes in teaching practice, acknowledging and affirming that “the
transformation of teaching practice is fundamentally a problem of enhancing individual knowledge and skill, not a problem of organizational structure" (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996, p. 240).

Public alternative schools, at their best, embody Dewey's and NCLB's quest for equal access to rigorous education; at their worst, they personify Rose's (1995) "politics of privilege" (p. 191), where students who lack wealth, opportunities, or access are categorized, labeled, and denied the challenging education that they deserve as they are isolated from their more privileged or able peers. As the number of public alternative schools in the United States continues to grow and the body of research on alternative schools continues to grow, "There is an increased need and demand for alternative schools to be held accountable for student progress and improved outcomes" (Swarts, 2004, p. 1). To meet these demands and to promote student progress, it is necessary to move beyond "'trait theories' of competence in instructional practice and leadership" (Elmore, 2004, p. 49), which, though useful, neglect the full picture. Elmore (2004) argues that "improvement is more a function of learning to do the right things in the setting where you work than it is of what you know when you start to do the work" (p. 73). What Elmore rightly highlights is the importance of developing the capacity of teachers to be successful in the environments in which they teach. For Elmore, this means that the "Principle of Reciprocity" is paramount—"for each unit of performance I demand of you, I have an equal and reciprocal responsibility to provide you with a unit of capacity to produce that performance, if you do not already have that capacity" (pp. 244-245).
Given the diverse needs of the students in alternative schools and the wide scope of demands placed upon the teachers in these schools it is important to begin to focus research on how to support the teachers who work in these schools. Supporting this stance, the Bureau of Legislative Research in Arkansas (2006) recommends that “teachers should have specialized education to identify and address the different mixes of multiple problems” (p. 17) that are present in alternative schools. Their survey of state commissioners or superintendents of education found that

Almost every administrator interviewed stated that teachers need more prolonged and intense education in how to address the multiplicity of problems presented by ALE [alternative learning environment] students. Teachers must understand students with emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and familial problems to be able to fully reach them in teaching .... Administrators believe that there needs to be a supervised clinical internship, for example, in an alternative learning setting, where prospective teachers can apply knowledge and practice skills before being confronted with a group of students who have multiple problems. (pp. 34-37)

Gregory (1998) found that

in reading hundreds of pages of material on child development, at-risk youth, alternative programs, etc., the issue of teacher training in Alternative Education was rarely broached. Although the need for alternative teachers has increased and in all probability will continue to do so, no formal move has been made to adequately train potential teachers at any level. (p. 31)
This research was designed to add to the growing knowledge regarding alternative public schools through an examination of the professional development that is necessary to aid teachers in meeting the diverse needs of alternative school students.

Research Questions

The proposed research will seek to contribute to the growing body of knowledge regarding public alternative schools by examining the professional development offered in Massachusetts' public alternative schools. The research will be guided by the overarching question: What form do professional development programs take in Massachusetts' public, alternative schools?

Four sub-questions will be used to help provide a comprehensive answer:

1. What opportunities for professional learning currently exist?
2. What are the goals of the professional development programs?
3. What perspectives do teachers and principals or directors hold that may influence professional development?
4. How do these professional development programs compare with the characteristics of high-quality professional development programs as described by the research and by the standards of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC, now called Learning Forward)?
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

With the introduction of the Common Core State Standards, educators in 46 states and the District of Columbia are now being called to transform their professional practice further to ensure that all students—not just some—master content and are able to apply knowledge that will prepare them for success beyond high school in college or careers. School leaders—principals, school leadership teams, and teacher leaders—face new challenges of finding and reallocating resources, introducing changes in curriculum and instruction, and ensuring professional learning needed to implement the Common Core. (MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2013)

Students across the country are disengaging and dropping out of school at alarming rates; Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) report:

Each year, almost one third of all public high school students—and nearly one half of all blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans—fail to graduate from public high school with their class. Many of these students abandon school with less than two years to complete their high school education. (p. i)

Recently, public alternative schools have garnered attention as the solution for a population of students who have not been successfully served by the traditional classroom, including but not limited to the following:
• “Students who were previously turned off, non-cooperative, truant, or otherwise problematic” (Raywid, 1983, p. 192);
• Students who have dropped out, have disabilities, or have high risk health behaviors (Lange & Sletten, 2002);
• Women/girls, pregnant/parenting teens, suspended/expelled students, recovered dropouts, delinquent teens, low-achievers, and all at-risk youth (Aron, 2003, p. 8);
• Students who have fallen “off track,” are transitioning to adulthood early, are older and returning to earn credits, and who require substantial remediation (Aron, 2003, p. 14).

The complex evolution, lack of a comprehensive definition, and relative newness of the contemporary alternative school movement have impeded the growth of research in this area. In its infancy this body of research has focused primarily on creating an all-encompassing definition of what it means to be an alternative school (Aron, 2003; Deal & Nolan, 1978; Lehr, Moreau, Lange, & Lanners, 2004) and on evaluating the effectiveness of individual programs. Although a comprehensive definition is a start, it is not nearly enough; further research on alternative schools is imperative if the alternative school movement is going to continue to grow, evolve, and meet the needs of at-risk students. Current areas of scholarship include: examinations of the students who are served, lists of defining characteristics of the schools, descriptions of the settings, explanations of how the programs are structured and administered, and records of what courses are offered (Aron, 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Tissington, 2006; Tobin &
Because these schools serve a population of students who struggle to be academically successful, it is even more imperative that the teachers who staff these schools are prepared and effective. This study attempted to add to the research base about professional development in alternative schools to aid these schools in fulfilling their charge. Due to gaps in the literature on alternative schools, this review will draw from the current scholarship on at-risk, urban, and poor students—populations that are similar to the student body found in alternative schools—when the research on alternative schools is missing. This chapter will provide a comprehensive review of alternative schools, urban and at-risk teachers, alternative school teachers, and professional development to provide a theoretical framework for examining the data from this study.

**Alternative Schools**

**History.** Alternative schools, public and private, have existed since colonial times, when they were simply an alternative or an option to children being schooled at home (Aron, 2003). Alternative schools as we now know them emerged in the 1960s and have been evolving ever since (Aron, 2003). In the 1950s with the launch of Sputnik and the Cold War, high school had come to be driven by national interest and focused intently on subjects, such as science and math, which would propel the United States ahead in the race for space (Young, 1990). As a result, students were tested and tracked into four paths: college preparation, business, vocational, and general education. Competition increased and large, comprehensive high schools were formed to accommodate all of the
tracks, which ultimately emphasized social class distinctions leading to the alienation of the population of at-risk students (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). As educators reacted to the problems of these students in the 1960s, equity became the focus of educational reformers. Scholars such as Kozol, Kohl, and Hentoff sounded cries of racism and inequity in the schools (Young, 1990) against the backdrop of the launching of the War on Poverty (1960) and the realization of Brown v. Board of Education (1954).

Throughout the last four decades, alternative schools have been established for a multitude of reasons, ranging from provisions for parental choice, respect for students, innovation, and a desire to place the child at the center of the educational experience. Hoping to offer choice, reconnection, and equity, the public school system took its cue from the Freedom Schools and Free Schools and in the late 1960s offered an alternative to traditional schooling, the Open Schools (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Open Schools were characterized by choice, autonomy in pace of learning, respect, and a focus on children. From the Open Schools grew a multitude of other alternatives including, Schools within Schools, Schools without Walls, Multicultural Schools, Continuation Schools, Learning Centers, Fundamentalist Schools, and Magnet Schools (Lange & Sletten, 2002). It was with this variety and choice that the public schools sought to remedy the problems of equity that were prevalent. Lange and Sletten (2002) note that this trend continued into the seventies as the National Commission on Reform of Secondary Education (1973) and the National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education (1976) both called for alternative education at the high school level to meet the needs of all students, to provide a variety of learning experiences, and to attempt to reconnect with students who were
alienated from school.

According to Young (1990), during the 1980s the focus of public alternative schools shifted away from equity, choice, and reconnection to remediation. Underlying this shift was *A Nation at Risk* (1983), which condemned low test scores and increasing dropout and illiteracy rates and called for higher standards and stricter graduation requirements as the remedy. This gave birth to an era of school reform in which public alternative schools were perceived as an avenue for providing the remediation that would enable students to meet these new, stricter requirements. Alternative schools continued to grow in number in the 1970s and 1980s to approximately 10,000 schools serving almost 3 million students (Aron, 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Young, 1990).

Also bolstering the public alternative school movement were books such as Boyer's (1983) *High School*, Goodlad's (1984) *A Place Called School*, Sizer's (1984) *Horace's Compromise*, and Powell, Cohen, and Farrar's (1985) *The Shopping Mall High School*, all of which decried the modern, comprehensive high school and called for smaller schools that would meet all students' needs, decrease harmful competition, and provide equity (Young, 1990). The movement continued to gain momentum throughout the 1990s, augmented by the restructuring of comprehensive schools into smaller learning communities, doubling to current estimates of approximately 20,000 alternative programs (Lange & Sletten, 2002). The political climate of the 1990s and the passage of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation in 2001 continued to intensify the country's focus on meeting standards. As a result, alternative schools shifted their emphasis from the original intentions of equity, choice, and reconnection to a new search for a treatment for
disruptive, expelled, and at-risk students (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006). And it is with disruptive, expelled, and at-risk students, as well as dropouts, that the current focus resides.

**Definitions.** It is precisely because alternative schools attempt to support such a wide variety of students and purposes that even formulating a definition of an alternative school proves difficult. In general, alternative schools are defined by whom they serve, where they operate, what programs they offer, and how they are structured or administered (Aron, 2003). The complicated evolution of public alternative schools combined with the multitude of purposes they serve makes formulating an exact definition a challenge. Aron (2003) maintains that

there is no commonly-accepted, or commonly-understood, definition of what constitutes “alternative education.” In part this reflects the newness of the field (at least as an area that is attracting widespread and mainstream interest), the variety of environments and contexts in which alternative education programming has evolved, and the many sub-groups of vulnerable youth who might benefit from some type of alternative education, broadly defined. (pp. 3-4)

Deal and Nolan (1978) suggest that “the puzzle [of defining an alternative school] is shrouded by the diversity of alternatives and the lack of unifying conceptual schemes to assist in classification” (p. 33). Numerous sources offer a variety of definitions ranging from anything that “fall[s] outside the traditional K-12 school system” (Aron, 2003, p. 2) to “alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or a program. It is based upon a belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of
environments and structures within which this may occur” (Morely, 1991, p. 6). Raywid (1994) presents the most comprehensive and all-inclusive definition:

Two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start: they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and consequently they have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs, and environments. (p. 26)

Advocating for a clearer typology or definition, Aron (2003) suggests that alternative schools can be classified or defined according to four integrated aspects: who is served, where the program takes place, what programs are offered, and how the program is structured and administered.

Due to the complexity of defining public alternative schools this study will utilize the definition constructed by the Massachusetts Department of Education (2007):

Alternative Education is defined as an initiative within a public school district, charter school, or educational collaborative established to serve at-risk students whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting.

For the purposes of this definition, Alternative Education does not include private schools, home schooling, General Educational Development (GED) services, or gifted and talented programs. Alternative Education may serve some students with disabilities but is not designed exclusively for students with disabilities....
Students enrolled in Alternative Education programs or schools shall be taught to the same academic standards established for all students in the Commonwealth. Alternative Education programs or schools shall employ highly qualified teachers as defined by the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. At the secondary level, Alternative Education programs or schools shall not limit student access to the opportunity to earn a high school diploma.

Students who may benefit from an Alternative Education include those who are pregnant/parenting, truant, suspended or expelled, returned dropouts, delinquent, or students who are not meeting local promotional requirements.

(Definition)

Characteristics. A plethora of lists of characteristics seem to shape—and perhaps further define—alternative schools. Young (1990) suggests the following characteristics of alternative schools:

1. Public schools of choice typically demonstrate a willingness to innovate and experiment. They are frequently on the cutting edge of educational issues and change.

2. They are close to their customers (students), attending to a variety of academic and nonacademic needs through a concern for the whole student.

3. Their smallness allows greater program autonomy and decision making than is the case in most conventional schools.

4. Treating students with respect, emphasizing group cooperation rather than individual competition, and rewarding appropriately are the hallmarks of
public schools of choice. Student success is not dependent on the failure of others.

5. The smallness of schools of choice facilitates a common set of shared values and goals among students and staff. These schools stand for something.

6. By not being all things to all people, schools of choice can specialize in and concentrate on what they do well. The student clientele served and curriculum offered are frequently limited, allowing the school to focus on the most important and immediate needs of students.

7. Small is beautiful, and most public schools of choice are typically small. They operate with a simple organization and lean staff (sometimes too lean).

8. Finally, although they operate within the guidelines of the central administration, they are able to exercise some individual autonomy. Sometimes that autonomy is the result of neglect by the central administration. More often, however, it is the recognition of expertise and effectiveness. (p. 51)

Raywid (1994) adds the following distinguishing characteristics:

1. They were small.

2. Both the program and organization were designed by those who were going to operate them.

3. They took their character, theme, or emphasis from the strengths and interests of the teachers who conceived them.
4. Their teachers all chose the program, with subsequent teachers selected with the input of present staff.
5. Their students and families chose the program.
6. A teacher-director administered each program.
7. Their small size denied them much auxiliary or specialized staff, such as librarians, counselors, or deans.
8. All the early programs were housed as mini-schools in buildings that were dominated by larger programs.
9. The superintendent sustained the autonomy and protected the integrity of the mini-schools.
10. All of the programs were relatively free from district interference, and the administration also buffered them from demands of central school officials.
11. The continuity in leadership has been considerable. (pp. 28-29)

Lange and Sletten (2002) contribute the following elements:

1. Clearly identified goals to inform both evaluation and enrollment (Gregg, 1999);
2. Wholehearted implementation without a piecemeal approach to structuring programs (Raywid, 1993);
3. Autonomy (Gregg, 1999);
4. Student-centered atmosphere (Frymier, 1987);
5. Integration of research and practice in areas such as assessment, curriculum, teacher competencies, and integration of special education services (Geurin & Denti, 1999);

6. Training and support for teachers who work with at-risk populations with or without disabilities (Ashcroft, 1999; Krovetz, 1999); and

7. Links to multiple agencies, an element that may become increasingly important as alternatives are required to serve students with special education needs (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998; Leone & Drakeford, 1999). (p. 9)

The lists presented here constitute a broad sample of the most common descriptions of the characteristics of alternative schools. The length and variety of the lists demonstrates the problems of attempting to define an alternative school.

**Teachers of Urban and At-Risk Students**

Because information is limited regarding alternative school teachers, a parallel can be drawn to urban or low-income schools who struggle with similar populations and problems as alternative schools.

**Demographics.** One important issue is based upon the fact that many teachers in urban and low-income schools are not of the same ethnic group or social class as their students, which could result in a lack of understanding. Tatum (2003) reports that "educators all across the country, most of whom are White, are teaching in racially mixed classrooms, daily observing identity development in process, and are without an important interpretive framework to help them understand what is happening in their
interactions with students” (p. xv). This statement is supported by data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2007) from the 2003-2004 school year:

Among public school teachers, 83 percent were non-Hispanic White, 8 percent were non-Hispanic Black, 6 percent were Hispanic, about 1 percent were non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native, about 1 percent were non-Hispanic Asian, and less than 1 percent were non-Hispanic Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. (p. 4)

It is also important to note that “during the 1999-2000 school year, 38% of public schools had not a single teacher of color” (Toppo, 2003, p. 2).

Another problem is that schools that serve at-risk populations are less likely to attract and keep qualified and experienced teachers. Dwyer (2007) argues:

Low-income and minority students in at-risk and hard-to-staff schools consistently are far more likely to have teachers with less experience or more marginal qualifications.... Furthermore, in most states and districts, the subject areas of mathematics, science, and special education suffer from consistent teacher shortages and high teacher turnover, thus perpetuating the presence of less effective teachers in these classrooms. (p. 71)

Though this may certainly be true, this perspective rests on the assumption that effective teaching can be measured by certification, experience, or educational attainment.

**Attributes of effectiveness.** Some of the characteristics of good teaching are particularly crucial for teachers of urban and at-risk students. Important characteristics of teachers who work with at-risk students in urban districts include:
• Knowledge of the community and the students’ cultures (Ilmer et al, 1997; Sachs, 2004);
• Compassion, diligence, and integrity (Ilmer et al, 1997);
• Open-mindedness and patience (Ilmer et al, 1997);
• Abilities to create a supportive environment and respond appropriately to disruptions (Grant, Strong, & Popp, 2008);
• Outlook that views academic and affective needs equally (Grant, Strong, & Popp, 2008);
• Belief that student relationships are paramount (Grant, Strong, & Popp, 2008; Loflin, 2000);
• Contextual interpersonal skills; self-understanding; a willingness to take risks; and perceived efficacy (Sachs, 2004).

One of the most significant findings is that effective teachers possess and seek more knowledge about their students and their backgrounds. Rockwell (2007) contends, “Ineffective teachers blame the students, their parents, and demographic factors for students’ failure. Research supports the powerful potential that low-achieving students exhibit under the tutelage of masterful instructors” (p. 9). According to Rockwell (2007), in order to determine what instructional strategies work best for at-risk students, it is first necessary to consider the following common characteristics of at-risk learners:

• Lack of sufficient knowledge of their own needs as learners (Billingsley & Wildman, 1990; Palinscar et al., 1991);
• Have limited understanding of task demands (Billingsley & Wildman, 1990; Palinsear et al., 1991);
• Exhibit difficulty knowing how, when, and why to implement strategies (Billingsley & Wildman, 1990);
• Often are unable to identify the resources needed to complete a task (Billingsley & Wildman, 1990; Malone & Mastropieri, 1992; Schunk & Rice, 1992);
• Require explicit instruction in skills, concept development, and generalization of content from one task or subject to another (Chan, Cole, & Barlett, 1987; Ritgnab & Crissm 1990; Schunk & Rice, 1992; Simmonds, 1990);
• Frequently display insufficient background experience in some subjects to make effective links between prior knowledge and new content (Weisberg, 1988);
• Benefit from training in self-monitoring (Malone & Mastropieri, 1992; Schunk & Rice 1992);
• Often attempt to avoid feelings of failure by blaming others or conditions beyond their control, withdrawing, procrastinating, selectively forgetting assignments, cheating, or lowering expectations of self (Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991);
• Tend to generalize failure in one area to all areas (Johnston & Winograd, 1985; Paris et al., 1992); and
• Benefit from attribution training and tend to make fewer academic gains (even when instruction is of high quality) without attention to their beliefs about themselves as learners (Schunk & Rice, 1992). (pp. 9-10)

In order for teachers to meet the wide range of needs posed by at-risk students, a variety of instructional methods are needed.

Students who are at-risk need instruction that is effective and challenging and can reach them in a different way than traditional methods do. Research suggests that the following methods, although not a comprehensive list, are effective for at-risk youth:

• “Facilitation of connections between prior knowledge and new content (Kameenui & Carnine, 1998; Coyne et al., 2007); assisting students in powering up by making personal connections with the content itself, the goals for learning the content, or their classmates (Tileston, 2007); and clearly defining the major concepts (Kameenui & Carnine, 1998; Coyne et al., 2007)” (Rockwell, 2007, p. 12)
• A combination of explicit and implicit instruction (Mercer et al., 1996)
• A balance of direct instruction with challenging activities (Johnson, 1998)
• Direct vocabulary instruction (Johnson, 1998)
• Focus on meaningful skills, concepts, and activities (Johnson, 1998)
• Instruction in self-monitoring and self-management (Johnson, 1998)
• Employment of effective questioning strategies (Bond, 2007).

Grant, Stronge, and Popp (2008) suggest that the following strategies are also effective:
- Manage the “classroom expertly by creating a positive learning environment, organizing to reduce disruption, and responding appropriately when disruptions occur” (p. 15), as well as “find[ing] ways to communicate rules and procedures quickly to highly mobile students can limit disruptions to classroom management” (p. 15);

- “Assess students when they first arrive in the classroom.... A review of high performing schools in which most of the students would be deemed ‘at-risk’ found that teachers focused on making decisions regarding instruction based on data. With students who are highly mobile, teachers need to assess where the students are in order to help them move forward academically” (p. 16);

- Take time to plan. Planning “communicates expectations to the students,” ensures that curriculum is rigorous, and takes into “account the needs and experiences of the students” (p. 16). Special attention must be given to developing “units of learning that can be completed in short periods of time” (p. 16).

These methods are essential to serving the varied and complex needs of at-risk and urban students and must be continually developed and refined throughout teachers’ careers.

One personal characteristic, resilience, is indispensable for surviving and thriving as a teacher of urban and at-risk students. Stanford (2001) argues that teachers who are resilient and who continue to “persevere positively” (p. 81) were able to do so because of (1) their love of and commitment to children, especially “these” children, (2) their sources of satisfaction as a teacher, (3) their perceptions of their ideal and worst
possible teaching lives, (4) their sources of support, and (5) their choices of
metaphors. (p. 81)

Overall, Stanford found that teachers “endured so long and so well because they found
depth meaning in their work...[and were committed] to making a difference in their
students’ lives and learning” (p. 84). This perspective influenced positively how they
viewed students as efficacious learners and themselves as efficacious instructors, which
in turn gave them the ability to persevere. Stanford also emphasized the importance of
having a “reservoir of strength, filled with a set of personal values, a religious faith, or
social philosophy that they can draw on for support and renewal” (p. 86). This meaning,
combined with a “belie[f] in their students, their abilities to learn, to do well, and to
become contributors in society” (p. 86), enables teachers of at-risk and urban students to
be resilient and to keep on teaching despite circumstances that are trying at best.

Building on Stanford’s (2001) assertions, Patterson, Collins, and Abbott (2004), in their
study of “sixteen resilient teachers from four urban districts” (p. 3), reported that:

Resilient teachers act from a set of values that guides their professional decision-
making. They also place a high premium on professional development and find
ways, often outside the school district, to get what they need. They provide
mentoring to others and stay focused on students and their learning. (p. 3)

Resilient teachers actively seek ways of refining and developing their teaching and
sharing it with others to promote student learning.

Underlying the teachers’ characteristics, qualities, perceptions, or traits, is a vision
or an ideology, which is a significant component of effective teachers of at-risk or poor
students (Haberman, 1995; Robinson, 2007). Haberman (1995) argues that a teacher’s ideology, or system of beliefs about teaching and learning, is the foundation for the kind of effective teaching seen in “star” teachers in urban schools:

The functions performed by effective urban teachers of students in poverty are undergirded by a very clear ideology. Such teachers not only perform functions that quitters and burnouts do not perform, but they also know why they do what they do. They have a coherent vision. Moreover, it is a humane, respectful, caring, and nonviolent form of “gentle teaching.” … My point here is that teachers’ behaviors and the ideology that undergirds their behaviors cannot be unwrapped. They are of a piece. Nor can this ideology be readily or easily taught in traditional programs of teacher preparation. (p. 1)

Robinson (2007) found that “teachers who believed poverty was rooted in social structure were more apt to be present in and to persist at poor schools” (p. 541). Teachers who held this ideology did not attribute their students’ poverty to “moral failings,” such as laziness, but rather to social structures around them, such as the job market (p. 544). These beliefs influence how they treat students or approach problems in the classroom and, ultimately, their “understanding of poverty makes them respond more effectively to problems of inner-city classrooms, and this response makes them feel more competent in their work than other inner-city teachers” (p. 542).

Haberman (1995) offers several functions of effective urban teachers that stem from this vision or ideology:
- Persistence: “Effective urban teachers...believe that it is their responsibility to find ways of engaging all their students in learning activities. They accept responsibility for making the classroom an interesting, engaging place and for involving the children in all forms of learning” (p. 2).

- Protecting Learners and Learning: The teachers themselves are continuous learners with varied interests and learning experiences outside of school. Their curiosity and broad knowledge allows them to “frequently involve their students in learning that transcends curriculum, textbooks, and achievement tests” (p. 3).

- Applications of Generalizations: “Successful teachers can also reflect on their many discrete classroom activities and see what they add up to.... Teachers must be able to improve and develop. In order for this to happen, they must be able to take principles and concepts from a variety of sources and translate them into practice” (p. 3). An essential element of this function is the ability to reflect and analyze daily practice.

- Approach to “At-Risk” Students: “Stars [effective urban teachers] also see all the societal conditions that contribute to students’ problems with school.... Star teachers believe that, regardless of the life conditions their students face, they as teachers bear a primary responsibility for sparking their students’ desire to learn” (p. 4).

- Professional versus Personal Orientation to Students: “Stars expect to find some youngsters in their classrooms that they may not necessarily love; they also expect to be able to teach them.... Genuine respect is the best way to describe the
feelings star teachers have for their students” (p. 4).

- **Burnout:** They know how to protect themselves from stress and the “mindless bureaucracy..... As they gain experience, they learn the minimum things they must do to function in these systems without having the system punish them...Finally, they set up networks of a few like-minded teachers, or they teach in teams, or they simply find kindred spirits” (p. 4).

- **Fallibility:** They create environments where making mistakes is acceptable for both the teacher and the students. Mistakes become a part of the learning process. (p. 5)

What is critical, however, is the ideology that underlies each of these functions. The star teachers to whom Haberman (1995) refers believe fundamentally that students can learn and that they can teach those students to learn. This perspective is essential in teaching, but even more crucial when teachers are dealing with students who are quite different from themselves and present challenges that may create cognitive dissonance, disequilibrium, and culture shock. In such circumstances, teachers’ positive yet realistic ideologies or visions ground them, sustain them, and provide a purpose—learning.

**Alternative School Teachers**

**Demographics and Entry.** Although the research about alternative school teachers is meager, a few studies add information that goes beyond the findings of the research about the teachers of urban and at-risk students. Lehr, Moreau, Lange, and Lanners (2004) raise the question, “Who are the educators working in alternative schools
and does their training equip them with skills to meet the challenge of working with vulnerable youth?” (p. 5). Their research, however, does not provide a comprehensive answer. Lehr, Moreau, Lange, and Lanners (2004) report that the majority of states require teachers to be certified or licensed and that at least half of the schools surveyed had low student-teacher ratios (pp. 14-15). Respondents also disclosed that “only licensed regular education teachers were consistently on-site more than 75% of the time. The majority of respondents indicated mental health counselors, career counselors, social workers, and school psychologists were on site less than 25% of the time” (p. 15). With support personnel noticeably missing from the environment, alternative school teachers are expected to contend with more than instruction; they need to be prepared to respond to students’ emotional, behavioral, and social needs. Lehr, Moreau, Lange, and Lanners (2004) also examined the licensure of teachers in alternative schools. Officials in thirty-five states responded to their survey and the authors reported that ninety-four percent or thirty-three states required that teachers be certified or licensed to teach in an alternative school and that at least half of the schools had student-teacher ratios of 10 students to 1 teacher or better (Lehr, Moreau, Lange, & Lanners, 2004, pp. 14-15). Lehr, Moreau, Lange, and Lanners (2004) rightly suggest that “more information about instructional and staffing needs in relation to meeting student needs is necessary to inform best practice” (p. 22) and that survey “responses reflected concerns about finding well-trained staff, certification issues with regard to teaching across subject areas, and staff development” (p. 19).

The research literature contains only a small amount of information about how
teachers come to teach in alternative schools. Kleiner, Porch, and Farris (2002), in the first national study of public alternative schools and programs, found:

86 percent of districts with alternative schools and programs for at-risk students hired teachers specifically to teach in such schools and programs. A smaller percentage of districts transferred teachers by choice from a regular school (49 percent), and an even smaller percentage assigned teachers involuntarily to positions in alternative schools and programs (10 percent). (p. 25)

Aron (2006) also found that for the most part alternative school educators opted to teach in alternative schools. Lange & Sletten (1995) conducted a study of Minnesota's alternative education programs, surveying 83 directors and 85 teachers and found that 69% taught at an alternative program for 5 years or less and only 8% taught in these settings for more than 10 years (p. 19). However, there is no information regarding why or how these teachers decided to teach in alternative schools, what competencies they possessed, or why they decided to leave.

Attributes of effectiveness. In general, the characteristics of effective teachers in alternative schools are similar to the characteristics of effective teachers of urban and at-risk students. However, those who have researched alternative education have highlighted a few attributes as especially crucial to successful alternative school teaching. A review of the available literature on the characteristics of alternative school teachers yielded only two unpublished doctoral dissertations. Anderson (1997) conducted a survey of alternative education teachers, administrators, and students to determine what characteristics were important for alternative school teachers to have. To inform the
study, Anderson relied heavily upon characteristics drawn from the available literature on teachers of students with emotional/behavioral disorders as well as the paucity of information available on alternative teachers. Anderson concluded:

AE teachers and administrators perceived 11 AE skills as important. The skills, "show warmth and enthusiasm," "be sensitive and empathetic," "have reasonable expectations of the students," "supportive and encouraging," "promote student responsibility and self-esteem," "be genuine and friendly," "make learning interesting," "maintain a safe and secure environment," "develop and maintain a personal/professional support system," "work with culturally diverse students," and "work with minority parents" reflect important skills from AE literature. (p. 122)

In a descriptive case study of an alternative school in Tennessee, Kershaw and Blank (1993) found:

Alternative school teachers perceive their roles to be different from traditional school teachers. All of the faculty members with experience in other school settings identified the focus on the individual student and the emphasis placed on the development of self-esteem as characteristics that distinguish teachers in the alternative school from those in traditional school settings.... The faculty members also perceived themselves as more patient, flexible, and accepting of the unique qualities of children who are "out of step with the mainstream".... The faculty members also acknowledged that their freedom to be flexible with time and instructional plans is another major difference between the alternative school
and traditional schools. (p. 8)

As new or traditional teachers try to acclimate themselves to the alternative classroom and to teaching, such an intense focus on the student can be difficult for the best and impossible for most others. In addition, new or traditional teachers can struggle as they attempt to manage multiple competing priorities such as classroom management, lesson planning and curriculum development, and professional duties, along with their responsibilities for attending to students’ emotional and social needs.

In its study of effective alternative schools, the Bureau of Legislative Research (2006) in Arkansas reported:

The National Dropout Prevention Center (2001) identified the small class size, emphasis on caring relationships, and clear rules and expectations of alternative schools as key elements of effective strategies for reaching students at risk of dropping out of school (Duttweiler, 1995). Additionally, Barr and Parrett (2001) recommended that students who are “at risk” of dropping out of school be placed in multi-grade level classrooms that emphasize curriculum designed for individual needs and mastery. (p. 11)

The study also found the following best practices as important to successful alternative schools: small number of students per teacher, structured classrooms, behavioral intervention and assessment, teaching social skills, and individualized remediation (p. 15). Butchart (1986) notes:

Interestingly, the literature consistently indicates that one key to success with potential dropouts, and with dropouts reentering through alternative education, is
in the quality of the relationships that can be created in an alternative school, and not in curricular change. Indeed, most programs follow a relatively traditional curriculum, although the methods of delivery are altered. But by changing the students’ relationships with teachers, peers, and the institution, alternative schools are able to transform achievement levels, behavior patterns, and attitudes. (p. 11) Good relationships among teachers and students seem to be crucial to working effectively with at-risk, urban, and alternative students. Kershaw and Blank (1993) contend that the role of a teacher in alternative schools encompasses more than just teaching, for “successful teachers in alternative settings see themselves as informal counselors and facilitators as well as teachers, see instruction as more than content coverage, and are persistent in working with students in academic, behavioral, and social contexts (Glasser, 1986; Wehlage, 1989)” (p. 3). Kershaw and Blank (1993) further argue that it is essential that alternative school teachers take on these additional roles in order to meet the “emotional, affective, and socialization needs of disenfranchised students” (p. 3). When this fails to happen, then the same conditions that originally alienated these students are recreated. Yet, reports also acknowledge that “school personnel often lack the knowledge and skills to address the multiplicity of problems students present” (Bureau of Legislative Research, 2006, p. 16). Teachers must be explicitly taught how to build successful relationships with students. However, merely building a relationship with students is not enough; the close relationship must be “leveraged on behalf of improving opportunities for [students’] intellectual development, achievement, and success” (Ancess, 1997, p. 1). Kershaw and Blank (1993) suggest that this can be
accomplished with a focus on students’ experiences, high expectations, and “the incorporation of a wide range of instructional methods” (p. 2).

Individualized instruction is an essential method for leveraging relationships with students and improving student achievement; however, teachers may not be prepared to execute such a demanding curriculum. Reimer and Cash (2003) echo this sentiment arguing that “an important factor in alternative education is that all personnel recognize that all children do not learn in the same way, so varied instructional methods and an innovative curriculum are necessary” (p. 4). Anderson (1997) found that alternative school educators reported the following instructional methods, which are similar to those found in successful urban or at-risk classrooms, as being effective in alternative school classrooms:

“establish and maintain students’ attention,” “be flexible and responsive,” “use a variety of nonthreatening techniques in the classroom,” “develop and/or implement appropriate classroom rules and a means for enforcing these rules,” “self-evaluate one’s own teaching and classroom management skills and use the results constructively,” “define and use skills in problem solving and conflict resolution,” and “revise instructional goals, strategies, and materials based on students performance.” (Anderson, 1997, p. 122)

Despite the knowledge that these strategies are effective in achieving success with at-risk students, it is unknown whether or not they are actually employed in the classrooms of alternative schools that serve at-risk students and to what extent they are actually effective. Further research is essential as alternative public schools continue to grow in...
order to keep up with a rapidly expanding at-risk population. This information will become invaluable in serving the varied and complex needs of these students.

**Quality of alternative school teachers.** Gordon, Kane, and Staiger (2006) advise, "Ultimately, the success of U.S. public education depends upon the skills of the 3.1 million teachers managing classrooms in elementary and secondary schools around the country.... Without the right people standing in front of the classroom, school reform is a futile exercise" (p. 5). The same is true of alternative schools - without qualified, prepared teachers in the classrooms student achievement will continue to wane.

Preparing educators to teach in alternative schools requires preservice preparation, efforts to retain experienced teachers, and professional development that is aimed at developing the capacity of alternative school teachers.

**Initial preparation.** Berry (2008) contends that "many teachers enter the classroom unprepared to work with high-needs students" (p. 768) and unprepared to assume all of the roles necessary to achieve success with a demanding population.

Gregory (1998) found:

- in reading hundreds of pages of material on child development, at-risk youth, alternative programs, etc., the issue of teacher training in Alternative Education was rarely broached. Although the need for alternative teachers has increased and in all probability will continue to do so, no formal move has been made to adequately train potential teachers at any level. (p. 31)

The lack of concrete data on teacher training programs for alternative populations combined with the realization that teachers as a whole are not successfully educating all
children led the Arkansas Bureau of Legislative Research (2006) to recommend that "teachers should have specialized education to identify and address the different mixes of multiple problems" (p. 17) that are present in alternative schools. According to a survey of state commissioners or superintendents of education (Bureau of Legislative Research, 2006):

Almost every administrator interviewed stated that teachers need more prolonged and intense education in how to address the multiplicity of problems presented by ALE [alternative learning environment] students. Teachers must understand students with emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and familial problems to be able to fully reach them in teaching (p. 34). Administrators believe that there needs to be a supervised clinical internship, for example, in an alternative learning setting, where prospective teachers can apply knowledge and practice skills before being confronted with a group of students who have multiple problems. (p. 37)

Results from a questionnaire (Gregory, 1998) given to teachers at alternative schools in the Salem, Oregon, area likewise found that "teacher-training education programs may be too general for a teacher working within this population. Some stated a need for specific training in Special Education, counseling, and issues regarding juvenile justice. Most felt that...exposure to the population is an absolute necessity" (p. 25). Gregory (1998) proposed the following classes as part of the program for Western Oregon University: Juvenile Issues, Introduction to Curriculum and Instruction (focus on how to teach basic skill areas), Classroom Teacher-Counselor, Encouraging Discouraged Children, and a Practicum.
Despite the recognition that specialized training is desired, few universities or colleges have programs that “offer a course concentration or degree for teachers and other professional staff to work with youth who are considered at risk” (Bureau of Legislative Research, 2006, p. 53). The Bureau of Legislative Research (2006) notes only twelve such programs (pp. 53-54). Ashcroft (1999) concurs, claiming:

Few universities offer a single course directed at teachers of delinquent children and youth (or those at-risk of becoming delinquent). Teachers who work in institutional or alternative community settings typically receive no special training intended to equip them to serve their often difficult-to-teach students. Of the thousands of teacher preparation programs in America, Eggleston (1991) documented only twenty university programs that offer teacher training course work at the graduate or undergraduate level that specifically targets the teacher who will work in an institutional or alternative setting. (p. 1)

Even though programs for teachers at alternative schools are currently limited, as alternative schools continue to grow the need will become greater to ensure that teachers are equipped to teach in these schools, making it imperative to consider the elements that would be necessary to implement effective programs. Currently, preservice teachers take courses in the subject matter they will teach, pedagogical content knowledge, classroom management, curriculum, methodology, multiculturalism, and social justice, among others. However, the limited research suggests two core areas that should be specialized and enhanced for alternative school teachers: field experiences with student diversity that encourage value exploration, and training in implementing individualized instruction.
Currently there is no research regarding field experience and practicums specifically for alternative school teachers, so this review will rely on research gleaned from studies of teachers preparing to serve urban and at-risk students. Melser (2006) claims that “teaching future educators to survive in a variety of settings is a key factor in their success or failure as urban educators” (Melser, 2006, p. 280). To this end, multiple field experiences are essential (Murray & Harlin, 2006) and when combined with site-based courses can influence preservice teachers’ views and preconceived notions, enabling teachers to build worthwhile relationships with students and colleagues. These relationships are essential to the endeavor of persuading students to become engaged and to learn in the classroom. Haberman (1995) extends this idea, arguing:

While knowledge of a subject matter and pedagogy are absolutely necessary, they are not sufficient conditions for being effective in urban schools. Knowing what and how to teach only becomes relevant after the teacher has connected and established a positive relationship with students.... While being an effective teacher of diverse children in poverty has some intellectual and academic aspects, it is primarily a human relations activity demanding the ability to make and maintain positive, supportive connections with diverse children, school staff, and caregivers. (p. 8)

Simply adding classes in multiculturalism or social justice are not enough to aid teachers in forging relationships with students who may feel alienated from school. Zygmunt-Filwalk and Leitze (2006) argue that “student [teacher] expectations of inner-city schools are generally negative (Aaronsohn et al., 1995), and 82 percent of preservice teachers
surveyed nationally expressed a desire to work in ‘majority settings’ (Zimpher, 1989)” (p. 283). To combat successfully the negative expectations and stereotypical assumptions, Zygmunt-Filwalk and Leitze (2006) suggest immersion experience programs, such as the Urban Semester Program at Ball State University. Such programs are useful in “influencing participants’ affective dimension in the hopes of attaining real change” (p. 284). While in this program, “issues of diversity are interwoven through college courses in individual subject areas” (p. 284). Student teachers complete diversity projects, engage in diversity training, explore multiple viewpoints and world views, participate in reflective journaling and classroom dialogue, create multicultural literature packs, and complete research on minority contributions (p. 284). The intention is that the combination of reflecting, discussing, and building new understandings will result in changing the perspectives of student teachers, thus making them better qualified and prepared to teach in challenging classrooms and better able to engage in meaningful relationships with students. Duarte and Reed (2004) similarly call for teacher education programs to do more than simply include a class in multiculturalism; instead, they demand a “curriculum that provide[s] a broader and more comprehensive view of what it means to teach in urban schools...[and] restructured field experiences, to help them decide whether or not they felt capable of meeting the challenge of teaching urban children” (p. 246).

Field placements alone are not enough to increase the skills of teachers preparing for nontraditional environments. Prospective teachers also need “opportunities to openly discuss their beliefs and actions with expert teachers in the classroom” (Duarte & Reed,
2004, p. 250). Therefore, it is critical that preservice teachers be placed with expert teachers who are successful and willing to enter into frank conversations about the reality of the classroom. Burant (1999) and Haberman (2005) caution that not all field experiences are valuable; some can reinforce stereotypes or negative perceptions. Instead, field experiences must be reconceptualized so that all prospective teachers have the opportunity to develop meaningful, long-term relationships with people different from themselves in carefully placed and carefully supervised practicums (Gomez, 1996, p. 126). Zeichner (1996) recommends educative practicums that move beyond individual classroom placements and focus on the full scope of teachers’ complex roles within schools and communities, stress that all students from all backgrounds can learn, and prepare teacher candidates for the process of lifelong learning and professional development (p. 218). (Burant, 1999, p. 209)

It is clear that preservice teachers who intend to teach in urban schools need experiences with at-risk students; it also makes sense to argue that preservice teachers who intend to teach in alternative schools need experiences in alternative schools. Such field experiences would furnish preservice teachers with opportunities to explore and think about diversity, as well as expose them to expert teachers who can guide and reflect with them. This comprehensive approach would provide a foundation of support and understanding that would better enable preservice teachers to form the relationships they need in their classrooms.

Obidah and Howard (2005) raise the relevant and essential question: “How do we
cultivate a pedagogy of achievement pertaining to low-income and minority students in ourselves and then ‘teach’ it to our students in the process of preparing them to be effective teachers for these students” (p. 248)? Their answer is that teacher education programs must address preservice teachers’ values and their lack of knowledge regarding diversity. Obidah and Howard (2005) maintain:

For preservice teachers to constructively and effectively assist students from diverse, ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds, preservice teachers must be given opportunities during the course of their preparation to thoroughly explore and comprehend their own cultural and personal values, their identities, and their social beliefs (Weiner, 1993). (p. 253)

Unless preservice teachers have engaged in exploring their values, they will be unable to navigate relationships with students who are different from them. Leland and Harste (2005) insist, “If we want teachers who can think critically, then we need to immerse them in critical issues and give them opportunities to sort through their conflicting beliefs and observations” (p. 75).

A second core area of initial teacher education that should be pertinent to the preparation of alternative school teachers is related to small class sizes and individualized instruction. Traditional teacher education programs train teachers to be successful in schools that have larger class sizes and instruction that is geared to the majority of the students. New or traditional teachers who do not have strategies for working with small group dynamics or for modifying and altering assignments to meet students needs will falter when placed in alternative settings and may deliver instruction that is ineffective.
Tomlinson (2008) argues:

We have often misconstrued the notion of equal access to education to mean that all students should receive precisely the same pacing, resources, and instruction. The result is a one-size-fits-all education system. Differentiated instruction recognizes that students are not the same and that access to equal education necessarily means that, given a certain goal, each student should be provided resources, instruction, and support to help them meet that objective. (p. 31)

Alternative school teachers must be prepared to respond to the variety of needs that students bring to the classroom as learners because a uniform solution will not work in schools that are designed to meet students' individual needs.

Retention and pressure in low-performing schools. Currently there is no data specifically concerning teacher retention in alternative schools; therefore this review will utilize research that examines teacher retention in urban or low-performing schools that serve at-risk students. In the United States, schools that served significant populations of urban, at-risk, or alternative students cannot attract or retain enough qualified and expert teachers. Obidah and Howard (2005) claim that in urban schools “the need is greatest for teachers who are well trained and confident in their ability to effectively nurture the academic well-being of their students” (p. 248), yet the “teachers who serve the students in these schools have the lowest rates of expertise gained through certification, and these schools struggle to retain credentialed teachers, particularly in the areas of math and science (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996)” (p. 250).

According to Obidah and Howard (2005):
In 2000, the North Carolina Association for Educators polled the state’s public school teachers. Of respondents, 69% said that if given the opportunity, they would not volunteer to work in a low-performing school. Similarly, in New York City, more than 2,000 certified teachers turned down job offers in 1 year, choosing not to teach rather than be assigned to a low-performing school (Grace, 2001). Recent studies conducted in California (Carroll, Reichardt, Guarino, & Mejia, 2000), Texas (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2001), and New York (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002) show that teachers systematically move away from schools with low levels of achievement and high concentrations of poor children of color.... Thus, our teaching agenda must address the reasons why teachers feel underprepared (despite their training) to teach in urban, inner-city communities. (pp. 250-251)

To explore this, Watson, Charner-Laird, Kirkpatrick, Szczesiul, and Gordon (2006) conducted a study that examined seventeen teachers who had just completed an urban teacher preparation program. Through thematic analysis of two rounds of interviews, they found:

Descriptions of students played a considerable role when participants made distinctions between effective teaching and effective urban teaching. These teachers defined the two types of teaching largely in terms of perceived behaviors, beliefs, and characteristics of urban and suburban students that were chiefly based on monolithic group stereotypes and in the case of students of color, were deficit laden. (p. 395)
Additionally, these teachers perceived controlling behavior in the classroom as effective teaching (p. 400). These harmful, deficit-laden perceptions, as well as the misconception of behavior control as teaching, reinforce the need to examine teacher preparation and professional development programs. Watson, Charner-Laird, Kirkpatrick, Szczesiul, and Gordon (2006) also raise the important question: Is there a difference between effective teaching and effective urban teaching? This question is easily rephrased to apply to alternative schools—is there a difference between effective teaching and effective alternative school teaching? If so, should there be different or specialized teacher training and professional development? The easy answer would be to argue, as Kershaw and Blank (1993) do, that “what is good for at-risk students is usually good for other students as well” (p. 16). Despite the fact that ideally there should not be a difference between effective teaching and effective alternative school teaching, the reality is that in order to reach at-risk children, teachers need to be explicitly taught how to form relationships with students, prepared to individualize curriculum, and able to handle a wide range of social, emotional, and behavioral issues. Teachers’ abilities to manage and effectively meet these demands influence their desire to continue teaching at-risk students.

Moreover, with a premium placed on testing, adequate yearly progress, and a variety of state exams, schools are under pressure to demonstrate that their students are becoming successful by these measures. Although students might be making improvements—socially, emotionally, behaviorally, and academically—these improvements may not all appear on standardized tests. This pressure to perform on
standardized tests is not particular to alternative schools, but given the challenges that alternative students present, meeting the standards is more difficult and requires significant intervention. In addition, it is important to measure students’ progress in ways other than simply relying on the test results because their progress and achievement may not best be assessed by these measures. Furthermore, alternative schools are also faced with the challenge of overcoming the stigma that is associated with them. Because alternative schools generally serve a population of students who previously have not been successful, the assumption is that these schools offer a lower-quality education. This perception can be particularly difficult to overcome if the students who attend the schools also feel that way. And, a poor reputation, even if undeserved, can make it difficult for alternative schools to attract and retain teachers. Teachers can become demoralized, which can reduce the possibility of developing feelings of success, progress, and achievement if standardized tests are seen as the sole measure of students’ progress.

Professional Development

Recent reports and articles have called for specialized and ongoing professional development in alternative schools in order to aid teachers to serve this special population of students effectively (Bureau of Legislative Research, 2006; Chalker, 1996; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Ruzzi & Kramer, 2006). Such programs would focus on topics such as: “Conflict management, interpersonal skills and human development, counseling and group process skills, positive approaches to behavior management, stress management, and building self-confidence” (Bureau of Legislative Research, 2006, p. 60). A review of
the literature yielded one unpublished dissertation (Noeth, 2007), which compared alternative high school teachers and traditional high school teachers in Ohio in order to ascertain the differences in both their preservice and inservice experiences. Noeth (2007) found that “the alternative teacher group... did not feel [that] their preservice preparation was adequate for their current high schools” (p. 117); moreover, what the alternative teachers’ responses indicated was that they “wanted more practical teaching experiences to prepare them for alternative schools.... They pointed to the need to include knowledge of specific teaching methodologies that relate to all types of learners” (pp. 118-119). To bridge the gap in their preparation, alternative teachers’ priorities for their professional development focus on instructional strategies specifically for alternative classrooms, which are not necessarily oriented to the specific content areas. The alternative group sought more preparation related to pedagogies that can help at-risk learners or learners who are disengaged or unmotivated. (p. 119)

In addition, when asked about improving inservice preparation, alternative teachers ranked the following as important:

(a) Professional development specifically for alternative school teachers (21 responses), (b) collaboration with colleagues (17 responses), (c) real world application for student issues (12 responses), (d) extended time and consistency of professional development (9 responses), and (e) value of workshops and conferences (7 responses). (p. 120)

Although these findings regarding the content of the professional development that
alternative teachers desire are interesting, it is not the most significant finding in Noeth's study. What Noeth highlights is:

The average tenure of a traditional high school teacher in his or her current high school was almost twice as long as the average tenure for an alternative high school teacher in his or her current high school. This has tremendous implications for professional development. If alternative high school teachers do not remain in their current high schools as long as traditional high school teachers, alternative schools have to continually train and retrain the teachers on their staff, costing valuable time and money for professional development. Further, the average tenure for alternative school teachers was not even 5 years. (pp. 144-145)

Beyond the content of professional development for alternative school teachers, what also becomes significant given the circumstances of an unprepared and consistently changing teaching force is how that professional development is conducted in order to mitigate these circumstances. Overall, a strong professional development program that could improve the effectiveness of alternative teachers would address both the content needs of alternative teachers and meet the unique demands of the fluctuating alternative school teacher force. Thus, a strong alternative school teacher professional development program would be relevant, continuous, and collaborative, would provide for mentoring and coaching, and would ensure that the principal is a strong instructional leader.

**Definition.** A review of the literature on teacher professional development in general will provide a coherent definition to shape this study and help generate criteria that may be applied when analyzing professional development activities in alternative
schools. Borko (2004) asserts that “teacher professional development is essential to efforts to improve our schools” (p. 3) because

the changes in classroom practices demanded by the reform visions ultimately rely on teachers (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Spillane, 1999). Changes of this magnitude will require a great deal of learning on the part of teachers and will be difficult to make without support and guidance (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Putnam & Borko, 1997; Wilson & Berne, 1999). (p. 3)

Professional development, therefore, refers to teacher learning, which “is usefully understood as a process of increasing participation in the practice of teaching, and through this participation a process of becoming knowledgeable in and about teaching (Adler, 2000, p. 37)” (Borko, 2004, p. 4). This definition is one that implies action, reflection, and involvement—a very different way of looking at professional development than in the past. Sparks (1994) contends

During the past 20 years, it has gone by many names—inservice education, staff development, professional development, and human resource development. But whatever it was called, it too often was essentially the same thing—educators (usually teachers) sitting relatively passively while an “expert” “exposed” them to new ideas or “trained” them in new practices. (p. 1)

Sparks further argues that due to results-driven education, systems thinking, and constructivism, a paradigm shift has occurred in professional development,

- From individual development to individual development and organization development
From fragmented, piecemeal improvement efforts to staff development driven by a clear, coherent strategic plan for the school district, each school, and for the departments that serve schools...

From a focus on adult needs to a focus on student needs and learning outcomes

From training that one attends away from the job as the primary delivery system for staff development to multiple forms of job-embedded learning

From an orientation toward the transmission of knowledge and skills to teachers by "experts" to the study by teachers of the teaching and learning processes

From a focus on generic instructional skills to a combination of generic and content-specific skills. (Sparks, 1994, pp. 2-4)

Professional development in traditional schools, according to the literature, has become more teacher-centric and more teacher driven, moving away from quick, hit-and-run, one-size-fits-all fixes. It is more than simply showing teachers an instructional strategy or informing them about various educational theories. Instead, professional development is derived from what motivates teachers—the opportunity to be a catalyst for student achievement—and fosters learning, growth, and development for both students and teachers.

Professional development should encourage changes in teaching that improve student learning. These changes can have a ripple effect of improving education from the inside out—from the individual classroom, to the school, to the district, and to the
profession as a whole. Lambert (1989) suggests that:

When teachers engage in reflective practice, collegiality, and shared leadership, they come to understand themselves and their work differently. This new understanding causes a shift in their beliefs and norms. This shift, in turn, creates new opportunities, new visions of what can be done. The new professional development is a cultural, not a delivery, concept. (p. 80)

Hirsch (2009), executive director of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC; now called Learning Forward), argues that the culture should be one of “continuous improvement” (p. 10) and contends:

Good teaching occurs when educators on teams are involved in a cycle in which they analyze data, determine student and adult learning goals based on that analysis, design joint lessons that use evidence-based strategies, have access to coaches for support in improving their classroom instruction, and then assess how their learning and teamwork affects student achievement. (p. 10)

It is these foundational beliefs that inform the Council’s definition of professional development; according to the NSDC,

The term “professional development” means a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement—

(A) Professional development fosters collective responsibility for improved student performance and must be comprised of professional learning that:
(1) is aligned with rigorous state student academic achievement standards as well as related local educational agency and school improvement goals;

(2) is conducted among educators at the school and facilitated by well-prepared school principals and/or school-based professional development coaches, mentors, master teachers, or other teacher leaders;

(3) primarily occurs several times per week among established teams of teachers, principals, and other instructional staff members where the teams of educators engage in a continuous cycle of improvement that—

(i) evaluates student, teacher, and school learning needs through a thorough review of data on teacher and student performance;

(ii) defines a clear set of educator learning goals based on the rigorous analysis of the data;

(iii) achieves the educator learning goals...by implementing coherent, sustained, and evidence-based learning strategies, such as lesson study and the development of formative assessments, that improve instructional effectiveness and student achievement;
(iv) provides job-embedded coaching or other forms of assistance to support the transfer of new knowledge and skills to the classroom;
(v) regularly assesses the effectiveness of the professional development in achieving identified learning goals, improving teaching, and assisting all students in meeting challenging state academic achievement standards;
(vi) informs ongoing improvements in teaching and student learning; and
(vii) that may be supported by external assistance. (National Staff Development Council, 2009a, pp. 12-16)

It is this comprehensive definition of professional development that informs this study.

**Characteristics.** According to Guskey (1986), "Staff development programs are a systematic attempt to bring about change—change in the classroom practices of teachers, change in their beliefs and attitudes, and change in the learning outcomes of students" (p. 5). Professional development should:

- Be "a key tool that keeps teachers abreast of current issues in education, helps them implement innovations, and refines their practice" (Cook, 1996, para 4).
- Offer opportunities for discussion because "the personal concerns of teachers must be addressed in a direct and sensitive manner" (Guskey, 1986, p.9).
- "[Build] a repertoire of teaching skills [by]...organizing instructional strategies in some meaningful way" (Garrett, 2007, p. 7).
Yet, many staff development programs are boring, unsuccessful, disjointed, poorly planned, random, seemingly impractical (Guskey, 1986; Haberman, 1995) and fail to achieve the change that is necessary and desired.

A study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2001) reveals:

Public school teachers were most likely to have participated in professional development that focused on state or district curriculum and performance standards (80 percent).... Teachers were less likely to have participated in professional development that focused on addressing the needs of students with disabilities (49 percent), encouraging parent and community involvement (46 percent), classroom management, including student discipline (45 percent), and addressing the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (41 percent).

(p. iv)

Even more disconcerting is that “among teachers who taught students with special needs, relatively few felt very well prepared to address those students’ needs” (p. v).

Professional development programs in schools in the United States are not attending to teachers’ needs and ultimately to students’ needs. Often the most needed areas of professional development are ignored or covered in one-day, superficial workshops that do not have the ability to bring about productive changes in practice. In order for professional development to bring about change, it must be “designed to provide continuity between what teachers learn and what goes on in the classroom” (Parsad, Lewis, & Farris, 2001, p. 5). Effective professional development programs connect to and address the specific challenges of the student population and the classroom.
Anderson and Olsen (2006) encourage the movement to the “reconceptualization of teaching as a career-long learning process” (p. 360). As part of a continuous learning process, professional development opportunities should be matched to teachers' experiences, universities should partner with schools to support their teachers, and expert and novice teachers should have opportunities to work and learn from one another. Anderson and Olsen (2006) conclude “that teachers appear to believe there is more to learn from collaboration and dialogue with other teachers than from a banking model in which they are positioned as passive recipients of information delivered by professional development specialists” (p. 369). Moreover, by offering a variety of options in professional development, the teachers’ learning will be ongoing, timely, and fit teachers’ needs. Tomlinson (2008) contends:

Professional development for significant change itself would have a new look in many schools. It is purposeful rather than opportunistic, coherent rather than fragmented, aimed at transfer into classroom practice rather than at absorption of information, collaborative rather than solitary or private, reflective rather than didactic, informed by needs and results rather than by popularity or availability. It aims to change minds as well as practice. (p. 46)

Likewise, Darling-Hammond (1997) claims that in order to reinvent teacher preparation and professional development, states, schools, and colleges must:

• Organize teacher education and professional development around standards for students and teachers.
- Institute extended, graduate-level teacher preparation programs that provide year-long internships in a professional development school.
- Create and fund mentoring programs for beginning teachers that provide support and assess teaching skills.
- Create stable, high-quality sources of professional development; then allocate one percent of state and local spending to support them, along with additional matching funds to school districts.
- Embed professional development in teachers' daily work through joint planning, study groups, peer coaching, and research. (p. 4)

Professional development must be targeted to help teachers meet the precise needs of their students. In an alternative school this might encompass staff development in areas such as differentiated learning, counseling, relationship building, cultural competency, awareness of juvenile issues, learning disabilities, and instructional strategies.

Designing professional development to create a collaborative learning environment for teachers is also important. In general, good organizations and systems are not about the individual only; in order to be truly successful, the group must be cultivated (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996; Fullan, 2008). The authors of a National Staff Development Council (2009b) (now called Learning Forward) report argue:

The most powerful forms of staff development occur in ongoing teams that meet on a regular basis, preferably several times a week, for the purposes of learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving. These teams, often called learning
communities or communities of practice, operate with a commitment to the norms of continuous improvement and experimentation and engage their members in improving their daily work to advance the achievement of school district and school goals for student learning. (para. 2)

Stevens (2008) in his study of twenty-four small high schools in Chicago found that “how adults work together in small schools is a crucial factor in raising student achievement. In particular, [the results of the study suggest] that collective work on improving instruction is a key lever for raising achievement” (p. 2). According to Fullan (2008), groups should above all be purposeful, arguing that “when peers interact purposefully, their expectations of one another create positive pressure to accomplish goals important to the group” (p. 63).

Hiebert, Gallimore, and Stigler (2002) question the assumption that collaboration is mostly a social arrangement, arguing instead:

Collaboration...becomes essential for the development of professional knowledge, not because collaboration provides teachers with social support groups but because collaborations force their participants to make their knowledge public and understood by colleagues.... Professional knowledge must also be public in a more expanded sense: it must be created with the intent of public examination, with the goal of making it shareable among teachers, open for discussion, verification, and refutation or modification. (p. 7)

For Hiebert, Gallimore, and Stigler, it is the public nature of professional knowledge that makes it more scholarly and therefore more useful; however, it may be that both the
social support and the public nature are necessary in order to have a balanced and successful collaborative approach to professional development.

Just as relationships with students are more important, so it is that working relationships with colleagues may be more significant for teachers in alternative schools compared to teachers in traditional schools. Mentoring, coaching, and teamwork, which should be enhanced by professional development, are essential to this work that can be both challenging and daunting. According to Staub, West, and DiPrima Bickel (2006), a "coach is a partner with the teacher in working toward the shared goal of student learning, not a critic of the teacher’s practice" (p. 4). Fullan (2008) argues that "with purposeful peer interaction, people band together to outperform themselves relative to their own past performance" (p. 63). Coaching or mentoring capitalizes on this idea, provided that the coach or mentor is knowledgeable and skilled: "Coaching must help teachers develop habits of mind in lesson design, learn to reflect on their teaching, and enrich and define their pedagogical content knowledge. It must also help them become better at communicating with each other about issues of teaching and learning in a focused and professional manner" (Staub, West, & DiPrima Bickel, 2006, p. 14). In a setting where turnover is high and teachers often have less professional experience, it seems logical that coaching and mentoring could help alleviate some of the teacher turnover as well as provide an avenue for improving teacher effectiveness.

Stevens (2008) found:

Strong principal leadership also is important for establishing a vision for school improvement and efforts to implement it. In earlier research on CHSRI small
schools, we found that principals were crucial catalysts in helping teacher communities engage in structured and sustained collective work on instructional improvement. Without principal leadership in this area, teachers were unlikely to organize these efforts on their own. (p. 5).

It is the principal who creates the environment, sets the tone, and models what is expected of the teachers. Donaldson, Marnik, Mackenzie, and Ackerman (2009) suggest that “leaders develop three clusters of relational skills and qualities: acting as consultants to translate pedagogical knowledge into practice, mediating conflict and reaching consensus, and valuing relationships” (p. 10). The principal is an ongoing learner who continues to learn and grow with the faculty, but he or she is also an expert who has pedagogical and instructional knowledge and knowledge about how to help teachers become better instructors. Primarily, the role of the principal “is helping all employees find meaning, increased skill development, and personal satisfaction in making contributions that simultaneously fulfill their own goals and the goals of the organization (the needs of the customers expressed in achievement terms)” (Fullan, 2008, p. 25).

Another significant role for the principal is providing feedback; Fullan (2008) notes, “People need to be able to compare themselves with themselves over time to assess their progress in achieving important personal and organizational goals...[and this] can’t be done without clear transparency showing causal relationship between practice and results, which enables them to make corrections as they go” (p. 103).
Summary

Aron (2006) asserts that overall, instructors in successful alternative programs choose to be part of the program, routinely employ positive discipline techniques, and establish rapport with students and peers. They have high expectations of the youth, are certified in their academic content areas, and are creative in their classrooms. They have a role in governing the school and designing the program and curriculum. (p. 12)

The evidence put forth in the review of teachers of urban, at-risk, and alternative students in this proposal suggests that the profile of an effective alternative school teacher encompasses five areas: a strong educational background and state licensure; an ideology or vision that values all students; an ability to form strong relationships with students; resilience; and instructional strategies that promote student learning despite a variety of challenges. Teachers need more than just credentials and education in order to meet the complex demands of the alternative school classroom; they must be able to form relationships with a population of students who are difficult, resistant, and, in most cases, different from them. Perhaps what is most important is the vision that the teacher holds (Hammerness, 2006). Without a strong vision of respect, care, and understanding of their students, teachers will flounder in the alternative environment. This vision strengthens the twin elements of the classroom, relationship-building and instruction, as well as the teacher’s own resilience. A coherent vision provides sustenance for the teacher and can bloom into the ability to form relationships, instruct effectively, and remain focused and engaged within this demanding and challenging environment. Ultimately, it is this
positive vision that is the foundation of the alternative teacher profile.

However, it would be a mistake to think that educational background and vision alone will be enough to help teachers meet the myriad of needs presented in the alternative classroom. A relentless pursuit of instructional improvement is also part of the equation. In particular the theme of relationships pervades the literature on alternative schools; although these references to relationships have been primarily about the importance of student-teacher relationships, I would also argue that this current of collaboration also runs through the literature regarding alternative teachers and professional development.

Consideration of relationships, among teachers, students, and school-level administrators are paramount to successful, effective professional development. It is also imperative that alternative schools and education programs begin to gather more data about teacher effectiveness, teacher preparation, and teacher development in alternative schools. Without this data it is impossible to determine what adjustments need to be made to the schools, the teachers, and the development offered. It is through improving the quality, preparation, and development of teachers in alternative schools that the alternative school movement will be successful.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS

Quality alternative education programs, which have successfully reengaged some of the hardest-to-teach young people, have vital information about what works in secondary education, information which could assist greatly efforts to improve all high schools. Communities need to learn from the best alternative education programs to ensure strong principles of youth development, supports for needy youth, and academic rigor. (Martin & Brand, 2006, p. 33)

This qualitative study was focused on examining the professional development in Massachusetts' public alternative schools using the theoretical framework laid out in the literature review as well as indicators of high-quality professional development as detailed by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC, now called Learning Forward). It was guided by the overarching question, “What form do professional development programs take in Massachusetts' public, alternative schools?” Four sub-questions aided in assessing the data:

1. What opportunities for professional learning currently exist?

2. What are the goals of the professional development programs?

3. What perspectives do teachers and principals or directors hold that may influence professional development?

4. How do these professional development programs compare with the characteristics of high-quality professional development programs as described by the research and by the standards of the NSDC?
The research took place in two phases, open-ended questionnaires and interviews, to provide a comprehensive examination of professional development in alternative schools. This chapter details the research design, including the sample, the data collection methods, and the data analysis method.

**Research Design**

**Sample.** At the time of the study, the Massachusetts Department of Education (MA DOE) (2010) identified 190 schools as meeting their definition of a public alternative school. The schools were sorted using the MA DOE classification system, which classified schools according to:

- **Type of students served**—Alternative education programs/schools include those targeted to very specific populations (e.g., parenting teens, expelled students, students retained in grade nine), as well as a more general enrollment that includes a broader base of students who have risk factors for dropping out of school.
- **Grade level(s) served**—Alternative education programs/schools include those that are focused on a particular grade level (or levels) such as at the middle school and/or high school grades.
- **Setting**—Alternative education programs/schools may be established within the traditional school during the regular school day; within the traditional school after the regular school day; or in a separate, off-site location.
- **Extent of involvement with the traditional school**—Alternative education
programs include those that use all, some, or none of the traditional school's teachers and classrooms. (para. 1)

The following schools, although alternative according to the MA DOE definition, were considered beyond the purview of this study: charter schools, schools that only offer technology-based instruction, juvenile detention centers, middle schools, and schools that were primarily night schools. These schools were excluded in order to create a more uniform sample and because I am interested primarily in high schools that are connected to the district and to the main high school. The schools selected for the study also met Raywid's (1983) criteria for an alternative school:

1. Be an administrative unit with its own personnel and program: a school or a school-within-a-school, but not just a course or sequence.
2. Be open to all within the district on an optional, not assignment, basis.
3. Be a unit deliberately differentiated from others in order to accommodate learner needs or interests, or parental preferences. (p. 191)

To determine if schools qualified for my study, I used the MA DOE comprehensive list to contact or research each school. Schools were eliminated because they did not fit the criteria, were duplicate postings, or had been closed. These actions resulted in a pool of 60 schools. Of the 60 schools, 6 were mailed the survey but did not complete it, 27 completed the survey, 12 did not return correspondence, 3 districts declined, and 12 schools declined to participate for other reasons such as time constraints. In total, 27 schools participated yielding a 45% rate of return. In the 27 participating schools, all administrators and teachers were invited to participate. Administrators from 20 schools
participated, yielding a total of 23 surveys. Of those 23 surveys, 21 or 91.3% were completed. Teachers from 22 schools participated, yielding a total of 79 surveys. Of those 79 surveys, 75 or 94.9% were completed. In total, there were 102 surveys completed.

Participants

Administrators. Because alternative schools have a wide variety of organizational structures, the term administrator will be used to refer to the person who is the leader for the alternative school; this could be a principal, lead teacher, teacher in charge, or director. Twenty-three administrators began the survey and 21 completed it. Of the sample, 65.2% were male and 34.8% were female. Ages ranged from the 30s to the 60s with 8% declining to respond: 30% were in their 30s; 21% were in their 40s; 34% were in their 50s; 4% were in their 60s. Most held multiple licenses: 52% held Massachusetts Administrator’s licenses; 21% held Counseling or Social Worker certifications; 30% held Special Education licensure; and, 43% held subject area licenses. Although none of the participants held doctoral degrees in education, 30% had earned Certificates of Advanced Graduate Study and 60% had earned either a Master of Arts, Master of Arts in Education, or a Master of Social Work. Sixty percent had 1-9 years of experience as an administrator in an alternative school; of the 60%, 39% had less than 5 years of experience; 21% had 10-20 years of experience; 4% had more than 20 years of experience. When asked how long they expected to remain working in alternative schools, 60% responded until they retire; 17% said 1-5 years, and 8% said they were leaving. Participants for the interviews were drawn from this sample.
Teachers. Seventy-nine respondents began the survey; 75 completed it. Of the sample, 46.8% were male and 53.2% were female in contrast to the more male-dominated administrators. Fifty-two percent of the respondents were in their 40s or 50s; 11% were in their 20s; 17% were in their 30s; 5% were in their 60s. Most of the teachers held multiple licenses with 62% reporting subject area licenses, 36% holding Special Education licenses, 8% holding counseling or social work certification, and 7% holding administrator certification. Fifty-nine percent had earned a Master’s degree, Master of Education, or Master of Social Work; 24% held a Bachelor’s degree; 12% held a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study; 2% held a law degree; and 2% declined to answer. A wide variety of subject areas (Table 1) were represented:

### Table 1

**Teacher Subject Areas Represented**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English/Language Arts</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Language</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thirty-six percent of the teachers taught more than one subject. Table 2 shows the teachers’ years of experience as a teacher as well as their years of experience teaching in an alternative school.

Table 2

*Teachers' Years Teaching and Years Teaching in an Alternative School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Teaching Experience in an Alternative School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5 years</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-9 years</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20 years</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30 years</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40 years</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked how long they expected to remain teaching in alternative schools: 58% responded until they retire; 18% were unsure; 11% predicted 1-5 years; 6% said 10 or more years; and, 3% were leaving.

**Summary.** Based on the data collected, a typical administrator was more likely to be male (65.2%), Caucasian (95%), and between 30 and 60 years of age (85%). More than half were certified as administrators and had education beyond a Bachelor’s degree. Ninety percent held either a Master’s or a C.A.G.S. Sixty percent of the administrators had less than 10 years experience working as administrators in alternative settings. However, the majority (60%) claimed to want to continue working in an alternative setting. In contrast to the administrators, gender was more evenly distributed among the teachers, 46.8% male and 53.2% female. Again the race distribution was heavily
Caucasian, which comprised 87% of the total respondents. Sixty-nine percent of the teachers fell in the 30-60 years old age range. A wide variety of subject areas were represented, with the heaviest concentration in the Core Subject Areas: English, social studies, mathematics, and science. Sixty-two percent were certified in their subject area and 36% were certified in Special Education. Seventy-one percent held advanced degrees such as Master’s degrees and C.A.G.S. Although more than half (59%) had been teaching for more than 10 years, only 37% had been teaching in alternative programs for more than 10 years. Thirty-two percent of the teachers reported teaching in alternative programs for less than five years. However, more than half (58%) wanted to remain teaching in alternative programs until they retired.

Data Collection Methods.

Open-ended questionnaires. If schools agreed to participate, I sent open-ended questionnaires to both administrators and teachers via Survey Monkey, mailed paper questionnaires, and, in some cases, attended faculty meetings to administer a paper copy of the survey. Follow-up calls and e-mails were utilized to help gain a higher rate of return.

For phase one, two open-ended questionnaires were developed: one for administrators, including principals, lead teachers, or teachers in charge (see Appendix 1), and another for teachers (see Appendix 2). Each questionnaire elicited background information (gender, age, race, education, and years of service) from the participants. Each questionnaire also included open-ended response questions designed to provide a
snapshots of the teachers’ and administrator’s experiences with professional development at their schools. Sample open-ended questions from the administrator questionnaire included:

1. What is the goal of professional development offered at your school?
2. What topics/issues/strategies has your professional development covered in the past three to five years?
3. How have the professional development experiences influenced the teaching in your school?
4. As an administrator, what supports are offered to you in terms of being the instructional leader?

Sample open-ended questions from the teacher questionnaire included:

1. When you began working in an alternative school, did you feel prepared for the demands that you faced? Why or why not?
2. How have your professional development experiences influenced your teaching?
3. Overall, how would you assess the professional development available to you? Why?
4. From whom or where have you learned the most about your practice as an alternative school teacher?

I piloted the open-ended questionnaires at my school, the High School Extension Program, located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Participants took approximately forty minutes to complete the pilot questionnaire. Based on the results of this initial attempt, I
modified the questions, contacted another local alternative program, and piloted the modified questionnaires there. Based on these data, I further modified the questionnaires, adding open-ended questions about how often professional development occurred, teacher and administrator preparation, and providing participants an opportunity to share additional comments or volunteer for an interview.

After I acquired permission to conduct my research from the Institutional Review Board at Boston University, I contacted sites meeting the criteria via telephone and e-mail. Once I received permission to conduct the questionnaire, I distributed and collected them via Survey Monkey, mail, and in person.

**Interviews.** From the sample of schools that responded to the questionnaire, I originally intended to select four schools where the responses about professional development were positive so that I could conduct follow-up interviews with administrators/lead teachers and focus groups of at least the core (English, mathematics, science, and history) teachers in order to provide further insight into the data. However, when I contacted principals to request the school's further participation and to arrange a focus group, it was close to the end of the school year and scheduling a focus group was not feasible. To remedy this problem, I then re-examined the survey data and identified each teacher and administrator who had responded positively to the question, “If you would like to participate in an interview, please include your email and contact information.” To determine if the responses about professional development were positive, I examined the following questions for the principals:

- How would you describe the professional development at your school?
- How have the professional development experiences influenced the teaching in your school?
- Is the professional development relevant to working in an alternative school? Please explain.
- Overall, how would you assess the professional development offered at your school? Why?

For the teachers, I looked at the responses to the following questions:
- How would you describe the professional development at your school? Please explain and provide examples.
- How have your professional development experiences influenced your teaching?
- Is your professional development relevant to working in an alternative school? Please explain.
- Overall, how would you assess the professional development offered at your school? Why?

Then, I cross-referenced them to determine who had the most positive responses across the questions. Although I tried to select teachers and administrators from the same school, this was only possible in two cases. Additionally, not everyone interviewed had positive comments regarding professional development, as it was difficult to find subjects who were willing to participate. In the end, I conducted a total of fifteen interviews—six with administrators and nine with teachers—in person or over the telephone. All subjects—administrators and teachers—participated in semi-structured interviews using open-ended interview questions in order to offer additional insight regarding professional
development. The depth of the responses as well as the variety of perspectives yielded a more well-rounded picture than what the originally intended focus groups could have. Interview guides (see Appendix 3) were constructed based on the data gleaned from the questionnaire and included a few questions very similar to the ones in the questionnaire in order to check for consistency. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

**Data Analysis**

Demographic information from both the administrator and teacher questionnaires was calculated using Survey Monkey. Raw data from the questionnaires and interviews were coded to create narrative descriptions for thematic analysis. Open response questions as well as interview transcripts went through two layers of coding. First, I developed general codes to classify the information, such as “collaborative learning experiences,” “colleague connections,” and “attitudes about their school.” Then, these codes were collapsed to form three major categories: “Opportunities for Professional Learning,” “Goals of Professional Development,” and “Perspectives.” Table 3 below represents the major categories and sub-categories that emerged from my coding.

Additionally, the results were compared with the characteristics of high-quality professional development programs as described by the research and the standards of the National Staff Development Council (2009b). To aid in validity, I employed member checking when appropriate and triangulation among the questionnaires, the interviews, and my notes.
Table 3

Coding Major Categories and Sub-Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Categories</th>
<th>Opportunities for Professional Learning</th>
<th>Goals of PD</th>
<th>Perspectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Categories</td>
<td>• Mentoring or Coaching</td>
<td>• Gain new strategies / develop skills</td>
<td>• Themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collaborative learning experiences</td>
<td>• Enhance student learning / meet students' needs</td>
<td>• Preparation to work with alternative students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reflection and feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Vocation/Niche</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Colleague connections</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Topics covered and what is missing</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Resourceful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Their Teachers (Administrators)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Professional Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Description and evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Relevance and influence on teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• How change happens (administrators)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Role of the principal/director (teachers)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER FOUR: DATA AND RESULTS

People underestimate the importance of diligence as a virtue. No doubt it has something to do with how supremely mundane it seems. It is defined as ‘the constant and earnest effort to accomplish what is undertaken.’ ... Understood, however, as the prerequisite of great accomplishment, diligence stands as one of the most difficult challenges facing any group of people who take on tasks of risk and consequence. It sets a high, seemingly impossible, expectation for performance and human behavior. (Gawande, 2007, p. 29)

Both open-ended survey responses and interview data from administrators and teachers could be sifted into three major categories: opportunities for professional learning, goals of professional development, and perspectives that administrators and teachers hold. This chapter provides description about the plethora of opportunities for professional learning available in alternative schools, specifically: mentoring or coaching, collaborative learning experiences, reflection and feedback, and colleague connections. Administrators and teachers also provided information regarding what topics their professional development has covered and what topics they want it to cover. Next, the goals of the professional development programs were reported. Lastly, a thorough examination of the perspectives that both administrators and teachers hold regarding themselves and their professional development is reported.
Opportunities for Professional Learning

Administrators

Mentoring or coaching. Eighty-five percent of administrators surveyed reported that they offered mentoring or coaching opportunities for teachers and thirty-eight percent reported that these opportunities were focused solely on new teachers. However, several administrators commented that these programs were “limited” (A3, p. 2, q. 11), “not related to alternative schools” (A1, p. 2, q. 11), or “not helpful” (A14, p. 2, q. 11). Administrator 13 commented,

Every new teacher in my building (whether it is the first year or the 20th year) is provided with a mentor. The program does an excellent job of informing teachers about the culture and policies of the building. It does not really address pedagogy or specific classroom practices. (p. 2, q. 11)

Interview data yielded only one mention of mentoring or coaching, which merely confirmed the value of mentoring, “I think one of the best-laid influence on teachers’ practice is really to pair them up with other teachers and to have mentors. I think that’s one of the best approaches” (Interview, A1, p. 5). Thus, although there are opportunities available for mentoring or coaching and that “if done right, [mentoring] can be very rewarding and informative” (A16, p. 2, q. 11), the effectiveness of these programs in an alternative setting can be limited by mentoring or coaching that is more in tune with a traditional school than an alternative program.

Collaborative learning experiences. Formal opportunities for collaborative learning experiences—situations where teachers can interact with the goal of improving
instruction—do not abound. In the survey data, administrators reported that teachers had the following, limited opportunities: co- or team-teaching (27%); internal experiences such as observations, working in the district, or peer-to-peer (38%); and external experiences such as university courses and observing other schools (11%). Twenty-two percent reported that this did not apply to them. However, each administrator except for one revealed in their interview data that teachers have a set time to come together and have conversations about students. Collaborative learning experiences regularly focus on student issues, not instruction. Administrator 1 shared:

We tend to talk more about not the way teaching is done but really what’s preventing our helping our students learn. We’ll talk about what the students are going through at any given time or how they’re improving or how they’re kind of faltering and what we can do to turn that around. So it’s not really subject motivated as much as it is people motivated. (Interview, A1, pp. 9-10)

This time to communicate and be together as a team is important, according to the administrators who were interviewed. Administrator 4 explained, “I think communication in alternative programs is critical to the success of that program…. I’ve seen programs that don’t make it…because people aren’t on the same page” (Interview, A4, p. 3).

Opportunities for reflection and feedback. Feedback and reflection opportunities were not abundant with only 50% of administrators reporting that there was a formal time for this to occur; 35% claimed that these opportunities happened weekly. Twenty percent claimed that feedback and reflection happened informally and 10% said that this
happened infrequently. Most administrators cited weekly meetings as the time for reflection and feedback; responses included: “We meet weekly to discuss each student and the issues that they face daily” (A2, p. 2, q. 13); “We have case management on every student every week. This is probably the best thing we do. It is a time to share the frustrations and successes” (A17, p. 2, q. 13), and “We meet in staff meeting [sic] twice each week and go through issues and reflect about how to proceed together, this is extremely helpful” (A20, p. 2, q. 13). Informal responses included: “I meet with staff informally to give feedback, both positive and constructive. I am lucky to have staff that is generally reflective and responsive to feedback so the conversations generally lead to positive changes” (A13, p. 2, q. 13), and “Very few and they are informal and usually take place after a crisis” (A1, p. 2, q. 13). Administrator 7 characterized the difficulties with providing time for feedback and reflection stating,

We do our best to stay connected with each other through email and conversations at school. There is not funding or time to provide teachers with this type of opportunity in a deliberate manner; however, most do their best to reflect on their work through the use of student achievement. (A7, p. 2, q. 13)

Interview data further indicated that there was little effort to make reflection and feedback an integral part of teachers’ day-to-day lives. Administrator 5 shared:

Is it a formal thing for teachers to do regularly for themselves, no. It’s just something that comes up at directors’ meetings and principals’ meetings and some things that the superintendent will direct to all the teachers about doing some personal reflections…. And as I think about it even more, I’m not sure that
there's a lot of teachers doing any kind of personal reflection. Good point though.

That'd be something that I should consider encouraging them to do. (Interview, A5, pp. 14-15)

Or, as another administrator pointed out, reflection occurred either individually or in the course of weekly meetings; however, it was driven more by the immediate situation or problem rather than as a part of teaching practice. Aside from regularly occurring meetings, opportunities for reflection appeared to be more independent in nature and feedback did not appear to occur regularly or formally. Administrator 2's comments confirm this:

We use our meetings to kind of think about how things are going you know and to kind of talk about you know dialog about what's happening and what could be doing a little differently.... For me personally, I use, I try to use my supervision time as a way of you know kind of setting goals for the year and then reflecting on who I meet with, my supervisors at the end of the year, and just kind of all right, what worked; what didn't; what could we so differently next time.... We don't have any really formal processes other than our time together to meet and talk. (Interview, A2, p. 18)

Overall, reflection, when occurring, does not seem to be a rich, frequent occurrence focused on instruction and practice, but rather an opportunity for strategizing about child-centered issues and trouble-shooting crisis situations. Feedback seems to be limited in both scope and availability. In these alternative schools, neither feedback nor reflection attend to issues of practice on a regular basis.
Topics covered and what is missing. Survey data from the administrators showed that professional development covers a variety of topics (Table 4):

Table 4

Administrators' report of topics covered in professional development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instruction/Assessment/Data</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology or 21st Century Skills</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Emotional Issues</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior/Discipline</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCAS/NEASC</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite this variety, when asked about what was missing from their professional development programs, administrators sought the following topics (Table 5):

Table 5

Professional development topics that administrators want

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavior/Classroom Management</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Climate Issues (i.e. relationships with students, families, or the community)</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction for the Specific Population</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Emotional</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, administrators who were interviewed did not provide a laundry list of topics when asked about what they wanted for professional development; instead, the few who actually responded to this question addressed issues such as opportunities to go offsite for professional development and joining a network of alternative schools, as well as developing a specific alternative educator's license. Administrator 3 reported:

If you got to say anything in your survey, I'd like there to be a separate license for alternative education teachers (Interview, A3, p. 21).

What I would like to be able to do is start having networks amongst all of us in the state or on the northeastern corner or whatever. Those of us who work in alternative education, we can gather and share ideas, troubles, problem solving. Why do we all have to keep reinventing the wheel ourselves? I feel like that is a serious lack that would be so easily met.... I believe that one of the reasons why alternative schools keep “failing” or closing down is because we do force them to work in isolation. (Interview, A3, pp. 28-29)

The desire for alternative-specific training and a connection to other alternative schools is essential to eliminating isolation and promoting best practices, which is unlikely to occur when professional development is so widely distributed across topics.

**Teachers**

**Mentoring or coaching.** Survey data from teachers provided a more detailed picture of mentoring and coaching opportunities than the data from the administrators. Fifty-one percent of the respondents reported that they have had mentoring experiences and 38% reported that these experiences were positive, while 17% reported that they
were negative. Ten percent claimed that they had informal mentoring and coaching available to them. One teacher with a positive response recalled,

My mentor has been amazing. We have formed a nice relationship not only professionally, but personally. She has an open-door policy and always gives me the answers I need to hear. She has provided me with the necessary resources to grow as a math teacher and I’m lucky to have her as my mentor. (T34, p. 2, q. 12)

Negative survey responses described experiences where the mentor was unhelpful, did not understand the demands of the alternative classroom, or was critical of the current administration. Mentoring experiences seemed to be highly variable; as one respondent put it, “The experience is related to who your mentor is. My mentor was not interested in teaching me but others were helpful” (T31, p. 2, q. 12). Thirty-one percent of teachers credited mentoring with how they learned the most about their practice, and 29% said that when they needed help, they would go to their mentors. Additionally, there did seem to be pockets of informal mentoring that were important. Ten percent of the teachers reported having had this type of experience. Moreover, colleagues were the most often (71%) sought-after source of support when teachers were struggling or needed help with their teaching. As one teacher put it:

I have learned most about working in an alternative school from my colleagues. I speak often with the director of the alternative school and school psychologist about how to handle certain situations. The other teachers in the program have extensive experience and are a great resource. (T65, p. 2, q. 4)

Interview data provided no comments regarding mentoring. When asked, “What has
impacted or changed your teaching?” most of the teachers interviewed credited experience, the students, and their own adaptability rather than colleagues or mentoring.

**Collaborative learning experiences.** Survey data from the teachers showed minimal access to formal, collaborative learning experiences. Eighteen percent participated in co-teaching or co-planning; 14% referred to collaborative learning as meetings or professional development sessions; and 21% said they had no access. Only 2% said that they had collaborative learning experiences with other alternative schools. Seven percent commented on the lack of depth or infrequency of these opportunities; one teacher wrote, “When I first came to the alt program, our director tried to do a collaborative thing but was sabotaged by teachers who didn’t want her to succeed. I haven’t seen much collaborative training since then” (T1, p. 2, q. 14). Another teacher offered, “I have no experience with collaborative learning. I sail my own ship” (T12, p. 2, q. 14). A concerning outcome of the lack of collaboration is a lack of connection among teachers; one teacher wrote, “At times we feel isolated—all collaborative opportunities are helpful—can not [sic] think of a time when they were not!” (T10, p. 2, q. 4). Even when teachers claimed that they had collaborative experiences, those experiences were focused primarily on students rather than instructional issues; one teacher explained,

> We have weekly team meetings with the 9th/10th alt ed teachers and students, together and separately. We talk about how the classes have gone the past week. Teachers talk a bit about the kids, what they’re doing or not doing. We don’t talk much about what we are doing or not doing as teachers. (T52, p. 2, q. 14)
Although formal collaborative opportunities for discussing or working on instruction are minimal, 68% of teachers credited colleagues, mentors, and supervisors with how they learned the most about their practice. All of the teachers indicated that when they needed help, they sought out colleagues, mentors, or supervisors. One teacher wrote, "I have wonderful colleagues and administrators who will do whatever they can to help one improve instruction—a truly collaborative staff" (T35, p. 2, q. 5). However, the focus of these connections was not always instruction centered as one teacher commented:

I am the only history teacher in the school, so it is difficult to receive help with curriculum and instruction. With no department head or guidance in my particular subject, many times I feel as if I am on my own when it comes to curriculum. As far as classroom management, I confer with fellow staff and administration to see how I can better improve my skills as an educator. Administrative observations have been helpful in highlighting my strong points and aspects I still need to improve. (T37, p. 2, q. 5)

Interview data did not yield any commentary regarding collaborative learning experiences. However, based on the survey data, colleague connections, although not typically thought of as formal, collaborative learning experiences by the teachers, were important in the alternative setting. The focus of these connections seemed to be primarily student-centered rather than instruction centered. This did not mean that co-planning and co-teaching did not occur; it was likely that they did occur—just at a much lower rate than interactions about student issues.
Opportunities for reflection and feedback. When asked about opportunities for reflection and feedback, 12% of teachers responded that they have formal opportunities—evaluations or observations; 10% claimed that they reflect on their own through meditation; 6% credit students for their feedback; 35% wrote they reflect and receive feedback through weekly meetings and informal discussions; and, 24% report that feedback and reflection are infrequent or not at all. Evaluations and observations seemed to be the only formal time that teachers reflected on and received feedback about instruction. One teacher remarked:

I have been formally observed on two separate occasions throughout the school year. Although both have been nerve-racking, I feel they have both been very effective in highlighting my strengths and weaknesses as an educator. I like seeing my practices through the eyes of someone who is not in my classroom on a day-to-day basis. I do wish I had more opportunities for informal and unannounced observations, as I feel two was not enough. (T33, p. 2, q. 15)

However, another teacher remarked, “My principal is relatively new to education. I listen to him but do what I want” (T33, p. 2, q. 15). Although formal evaluation and observation seemed to be the primary way that teachers received feedback on instruction, its impact was highly variable.

Comments from the teachers who reported that their feedback and reflection came from weekly meetings, revealed that the reflection and feedback were primarily situational or student-driven and served mostly as a method of stress relief:

- Everyday at the end of the day, we reflect on the happenings that day. It is a
great stress reliever, and often leads us to trying different strategies to approach apparent problems. (T44, p. 2, q. 15)

- Almost none in teaching...but daily meetings with the alternative staff help in reflecting on our work with the kids. (T65, p. 2, q. 15)

Teachers who claimed that opportunities for reflection and feedback were infrequent or not at all suggested that a lack of time and a heavy workload inhibited these opportunities. Interview data reinforced the survey data and indicated that teachers who reflected did so primarily on their own or at group meetings. When teachers did reflect, the purpose of the reflection seemed to be focused on student issues or trouble-shooting and stress release, as illustrated by Teacher 4's response:

I think our weekly Friday meetings where we have the chance to reflect with the staff on the week and on the week ahead are valuable. I think the reflection as a staff is really helpful because sometimes we’re so focused on our, so much of our behavior modification program, we’re removing the emotion.... But the, at the same time being able to throw an idea off your colleagues and reflect on it, you know? How can I handle this differently? We lost that kid; he’s going to drop out of school. What could I have done differently? They are very valuable for that.... Then for personal reflection, it’s being able to unwind at the end of the school day. It’s not scheduled time, like after the kids all leave, just the chance to sit down and reflect on what went well and what didn’t. (Interview, T4, pp. 30-31)

The one teacher who said that there was little to no reflection cited time as the primary
obstacle; Teacher 9 explained,

Chance for reflection? Ultimately I don’t think very much or very many.

Whatever the proper English answer is…. There is always something that needs to get done and so reflection doesn’t get stuff done, I guess…. Right, it doesn’t help with that kid at that moment. I guess that would probably be it. (Interview, T9, p. 17)

None of the teachers interviewed mentioned feedback. Overall, there was little formal or on-going reflection or feedback. Teachers who do reflect either do it on their own or in group meetings aimed at discussing student issues.

**Topics covered and what is missing.** According to the teachers who were surveyed, the topics in Table 6 have been covered in professional development at their schools:

Table 6

*Teachers’ report of topics covered in professional development*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavior/Discipline/Bullying</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCAS/NEASC</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology/21st Century Skills</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Emotional</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment/Data</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL/ELL</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Evaluation</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Opportunities</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachers' comments typically reflected that they have been provided with a variety of options:

- Don't recall at present, but many various topics covered. LRE, PLCs, MCAS remediation and outcomes. (T61, p. 2, q. 7)
- Safe Schools, Executive Dysfunction. Frankly, I had to go into my file cabinet and look these topics up. The problem is, even if is [sic] a good workshop, the material just gets put into a file and never refered [sic] to again. I mean to do it, but I work 12 to 14 hours a day and I often bring it home to put into my “read” pile, but that pile is gigantic. (T39, p. 2, q. 7)

Most survey responses read like a laundry list of popular topics in education, with many teachers suggesting that they did not remember all of the topics to which they had been exposed. Also, noticeably missing from the list of topics that teachers discussed was any professional development geared toward leadership. Teacher 36 summarized the effect of this disjointed approach to professional development:

At times it is unorganized and can be ineffective. Many times district professional development is not useful or relevant due to the particular nature of our school and population. I do not feel any of the professional development so far has been particularly helpful or effective. (T36, p. 2, q. 7)

Based on these responses, it appears that there is very little continuity, follow-up, or focus in the professional development programs at these schools. In the interview data, teachers did not discuss the variety of topics covered in their professional development.
Despite the plethora of topics already available, teachers who were surveyed wanted professional development in the following areas (Table 7):

Table 7

*Teachers' requests for professional development*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Specific</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Emotional</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum/Instruction geared toward the Alternative Population</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior/Classroom Management</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Climate (relationships with students, family, community, mainstream)</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Morale</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the open response answers, requests for alternative-specific professional development repeatedly arose, as one teacher wrote, "Where to begin? I think I would like to have programs that address the needs of the students in our school and not something that is the current educational 'flavor of the month'" (T20, p. 2, q. 10). Interview data confirmed the desire for professional development that was geared toward alternative programs, as well as the desire to network with other alternative programs. When asked what they wanted for professional development, one teacher responded: "Um, it would be great if they had special development just for people that work in alternative high schools
like in the area.... That would be great; I've never seen that offered but that would be
great” (Interview, T2, p. 8). The need for alternative-specific professional development
is a legitimate concern as alternative programs work with higher concentrations of at-risk
students.

Goals of Professional Development

Administrators. Administrators’ responses to the question, “What is the goal of
professional development at your school?” were dispersed across several categories
(Table 8):

Table 8

Administrators’ goals for professional development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Strategies/Skill Development</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing Student Learning/Meeting Students’ Needs</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Help Create an Environment</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Idea/N/A</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance Technology</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Regular Education Teachers</td>
<td>5%</td>
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</tbody>
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Sixty-five percent of administrators perceived of professional development as a way of
developing teachers’ skills and meeting the needs of their students, which can be seen in
this typical response, “To enhance the work of educators in regard to improving student
achievement. Also, to assist staff with the opportunities to expand their professional
mind” (A7, p. 2, q. 7). However, exactly what the strategies, techniques, or new
developments are is unclear. Moreover, when combined with the data on the variety of topics that are covered in professional development, the responses to this question make it unlikely that there is both a coherent approach to reaching this goal and consistent follow-up to help teachers continue to develop in these professional development opportunities. Administrator 8 shared:

For the alternative programs, my goal is to get teachers talking about their instruction collaboratively and using that work to improve student learning. It doesn't always happen and there has been some resistance, however, we did get some peer observation in and develop strategies we all agree work within our diverse classrooms. (A8, p. 2, q. 7)

It is promising that this administrator is working toward collaboration and is focused on improving student learning, but without a consistent, ongoing, and concentrated approach it is not likely that professional development will change and improve teachers' instruction. What is even more concerning is that 20% of administrators either had no idea what the goal of professional development was or thought that this question did not apply to them. Without a clear purpose it is unlikely that changes in teachers' practice will occur. Interview data yielded no discussion of the goals of professional development.

Teachers. Teachers who participated in the survey identified the following as the goals of professional development (Table 9):

89
Table 9

Teachers' goals for professional development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Strategies/Skill Development</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Idea/N/A</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing Student Learning/Meeting Students' Needs</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation/Meeting Standards</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Help Create an Environment</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Regular Education Teachers</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the majority of teachers cited the goal of professional development as gaining new strategies or skill development, the variety of responses regarding the goals of professional development suggests that in most cases the actual goals for professional development are scattered. Additionally, 13% of teachers wrote they believed that the goal of professional development was to meet state standards, licensure, or accreditation. Many of the survey and interview responses acknowledged a desire to improve instruction and meet standards; however, they indicated a superficial understanding of how instructional improvements are made, as if instruction is improved by outside forces—such as initiatives from superintendents, technology needs, the home, or state standards—rather than the idea that changing practice occurs through teacher reflection, a critical examination of instruction, and ongoing feedback. In this data, the teacher seems to be missing as the center of instructional improvement and the locus of professional development.

Also concerning is that 17% of teachers surveyed indicated that they had no idea
what the goals of professional development were or that the question did not apply to
them. One teacher elaborated:

Well, we have four professional days a year. There seems to be a "scatter shot"
approach. It would be nice to have all four—or even two—days relate to the
same topic instead of a "one and done" approach. Follow-up would really be
good. Having said that, we are currently getting ready for our re-accreditation, so
much of the meeting time is devoted to that. (T18, p. 2, q. 8)

Without clear goals, it is unlikely that there is a coherent, unified approach to develop
teachers and change practice to increase student learning. Interview data did not yield
any further information about the goals of professional development.

Perspectives

Administrators

_Themselves._ When asked if they felt prepared for the demands of working in an
alternative school, 57% said that they were prepared. Feelings of preparation seemed to
be connected to some kind of experience with or exposure to working with at-risk
students—whether personally, in a traditional or specialized school or through study.
However, 19% felt unprepared, and 19% said they were both prepared and unprepared.
The administrators who said they felt unprepared reported that they had little to no
experience working with at-risk students. One administrator explained, "I first began
teaching in a publicly-funded, private school. I had no experience teaching and no
training" (A13, p. 2, q. 3). Experience also played a role for administrators who felt that
they were both prepared and unprepared. Administrator 8 commented,

I felt confident that I had some personal characteristics that would help me to work with this population and my mental health training was very important in helping prepare me in regards to having difficult conversations, but I don’t know that anyone is every truly prepared for the demands that come across your desk or through your classroom door in an alternative program setting. Despite working with these students for a while now, new demands come to me daily that I need to figure out how to manage. (A8, p. 2, q. 3)

Experience or lack of experience underlies administrators’ sense of preparation. However, based on this data it appears that an ability to form relationships with students may mitigate—though not erase—feelings of unpreparedness.

Despite the fact that interview data did not yield a more in-depth examination of preparation and experience, it did further illuminate how administrators perceived themselves and their job. From the interviews, administrators identified themselves as resourceful and their jobs as a vocation where teamwork and teacher buy-in were essential. The sense of a vocation and resourcefulness was seen most clearly in an excerpt from Administrator 1’s interview:

Let’s put it like this. I taught in the public schools for seven years. Proposition 2½ hit so I wasn’t going to get a contract. I went into alternative ed and I’ve never looked back, knowing that I would’ve made more money if I had gone back. But I never went back. I love my job. I love my population even though they’re very challenging. But I feel like this is what I’m meant to do. I really feel
like this is my vocation. Does that sound corny? I make less money. And I have the credentials to make significantly more but I really, really—when I get together with my friends—I have some friends I’ve been friends with since high school and it’s so funny. We get together monthly. And when we get together they’ll always say, ‘You’re the happiest one of the group.’ I honestly love my job. Now I’m not saying that there aren’t days when I dread it. Some days you get up in the morning and it’s like, oh my God, especially right before the holidays when the kids are acting out. But then like we have that Christmas break and I come back revitalized and raring to go. (Interview, A1, pp. 12-13).

She continued,

I’m at a disadvantage because I haven’t been able to access from work what’s going on [and available in the district due to computer problems]. So yes, it can be frustrating sometimes. But I don’t dwell on that stuff. Honestly, I don’t dwell on the negatives because it doesn’t get you anywhere. I’m a person that, if there’s something that has to be done, I’m going to find a way to do it…. I just need to find out what and how. (Interview, A1, pp. 20-21)

A strong affection for the type of student who attends an alternative school bolsters the sense of vocation; Administrator 3 shared:

I think in my case the reason why I feel like I will always be involved with those kids in some capacity or another is—actually I mean I just really like working with them. I think the world doesn’t give them enough of a chance sometimes and once you get in there and you know—people who are in traditional education
and walk by like a “scary high school kid,” they make a judgment about this male with you know his head down and whatever and you know I just say like once you get to know these kids you realize that their world has been so full of hurt...that they need people like us to kind of see that inside that they’re hiding for a reason.... I think you kind of like see behind that exterior and you know not everyone does but I think you want to stick with them. (Interview, A2, p. 10)

Although administrators saw their work as deeply personal, it did not mean that they perceived their work as an individual endeavor; rather, there was a solid belief that alternative education is predicated on teamwork. Almost every administrator interviewed mentioned the necessity of teamwork and teacher buy-in; Administrator 3 put it simply:

I really believe it has to be done together. When you are teaching alternative ed., you are working as a team no matter what. If you are working out there all by yourself, what makes you different from the others, you know? If you work in isolation. It’s about teaching community and the values of community and relying on one another. That’s kind of interdependent-independence thing.

(Interview, A3, p. 25)

Administrator 2 also commented: “What I think it’s really important to just really stay the course as a leader and push, but also to have it come—it’s starting to come from the teachers as well you know. So, I think it’s a balance of you know kind of working with them to kind of buy into it...” (Interview, A2, p. 2). Overall, administrators recognized that teamwork and buy-in were essential to running an alternative school and perceived of their jobs as requiring resourcefulness, experience, a love of the type of students with
whom they work, and a sense of vocation.

**Their teachers.** When asked about how prepared administrators felt teachers were for the demands of teaching in an alternative school, 20% of administrators said that teachers were prepared, 25% thought they were somewhat prepared, and 45% said they were not prepared. Again, experience played a role in administrators’ responses about the preparedness of their teachers. Lack of experience working with an alternative population and a failure to understand the specific needs of the students contributed to administrators’ perceptions that teachers were not prepared to work in this environment. Administrator 6 commented:

> Some are, some are not [prepared]. However, that can be said for any occupation. Concerns specific to at-risk students is the reality that there is much patience and flexibility necessary to maneuver through their sometimes toxic ways of self-sabotage and defiance to authority. This can be a challenge for a mainstream teacher in that those qualities are not quite as obviously needed. A big challenge for teachers is that if they come to alternative education with their own agenda; they will be much more challenged in supporting student success. What I have found with at-risk students is that they respond best when they believe they are worthy of the effort put out for them. (A6, p. 2, q. 4)

Teachers were considered prepared to teach in alternative programs if they had some prior experience with the population and if they could attend to the myriad of needs that this population presents; Administrator 16 asserted:

> Not everyone is created to work with people who think outside the box. But, when
you find someone who is...you and the students have won the lottery. Faculty needs to be able to not hold a grudge, change on a dime dependent on what each day brings, hold students accountable for their learning, provide a rigorous curriculum that innately differentiates. (A16, p. 2, q. 4)

Although interview data did not provide a deeper consideration of preparation and experience, it did provide a more detailed explanation of how administrators perceive their teachers. Administrators saw their teachers as different from traditional teachers, as resourceful, and as engaging in many formal and informal conversations about students. Administrator 1 explained:

And I think the teachers that are attracted to working in alternative ed have a little bit of a different slant on things. They go above and beyond. They just seem to give a little more, I think. They’re not limited to—a lot of my friends who teach in the ______ Public School, I hate to say it but many of them will not go beyond their workday, for example. Or if they have a period off for planning they wouldn’t necessarily—not all because there are exceptions, of course. But many wouldn’t spend that time working with a student per se. But I think in alternative that you find the teachers are really just the opposite of that. They kind of will give all of their time to kids. It’s a different type of personality, I think, that goes with alternative ed. (Interview, A1, pp. 1-2)

But definitely I would say they’re more resourceful, definitely, if they’re doing it right. Let’s face it. There are teachers, there are traditional teachers who go above and beyond. And there are alternative teachers who I’m sure just go for the
ride. They do what they have to do. But I do think that in alternative education, those who stay really want to make a difference; they want to do something special with the kids. (Interview, A1, p. 14)

Administrator 5 also shared a similar sentiment:

I'd have to say [that alternative teachers are more resourceful], based on my experience both with, for lack of another term, regular education versus alternative education; I think lots of teachers in regular ed become very routine. They find the approach that has worked for the larger majority of a class and they continue with that right along. Since we in alternative may have a class that the group sure has one common theme. They're all truants or they hate school. Those ten or twelve kids, you get three kids that are visual learners and four kids that are kinesthetic and three kids on an IEP and two kids are on 504s. You need to come up with a barrage or quite a repertoire to even teach a single, sole concept for a day. So yes, I think they come up with all kinds of ideas.... I think they're really much more resourceful in finding techniques and ways in which to get their point across. (Interview, A5, p. 8)

Being resourceful, however, does not mean that alternative teachers are working in isolation; rather they are engaged in a consistent conversation with their colleagues. Administrator 2 explained:

We share but we are sharing information among our team and with our teachers so that they know what's going on [with students].... So, a lot of it is just supporting one another. I mean, they're difficult kids to work with.... Um,
unfortunately...a lot of sharing is not around what can I be doing differently to help them learn this content material. But you know that is not often the focus. The focus is often around why is the head down on the table; why you know it’s identified as the kid’s problem not as what could we be doing differently. So, um, I mean sometimes the conversation can get there which I see is a positive but it doesn’t always get there. Sometimes, it’s absolutely just venting like this is hard work and we need to get it out you know.... I mean it is important to know that you’re not there in isolation. I mean we’ve got teachers in tears sometimes and frustrated you know. I mean I think—I mean another piece of our model that I think is really important is that we are pretty well staffed so there is a lot of support. (Interview, A2, pp. 6-7)

Administrators 3, 4, 5, and 6 also commented on the importance of regular communication and noted that they all built time into the week for these discussions to occur. However, as Administrator 2 pointed out, these discussions are not really focused on instructional issues; they serve as an opportunity to trouble-shoot, vent, and build the team.

**Professional development.** When asked to describe the professional development at their school 40% of administrators offered negative responses, 30% offered positive responses, 15% offered that it was adequate, and 15% said that it did not apply. Negative responses highlighted administrators’ perceptions that professional development is inadequate, inappropriate, and inconsistent. Interview data also supported this pattern. Administrator 3 described professional development as “non existent” and elaborated on
the reasons why:

I was a lead presenter at the alternative ed. conference, so I got to go. It's not possible [for all teachers to go].... I think that we work with a marginalized population. I think that in order to do stuff it needs to be ongoing and that's a difficult thing. If you take all the teachers out to this ongoing thing and they are supposed to be working with those children that are already marginalized. What about the teachers for those children? It's not something that they are willing to support in out of school time because of budgets are being cut. How do you choose what it is you are going to do? We can offer our classes and differentiation education *ad nauseum*, but unless we are in the classroom supporting it, how are we going to be able to relate and make it work? Part of it is in the empower issue, part of it is a financial issue, part of it is they are the "others" issue. (Interview, A3, pp. 12-13)

Administrator 5 openly admitted:

[Our professional development] needs work. And it should probably be, instead of doing it year by year, we'd probably be better off if we were to come up with some smaller intervals of time and identify issues and then go right into dealing with things in a professional way quickly. Because oftentimes we start addressing issues of need that happened in the past year. And while we’re developing techniques on how to address these particular needs, another one arises or that one isn’t even here any more. And that’s one of the difficulties with professional development. It isn’t always an immediate remedy. It’s usually something that’s
long range. (Interview, A5, p. 16)

Professional development, in these cases, lacked consistency, coherence, funding, and time. In contrast, some survey responses suggested that a variety of options and professional development that was geared toward working with an alternative population yielded a positive perception of professional development; "MCAS, NEASC, Bullying etc. good solid selection which results in 10 pdp's per year. We develop our own prof. development w/in the program" (A17, p. 2, q. 5). Interview data did not yield additional insight into positive perceptions of professional development.

Although the positive perceptions are important, they may not accurately reflect the qualities of a high-quality professional development program. When asked to assess the professional development at their school, 55% of administrators rated it as poor, 16% rated it as reasonable, and 27% rated it as good. The positive responses were neither overly enthusiastic nor overly detailed; administrators considered professional development good if there were opportunities and if merely they were applicable to alternative schools. Personal interest and motivation were also significant drivers for professional development; one administrator explained, "If you are motivated and want to learn, the opportunities are there. The administration encourages professional development and offers numerous workshops for us to attend" (A13, p. 2, q. 16).

Administrators, who responded negatively, shared the following insights about their perception of the professional development available:

- Lacking. One of the areas that we need to focus more on. I believe an issue is funding and organization. (A12, p. 2, q. 16)
• Not particularly well-geared toward alt. ed. needs (or guidance / school psych's or other support staff). This past PD day was oriented to behavior management but that was the 1st time since I've been at this school (4 yrs). (A4, p. 2, q. 16)

• I believe that the professional development involves too many issues that don't have to do with actual teaching. I think some of the things are more for "show," like flashy technology, and bringing in outside consultants and the administration does not use the talents of the faculty to teach each other or show each other successful practices that we are actually using in the classroom. (A18, p. 2, q. 16)

Other administrators assessed the professional development with one-word responses, such as: "zip" (A15, p. 2, q. 16), "poor" (A10, p. 2, q. 16), "inconsistent" (A8, p. 2, q. 16), and "non-existent" (A1, p. 2, q. 16). In general, administrators who assessed their professional development as poor perceived the programs as highly variable, insufficient, and inapplicable to teaching and working with alternative students. However, when asked if the professional development available was relevant to working in an alternative school, 45% of administrators responded yes, 35% responded no, and 20% responded yes and no. Additionally, when asked how the professional development has influenced teaching, 25% said that it has influenced teaching, 35% said that it has not, 15% said that it has somewhat, and 25% claimed that it had modernized teaching. Administrators did not elaborate on either the survey or in the interview about how they drew these conclusions, suggesting that there is no formal way that the effects of professional
development are assessed. Overall, these findings appear contradictory, given that more than half of the administrators assessed their professional development as poor.

Interview data also revealed that administrators recognized that change was slow and could be impeded by the desire for an immediate solution to problems, not prioritizing professional development, lack of budget, reluctant teachers, and a lack of time. Administrator 5 shared:

We kind of have the mindset that we focus on the problems that we have. We do participate in the district professional development, which isn’t always what we’re looking for. So through my weekly common planning with teachers, we come up with areas in which we want to work on. It isn’t always the area that all teachers want but it’s something that we can address and improve the school quicker. (Interview, A5, pp. 4-5)

Administrator 4 commented:

I would say that informally I play—I have a larger role informally in terms of—and by that I mean our professional development many times is adapting to what the regular school; I’m basically modifying what the regular school dictates that we do..... But, to be honest with you, it’s not my highest priority. I basically allow the district to do it and we kind of follow along.... I think it’s something that’s valued; it needs to be relevant. It needs to be, um, you need to walk away from the experience with more knowledge than you went in with. So, I mean I don’t know if the pressure of the value of the development that I appreciate the
most is the one that I utilize in my everyday dealing as an administrator.

(Interview, A4, pp. 4-5)

Teacher buy-in and focus could also be an obstacle to change as Administrator 2 explained:

I mean I think change takes time. I think, um, you know just from leadership I think it’s just important to continue to stay true and to—and it’s all change initiatives and goals and to just kind of keep pushing the course on that. You know I’ve been working to get teachers to work with differentiating instruction, and it’s annoying at times to them and they just want to really vent at the majority of our meetings; just talk about the kids you know. (Interview, A2, p. 3)

In these cases, professional development was not seen as a priority; it was seen as a quick fix. Professional development should offer a sustained effort at improving teacher practice and student learning, not a quick solution to the myriad of problems that can arise in an alternative program. Additionally, data does not seem to be used to inform decisions regarding professional development or to assess the impact of professional development on instruction or learning.

**Their role in professional development.** When asked what role they play in professional development, 33% of administrators said that they had no role; 33% said their primary role was to support teachers or to be a role model; 28% said they developed, planned, or facilitated professional development; and, 9% said they were a participant. Even though open responses offered little depth or explanation, interview data revealed that administrators perceived their role as significant but that professional
development was not really a priority or was done informally. Two administrators explained:

- Um, I would say I have a big role in it and I try to get you know spend some time at the beginning of the year thinking of potential ideas of what we can focus on for the year. So, I've tried to get teachers to come to some agreement as to what they want to work on. Um, and honestly some of those potential ideas come from what I'm thinking.... So, and then, I can, you know, really lead the meetings and help facilitate that. So I do have a big influence within the Alternative Program. (Interview, A2, pp. 14-15)

- I would say that informally, I play—I have a large role in informally in terms of—and by that I mean our professional development many times is adapting to what the regular school. I'm basically modifying what the regular school dictates that we do. So that if we need to change courses, we need to change offerings. I have to be prepared to help those teachers to gain professional development outside of here, visiting other schools. But, to be honest with you, it's not my highest priority; I basically allow the district to do it and we kind of follow along. (Interview, A4, pp. 4-5)

Based on this limited data, although administrators perceived their role as significant, professional development was not a priority and was usually handed down from the district, limiting the scope of professional development as well as administrators' ability to plan and execute professional development that was applicable to the alternative program.
Teachers

Themselves. Fifty-eight percent of teachers who participated in the survey reported that they felt prepared for the demands of working in an alternative program. Similar to the administrators, experience with at-risk students contributed significantly to perceptions of preparation. Although the majority of teachers felt prepared, 29% did not feel prepared and 12% said they were both prepared and unprepared. For those who felt unprepared, lack of experience and a sense of culture shock were the primary reasons, which can be seen in the following response:

Not at all! I came from white bread America—two educated parents, middle income with stable job(s) and, as a student in a middle and high school was mostly directed into gifted and talented programs and college-level academics. I had very little understanding of the spectrum of economic and cultural diversity that existed even within my mostly homogenous community (my father was an Air Force officer and all of my schools were on military installations and mostly populated by other military brats from very similar backgrounds as my own). And teacher preparation, with the exception of the final internship, was mostly done without exposure to students (ironic, no?). My student teaching gave me a small glimpse of the greater student body, but it wasn’t until I arrived here that I became aware of the depth of poverty that existed elsewhere in our community. Even more shocking was the degree of trauma that so many of my students have experienced with regard to substance abuse (both parents and children), sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, etc., etc. It was definitely learn on the job and I
made many mistakes. (T35, p. 2, q. 3)

Similar to the administrators, experience or lack of experience affected teachers’ sense of preparation. However, based on this data it appears that mentoring and support from leadership can mitigate feelings of unpreparedness.

Although interview data did not provide additional insight into the connection between preparation and experience, it did reveal that the teachers interviewed perceived themselves as having found their niche and as engaging in frequent conversations about students. Two teachers offered the following insights:

- I just sort of feel like I found my niche, I guess.... My kids are wonderful. I absolutely love my kids. I think a lot of people are surprised. Like they’re really well-behaved. And I think that’s because like in such a small environment you either build a good rapport with each other or you don’t. And we’ve managed to do that at our school I think really well. I really like the program. I think that there’s a sense of like accomplishment for the kids. And there’s a sense of accomplishment for me. And because a lot of them come from all different places, they have all different issues, I feel like it’s rewarding. (Interview, T1, part 2, pp. 2-3)

- Again, that’s a personality thing. I had a para who got his teaching degree a couple years ago and it [alternative teaching] just really annoyed the hell out of him. That’s no fault on his part. That’s no short coming [sic] on his part. He’s teaching business classes in the high school and he’s very happy now. That’s his niche. At the same time, it’s like when I meet people and they find
out what I do and they go, oh you are a saint. No, I’m not. This is my niche. This is just where I belong. When you are in your niche, as difficult as it is, you stay with it. I do think, the big thing that keeps teachers with it, you have a number of failures, but you have a lot of successes. A lot of success stories where other people weren’t succeeding and where the writing seemed to be on the wall that this kid was just going to go straight down the toilet. When it doesn’t happen, how can you compare with that? (Interview, T8, pp. 16-18).

The teachers interviewed perceived teaching in an alternative school as suited for people with a specific personality; however, there was little discussion about how to develop this personality—either you had it or you did not, either it was your niche or it was not.

Teacher 5 commented:

I think that a person that is going to be attracted to kids who are button pushers and that you really have to work with and spend time with is somebody who probably likes a challenge. And so they’re going to like the challenges that come up and they’re going to want to solve them themselves maybe. (Interview, T5, p. 13)

Teacher 8 explained:

It definitely appeals to a certain personality. You have to appreciate the quirky kids. You know? Which is what works for me; it’s appreciating the kids who don’t march to the same drummer.... So when you become a teacher it’s really appreciating the kids that don’t fit the mold because you didn’t fit the mold.... It takes a certain personality. There’s got to be a lot of irreverence. A quirky sense
of humor sometimes and then what I see here is an awful lot of men that teach, probably all the men that teach down here, with only a couple of exceptions are coaches. They are involved in coaching and so they are in this type of teaching almost as a life coach. That coaching personality, whatever that is. (Interview, T8, pp. 15-16)

Building relationships with students, being primarily responsible for students’ learning, being successful where others had not been, and enjoying a challenge were all factors in why teachers enjoyed working in alternative programs and seemed to delineate, in part, what made this their “niche” or why their personality is the type for alternative teaching. What was encouraging about this perspective was the enthusiasm for working with this type of student, as well as the recognition that there was a specific skill set that was necessary. However, what was limiting about this perspective was the idea that these traits were inherent rather than learned and cultivated.

Teachers also perceived themselves as having frequent conversations about students. These conversations, seen as important, highlighted student issues primarily and did not focus on instructional matters. Teacher 9 shared:

The conversations are very important. I don’t know—we have them pretty much every day to assess where kids are at, what are the hot button issues that we have to be dealing with, what kids are struggling with, what are the different issues? They are more around big picture stuff with the kids. We don’t tend to talk about teaching all that much in those discussions. The teaching and the instructional stuff aren’t the most important at any given moment for the ids. We may talk
about how to get them to produce work or get to class on time, but it’s not often a specific in class teaching strategies that—you know what I mean? (Interview, T9, pp. 8-9)

Teacher 4 also offered a response that is representative of the other transcripts:

We, as a staff of the alternative staff, every Friday afternoon [meet]. It’s just kind of a chance to rehash the week, talk about the week to follow, the week we just had. It gives people a chance to, because some of us get to know students on a more personal level, it gives people a chance to just give people that little bit of insight also. So-and-so is having a bad week because Mom and Dad have been fighting a lot at home. It’s our chance to kind of put everything on the table so that we can see things. Or, if I say, “Oh God, Eric’s been doing terrible in class,” his math teacher says, “I don’t know what you are talking about, he’s doing great.” It’s the little things that kind of help us be better teachers. We always have a lot of open communication. We have a lot of time to talk and I think that’s incredibly valuable. (Interview, T4, p. 8).

These conversations are perceived as necessary, important, and at the heart of being an alternative program. However, the lack of conversations and feedback about instruction or curriculum is concerning.

**Professional development.** When asked to describe the professional development at their school, 30% of teachers offered negative responses, 23% offered positive responses, 19% offered a list of topics covered, 12% said the question did not apply to them, 5% said it was adequate, 5% said it was geared to the mainstream, and 5% said that
there were outside speakers. Teachers who had negative responses regarding professional development at their school offered a variety of reasons: the goals were unclear; it did not apply to the alternative classroom; it was underfunded; it responded only to current hot topics in education. These responses revealed that professional development did not seem to be focused, coherent, or ongoing. Positive responses also reflected a variety of perspectives; teachers liked that professional development gave them time to vent, talk, and work on tasks that were important to the school, such as developing common assessments. Teachers were also appreciative that they could earn professional development points toward recertification and that there was an extensive list of topics available. Although these perspectives were positive in nature, the professional development programs they described had the same qualities as the negative responses—mainly, a lack of a focused, sustained, initiative to improve teachers’ practice. Interview data further supported this finding. Teacher 4 shared:

I think I spoke very despairingly about my district’s professional development offering.... I don’t think sitting in a room and being talked at for an hour. Quite frankly, if you were observed doing that as a teacher, they would tell you you are a bad teacher, yet they do it to us in professional development. As far as the opportunities being made available to us, I know that some people like to play the lack of respect card, but the fact of the matter is, we’re the smallest department in the building and to expect things to be catered to us is unrealistic. To expect the flexibility to not attend things that we know aren’t going to be valuable; that is the best thing that our school does for us. (Interview, T4, pp. 31-32)
Teacher 8 commented:

Most of our professional development experience—a lot of it like everyone else has focused on improving MCAS scores and making adequate yearly progress, which pisses the hell out of me. That’s happening in schools everywhere across the curriculum, across special needs, and that dominates. I think it’s a ridiculous wasting of a professional development product. It’s been years and years since we’ve done something that I felt was really developing us as professionals to be better teachers. (Interview, T8, p. 23)

Overall, professional development was described as inconsistent, varied, limited in time, and as not being specific to the alternative population.

When asked to assess the professional development offered at their school, 36% of teachers assessed it as good, 13% assessed it as reasonable, 43% assessed it as poor, 2% said it was based on standardized tests, and 4% responded not applicable. Teachers, who judged the professional development as positive, described professional development programs that were very topic oriented, individually driven, and not explicitly applicable to the alternative classroom. When teachers who assessed their professional development as reasonable elaborated on their assessment, they described professional development programs that were not applicable to the situations that the teachers faced on a day-to-day basis and that were more focused on behavior than on instruction, practice, or curriculum. One teacher shared, “I’d give it a ‘C.’ It exists, but isn’t too much of a focal point. In an alternative school like this it might be because so much more is focused on consequences for student behavior. It’s a hard balance” (T15,
The explanations of the negative perspectives of the available professional development were similar to both the positive and reasonable explanations. Overall, regardless of how teachers categorized their professional development, they perceived it as separate from their day-to-day work in the alternative classroom. Both positive assessments and negative assessments revealed significant problems with the professional development that was offered; there was a lack of consistency, applicability, and focus on instruction. These findings were supported by teachers' responses to the question, "Is the professional development offered at your school relevant to working in an alternative school?" Forty percent responded that it was not relevant, 37% said that it was relevant, 17% said yes and no, and 5% answered not applicable. Interview data also supported mostly negative assessments of professional development. Teacher 5 shared:

I'd say in terms of availability it's a 10. In terms of what it helps me with is probably an 8 or a 9 in terms of support like in the sense of making me feel comfortable or morale wise or you see other people with other things and you feel good. In terms of my technical skills that came out of it, probably a 3 or 4.

(Interview, T5, pp. 3-4)

Teacher 9 commented, "They often end up feeling, I don't know, they end up not feeling particularly useful.... It's practically nonexistent. I think there is a hole in the school" (Interview, T9, pp. 13-17). Even positive responses indicated a lack of coherence and a reliance on individual teachers to find and access professional development. Whether or not teachers' responses were categorized as positive or negative, they all reflected an approach to professional development that was not a coherent, ongoing, data-based
approach geared toward improving instruction.

However, when asked how professional development had influenced their teaching, 44% said that it had, 20% said that it had somewhat, and 29% said that it had not. Approximately 64% felt that it had influenced their teaching in some way, which appeared contradictory to teachers’ descriptions, assessments, and perceptions of relevance of their professional development programs. Teachers who said that professional development had influenced their teaching said that I had done so because it made them think, offered strategies to work with students, or helped with technology. Negative survey responses were succinct and offered little depth. Interview data, however, revealed that although teachers were open to discussions and new information, more often than not, what they were exposed to was tedious, irrelevant, or state-mandated. Even if they found parts of the material interesting, they did not always attempt to incorporate it or feel required to apply it in a focused way in their classrooms. Based on this data, professional development appeared to have little influence on instruction. Both positive and negative comments described professional development programs that were topic driven and episodic rather than sustained efforts aimed at improving instruction and student learning. Teachers did not indicate on the survey or in the interview how they arrived at their conclusions, suggesting that there is little follow-up or accountability regarding the implementation of professional development initiatives.

Teachers’ perceptions of administrator’s role in professional development.

Teacher responses to the question, “What role does your principal/administrator/teacher
leader play in professional development or as an instructional leader?" were dispersed across a variety of categories (Table 10):

Table 10

Teachers' perceptions of administrators' roles in professional development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coordinates</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small to None</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support (Financial, Material, or Emotional)</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs/Directs</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor/Role Model</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused on Mainstream</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two largest categories perceived administrators as primarily coordinating professional development or having no role in it at all. One teacher shared:

We have a brand new principal this year. In my opinion, he has been doing a great job restructuring a school environment that was previously suffering. Typically, he leads professional development, but as they are district mandated, they rarely apply directly to us as an alternative school. He is not involved in curriculum or instruction in any way whatsoever. My hopes are that next year he can delegate some of the paperwork more effectively so he can be a more active face around the school during the day. (T37, p. 2, q. 16)

Lack of funding, leadership, and focus on development contributed to teachers' perceptions that administrators did not have a role in professional development. Teachers
who categorized their administrators as coordinators of professional development described their role as sending out emails, suggesting topics, finding speakers, or making arrangements for the programs. Based on these descriptions, administrators were not seen as instructional leaders; they merely coordinated professional development opportunities without integrating it into the daily lives of teachers. Of the teachers who elaborated on the survey, only one reported that their administrator had a “very active role—he is in and out of the classrooms, and is an integral part to working with students. Students and teachers alike go to him when they need assistance or have a question” (T43, p. 2, q. 16). Although this was positive, it was the only comment of its kind and even though that administrator clearly was helpful and visible, that did not attest to the implementation of any type of coherent, structured, ongoing professional development plan led by him.

Interview data reinforced these findings. When asked about the administrator’s role in professional development, Teacher 1 responded:

In the professional development that we do at the high school, I don’t really feel like any—I don’t want to make it sound like he doesn’t play a role because he plays a huge role in our school. But as far as our Professional Development days, I don’t think really any…. I know that like he had asked at one point, had asked the principal [of the main high school] if we could go through like a SMARTboard training instead of going to one of the other Professional Development Days. And it was sort of like things were already set in stone and it would be too late to use more of the budget to have somebody else come in and
do that sort of training. So I know for next year, that’s something that maybe we were hoping to do. (Interview, T1, part 2, pp. 7-8)

Encouragement and support were also mentioned as the administrator’s primary role in professional development. Teacher 9 explained, “I think having mostly sort of through personal encouragement, sort of saying, when you go to him with an issue or something, not trying to solve it for us, but trying to help us try to figure out to work on it, how to do it better ourselves, I guess” (Interview T9, p. 15). Teacher 7 said:

He’s very supportive. Anything that I feel the need to do or get trained in, he would support that all along. He would find the money; he would give me the time. He’s very supportive of these things. I usually bring the ideas to him. But he’s very supportive. He’s more the disciplinary being of the program. And when we have any kinds of problems we go to him. But curricular wise we drive each other. When there’s a weak teacher or something, we usually force them out after a year or so. It’s hard to deal with, the weak members. (Interview, T7, p. 23)

Professional development, then, was driven by teachers’ immediate needs and only if they brought it to the attention of their administrator, rather than being a proactive program aimed at improving instruction. The administrators’ role in professional development became that of problem solver, cheerleader, and coordinator of opportunities instead of instructional leader.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The pathology of American schools is that they know how to change. They know how to change promiscuously and at the drop of a hat. What schools do not know how to do is to improve, to engage in sustained and continuous progress toward a performance goal over time. So the task is to develop practice around the notion of improvement. (Elmore, 2002, p. 8)

Examining the professional development available in alternative public schools is important because professional development is an essential component of effective teaching. It sustains teachers, protects against burnout, provides them with opportunities to learn from their collective experience, builds their capacity to be effective, and prevents them from leaving the occupation. As alternative schools are continuing to grow rapidly due to the focus on No Child Left Behind (NCLB), more stringent accountability regarding adequate yearly progress (AYP) and graduation rates, the implementation of the Common Core curricula, and new teacher evaluation systems, “many school systems are beginning to look to alternative education as a source of information on how to work with at-risk and low-performing students” (Martin & Brand, 2006, p. 6). Although alternative schools certainly possess strategies, knowledge, and solutions for working with challenging populations, previous research has focused on classifying or defining alternative schools, identifying the characteristics of the schools and the teachers, or merely examining and evaluating the elements and structure of
specific, individual schools. In contrast, this research offers a broader picture of how teachers develop the capacity to influence student achievement within the complicated environment of an alternative school and brings to light the significant problems plaguing professional development. This chapter discusses each major category—opportunities for professional learning, goals of professional development, and perspectives of administrators and teachers—relating the major findings to the literature review and then drawing conclusions by answering each research question. Recommendations for further research and a consideration of the implications for practice end the chapter.

Discussion

Opportunities for professional learning. Opportunities for professional development in alternative schools were limited by obstacles and by a lack of coherence. Reported obstacles, which seemed to be prevalent, included lack of consideration of the specific population, variability in quality, and a limited focus on instructional matters. Of these, the most often repeated was the lack of consideration of the specific population, which indicated that districts and alternative schools have continued to ignore the requests of alternative teachers and scholars (Bureau of Legislative Research, 2006; Chalker, 1996; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Ruzzi & Kramer, 2006) alike who have called for specialized professional development. This finding is also consistent with Noeth’s (2007) study, which, in its comparison of alternative high school teachers and traditional high school teachers, found that alternative teachers ranked specialized professional development as most important.
Mentoring and coaching also seemed to be a consistent opportunity for professional learning. However, the quality of mentoring and coaching, which both administrators and teachers claimed was useful, varied greatly depending on the quality, diligence, and effort of the mentor or coach. Moreover, problems arose when mentors were more in-tune with a traditional model of teaching suited for a traditional classroom rather than focused on teaching in an alternative classroom. This is problematic as effective coaching is predicated on having a coach who is knowledgeable and skilled (Staub, West, & DiPrima Bickel, 2006); in this case, the knowledge and skills must be applicable to the alternative classroom. In addition, mentoring did not seem to focus on matters of instruction or curriculum, but rather on issues of managing student behavior. This singular focus on managing student behavior inhibits coaching or mentoring experiences that would “help teachers develop habits of mind in lesson design, learn to reflect on their teaching, and enrich and define their pedagogical content knowledge” (Staub, West, & DiPrima Bickel, 2006, p. 14). A similar conclusion was drawn from the data about collaborative learning experiences. Survey data from both the administrators and the teachers revealed that there was minimal access to formal, collaborative learning experiences centered on matters of instruction and curriculum in alternative programs; rather, what was predominant were regular meetings and discussions—formal and informal—regarding student issues and behaviors. Although the time to be together as a team and to communicate was considered valuable, there were few opportunities for teachers looking to develop curriculum and instruction skills in either group or individualized settings. This finding was problematic as Stevens (2008) pointed out that
“How adults work together in small schools is a crucial factor in raising student achievement. In particular, that collective work on improving instruction is a key lever for raising achievement” (p. 2). Without collaborative learning about instructional matters, professional knowledge is not made public, “shareable among teachers, open for discussion, verification, and refutation or modification” (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002, p. 7) and social pressure will not be exerted in order to create change (Fullan, 2008) that affects student learning.

Additionally, formal opportunities for reflection were sparse and opportunities for feedback were even more limited. Reflection, when it did occur, was either an individual practice or centered upon student issues. Feedback most often occurred during formal evaluations, which did not seem to happen regularly for all teachers. Both lack of time and a heavy workload seemed to impede opportunities for reflection and feedback.

Fullan (2008) argued:

People need to be able to compare themselves with themselves over time to assess their progress in achieving important personal and organizational goals...[and this] can’t be done without clear transparency showing causal relationship between practice and results, which enables them to make corrections as they go.

(p. 103)

Without structured time to reflect or to offer feedback progress, adjustments, and setbacks cannot be ascertained.

Despite flaws, a variety of opportunities for professional development—mentoring or coaching, collaborative learning experiences, opportunities for reflection
and feedback, and diverse topic-specific programs—existed in some form in alternative programs. The wide variety of professional development options and topics available to teachers and administrators was the result of an attempt to provide a comprehensive professional development program; however, in promoting breadth over coherence, more often than not it was a misguided effort to offer a little bit of everything to everyone. In seeking to suit all teachers’ needs and interests and meet district and state mandates, these professional development opportunities failed to offer a comprehensive, focused, approach to developing teachers’ skills in the classroom. The result was a hodge-podge of opportunities that few teachers remembered or actually implemented in their classrooms. These findings are concurrent with both Guskey’s (1986) and Haberman’s (1995) assessment of staff development programs as disjointed, random, and seemingly impractical, and suggest that the paradigm shifts in professional development “from fragmented, piecemeal improvement efforts to staff development driven by a clear, coherent strategic plan” (Sparks, 1994, p. 2) have not yet begun to occur. Additionally, these programs failed to take advantage of the already collaborative nature of alternative schools and relied instead on a “banking model in which [teachers] are positioned as passive recipients of information delivered by professional development specialists” (Anderson & Olsen, 2006, p. 369). Even though teachers were offered a variety of opportunities for professional development, these opportunities did not provide a cohesive, coherent, collaborative approach to developing teachers’ skills in curriculum and instruction.
**Goals of professional development programs.** Almost all of the administrators and teachers reported a goal for professional development, with the largest number indicating that the goals of professional development were twofold: to gain new strategies or develop pedagogical skills, and to enhance student learning or meet students' needs. A closer examination of these goals—and all of the other goals—revealed that they lacked focus and accountability. When the stated goals were studied in conjunction with the number of topics covered in professional development, it became apparent that there was a prevalent "survey approach" to professional development, where the objective seemed to be to offer a wide variety of topics and cover as many as possible. Additionally, given that most administrators and teachers reported that professional development occurred one to four times a year, there was simply not enough time to launch a comprehensive, focused development program aimed at improving instruction; rather, what was available promoted quick fixes that could be implemented or ignored. And, the goals rarely included any means for ascertaining whether or not teachers were trying the new approaches and whether or not these approaches were contributing to improvements in student learning. The weaknesses in the goals prevented depth, consistency, and accountability for implementation.

**Perspectives that influence professional development.** More than half of the administrators in the study perceived themselves as prepared for working in alternative schools because of prior experience working with at-risk children. Feelings of unpreparedness, when they occurred, seemed to be mitigated by the ability to form relationships with students. The administrators also perceived themselves as resourceful,
as following a vocation, and as recognizing the necessity of teamwork. In contrast, only
20% of administrators thought that teachers were prepared for the demands of teaching in
an alternative school, citing a lack of experience working with this population as well as a
lack of understanding regarding the specific needs of at-risk children as the biggest
problems. However, administrators did perceive their teachers as different from
traditional teachers, resourceful, and willing to engage in many conversations about
students.

Teachers’ perceptions about their preparation contradicted administrators’
perceptions; more than half of the teachers who were surveyed thought they were
prepared for alternative classrooms. Like administrators, they cited prior experience
working with at-risk children as their primary justification. Of those teachers who felt
unprepared, mentoring and support from leadership mitigated these feelings. Also
similar to administrators, teachers perceived of themselves as having found their niche in
the alternative school; many felt that it suited their personality because alternative
teaching offered autonomy, challenge, and the opportunity to connect with students.
Teachers also reported that they believed that they participated in many conversations
about students. Neither teachers nor administrators mentioned engaging in conversations
about instruction or curriculum, which are essential to improving instruction and
increasing student learning.

As for perceptions about professional development, 40% of administrators
described professional development in their schools as inadequate, inappropriate, and
inconsistent. Additional problems mentioned were time and funding. Moreover, more
than half of all administrators surveyed assessed the professional development programs at their schools as poor. The few administrators who assessed the professional development as good did so because the programs were highly individualized—driven by individual teacher interest and motivation. Regardless of the assessment of quality, open responses and interview data contained descriptions of professional development that were episodic, not connected to a common goal, not consistently applicable to an alternative classroom, and driven by immediate needs rather than a sustained effort aimed at improving instruction. This finding was also consistent with teacher survey and interview data; teacher descriptions primarily depicted programs that were inconsistent, disjointed, and topic driven, leaving teachers feeling that professional development was disconnected from their day-to-day work. There was no indication of an ongoing, focused approach aimed at improving instruction in the alternative classroom or at looking at teachers’ practice. However, almost two thirds of teachers felt that professional development had influenced their teaching in some way—a testament to the influence that professional development can have.

Sixty-six percent of administrators said that either they had no role or their role was merely to support teachers in their professional development efforts, which contradicts Stevens’ (2008) study confirming that “principals were crucial catalysts in helping teacher communities engage in structured and sustained collective work on instructional improvement. Without principal leadership in this area, teachers were unlikely to organize these efforts on their own” (p. 5). Although teachers perceived administrators as having a variety of roles in professional development, the three most
mentioned categories were having no role, acting as a coordinator, and supporting teachers. Funding, time, district mandates, and not seeing professional development as a priority all contributed to these perceptions. None of these roles, however, posited the administrator as an instructional leader, guiding curriculum and instruction efforts. If the role of the principal is—as Fullan (2008) suggests—"helping all employees find meaning, increased skill development, and personal satisfaction in making contributions that simultaneously fulfill their own goals and the goals of the organization" (p. 25), then the role of the principal in professional development in alternative schools needs to be altered. In most cases, the administrators did not plan or lead professional development. These findings highlighted a critical gap in the professional development programs of alternative schools—the principal as catalyst for instructional improvement.

Overall, the professional development programs in this study failed to meet the standards of high-quality professional development programs. Professional development more often than not was characterized as either conversations about students or as "one-hit wonders" on a variety of topics. Perhaps most concerning were the lack of clear goals for the programs and the lack of understanding about the importance of a professional development program that is sustained, focused, and regularly engages teachers in discussions about their practice.

**Comparison to high-quality professional development programs.** According to the National Staff Development Council (2009a) (NSDC, but now named Learning Forward), "the term 'professional development' means a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student
achievement” (p. 12). The professional development programs described in this study offered a variety of topics taking place one to four times a year or opportunities that teachers sought out on their own, which falls short from the NSDC’s recommendation that professional development “primarily occurs several times per week among established teams of teachers, principals, and other instructional staff members” (NSDC, 2009a, p. 12). Although administrators and teachers perceived the goal of professional development as developing new skills or strategies to enhance student learning, this goal was broad, unable to be measured, and not rooted in any data. Given the time spent on development and the general nature of the goals, it was clear that these schools did not have a “comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach” (NSDC, 2009a, p. 12) to professional development.

Moreover, although it was obvious that both teachers and administrators engaged in an ongoing conversation about students’ behaviors, issues, or social emotional needs, almost all admitted that there was very little dialogue about curriculum or instruction. Thus, the professional development offered approached improving student performance by mitigating the overwhelming behavioral, social, and emotional needs of the students rather than engaging in a continuous cycle of improvement that—

(i) evaluates student, teacher, and school learning needs through a thorough review of data on teacher and student performance;

(ii) defines a clear set of educator learning goals based on the rigorous analysis of the data;
(iii) achieves the educator learning goals...by implementing coherent, sustained, and evidence-based learning strategies, such as lesson study and the development of formative assessments, that improve instructional effectiveness and student achievement;

(iv) provides job-embedded coaching or other forms of assistance to support the transfer of new knowledge and skills to the classroom;

(v) regularly assesses the effectiveness of the professional development in achieving identified learning goals, improving teaching, and assisting all students in meeting challenging state academic achievement standards;

(vi) informs ongoing improvements in teaching and student learning; and

(vii) that may be supported by external assistance. (NSDC, 2009a, pp. 13-16)

Data from the survey and the interviews did not yield any discussion of student improvement data, educator goals, district goals beyond MCAS or NEASC, or a formal way to evaluate professional development. Although coaching and mentoring were frequently commented upon, these encounters were highly variable due to mentor or coach quality and interest; often it seemed that mentors or coaches were not alternative specific and not organized around a common goal for instructional improvement.

Lastly, NSDC (2009a) suggests that professional development should be “conducted among educators at the school and facilitated by well-prepared school
principals and/or school-based professional development coaches, mentors, master teachers, or other teacher leaders” (p. 13). This did not seem to be the case in the schools that were surveyed. A majority of administrators—as described by both administrators and teachers—did not have a role in professional development beyond supporting teachers. For most administrators, professional development was not a priority and was usually handed down by the district rather than derived from data on student learning in their schools.

Alternative schools, with their typically small staffs and flexible structure, should be the ideal places for professional development that is rigorous, ongoing, and focused on student learning. Instead, what can be seen from this research is that professional development was considered an add-on, an opportunity for personal improvement sought out by motivated individuals, or a district-mandated one-day interlude on a current topic in education, which may or may not have related to the alternative classroom. Clear goals, based on a rigorous analysis of student data, and a methodical, organized approach to developing teachers' instructional skills to meet the identified, academic needs of students, were missing from the professional development programs at these alternative schools. A close examination of the professional development programs in this study revealed that there is an overwhelmingly large gap between what professional development is and what it should be.
Conclusions

Opportunities for professional learning. There were many opportunities for professional learning in alternative programs, including topic-driven seminars, mentoring or coaching, and collaborative learning experiences. However, these opportunities were scattered, highly variable in quality, and limited in scope and time. They did not provide depth, coherence, or continuity and were not owned or embraced by teachers or administrators. Moreover, the focus of the activities considered professional development was on students' social emotional needs and behaviors instead of instructional matters.

Goals of professional development programs. Few administrators or teachers elaborated in depth about goals for professional development programs in their schools, suggesting that goals were not clearly formulated and articulated in their programs. Most reported goals were broadly aimed at improving teachers' skills and were not grounded in analysis of data about student achievement. Without clearly defined goals, the programs could not implement a coherent and focused approach to improving instruction and the effects of professional development could not be measured.

Perspectives that influence professional development. How administrators and teachers perceived themselves and their professional development programs was significant. More than half of administrators and teachers perceived themselves as prepared for working in alternative schools because of prior experience working with at-risk students. These beliefs were bolstered by perceptions that they had personalities suited to this type of work and that they had found their niche or vocation. The reliance
on experience and trait-based theories of competency could explain the lack of
engagement with issues of curriculum and instruction and the lack of a movement toward
cohesive, data-driven professional development programs.

Comparison to high-quality professional development programs. The
professional development available in alternative schools did not fully meet any of the
characteristics of high-quality professional development programs as defined by NSDC.
Professional development programs in alternative schools were infrequent, scattered, not
led by the principal or teachers, not guided by data analysis or clear goals, and not
assessed for effectiveness.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study was limited by an examination of alternative schools in only one state;
it would be interesting and fruitful to examine the professional development programs in
other states in order to determine if this problem is typical or atypical and to learn from
the experiences of other programs. This study also would have benefited from a deeper
examination of the goals of the professional development programs; I incorrectly
assumed—because of my professional development experiences at the Cambridge High
School Extension Program—that most schools already had clear goals in place. Further
research searching for examples of high-quality professional development in alternative
programs would be helpful in identifying best practices and improving student learning.
Implications for Practice

At a time when the nation is moving quickly to adopt common core standards and schools are challenged to accelerate gains in student achievement to meet federal mandates, states and districts need to move more aggressively to provide continuous professional development. Effective professional learning—which enables teachers to work regularly together to improve their practice and implement strategies to meet the needs of their students—must be a key ingredient in any effort to bolster student achievement and ensure that all students complete high school ready for college and careers. Without ratcheting up support for effective educator learning, the ability of teachers and school leaders to meet these new challenges will be diminished. As consensus among researchers indicates, the quality of teaching students experience is highly correlated with their academic success. Professional development is a key strategy available to schools and school systems for improving teaching quality. (Hirsch, 2010, p. ii)

It is clear that professional development programs in Massachusetts' public alternative schools—whether perceived positively or negatively—were not at the time of this study meeting the standards of a rigorous and thoughtful developmental process for teachers. The data on teacher and administrator perspectives revealed that neither group took much ownership for or emphasized professional development for curriculum and instruction. Instead, what was stressed was experience with and dialogue about students. In the alternative schools, learning more about instruction was subordinate to concerns about students—their behavior, their social and emotional problems, and their
circumstances. This preoccupation is undeniably important as a crucial aspect of what makes an alternative school alternative and is in line with suggestions from the Bureau of Legislative Research (2006), which advocates for professional development that addresses behavioral, social emotional needs, and behavior. What is overlooked, however, is “more preparation related to pedagogies that can help at-risk learners or learners who are disengaged or unmotivated” (Noeth, 2007, p. 119). This imbalance hinders teacher development, instructional improvement, and student achievement.

Because alternative programs are typically smaller in nature and do not always adhere to the same structural constraints as traditional schools, the opportunity for coherence and unity is enhanced, making alternative programs fertile ground for high-quality professional development to improve instruction. Alternative schools need to commit themselves to becoming “learning organizations” (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009)—places where all parties (administrators, teachers, students) are continuously learning and working toward improvement. In order to become learning organizations, alternative schools need to heed the scholarship of the past thirty years and begin to implement what is already known as good professional development and good instructional practice. Teachers and administrators must have a singular focus and commitment to building teachers’ capacity to instruct and to building students’ capacity to learn and achieve, both of which require a movement away from programs known to have little influence on improving teaching—“one-hit wonders” and professional development that flits from topic to topic. Educators would not instruct their students that way, so why do they continue to pretend that it is effective with teachers?
Kagan (1992) argues that teacher change is primarily brought about through a teacher's cognitive dissonance as they “struggle simultaneously [to balance] issues of management, social roles and routines in classrooms, instruction, and learning” (Grossman, 1992, p. 175). Out of this struggle, teachers learn to enact managerial and instructional procedures that they perceive as more effective. Most teachers in this study credited this experiential system of trial and error as significant in shaping their practice. Although there is much to be gained from this system of learning, it is an isolated approach that defies uniformity and produces uneven results; it also lacks a clear and measurable goal, which inhibits accountability and evaluation. The current method of professional development, in which ideas are poured into teachers in one-day information sessions, supports and fosters an experience-based system for change because it wrongfully assumes that all teachers are lacking is knowledge and because as a system it lacks support, feedback, and accountability. Wiliam (2007) argues:

Knowing that is different from knowing how. But in the model of learning that dominates teacher professional development (as well as most formal education), we assume that if we teach the knowing that, then the knowing how will follow. We assemble teachers in rooms and bring in experts to explain what needs to change—and then we’re disappointed when such events have little or no effect on teachers’ practice. This professional development model assumes that what teachers lack is knowledge. For the most part, this is simply not the case. The last 30 years have shown conclusively that you can change teachers’ thinking without changing what those teachers do in classrooms...If we want to change
what teachers do in classrooms, then we need to focus on those actions directly.

(pp. 38-39, italics in the original)

Operating under this misunderstanding and relying primarily on this method to improve teachers' practice is not only ineffective at improving instruction on a large scale or creating change, but it also exacerbates the isolation that is prevalent and works against the collaborative norms that already exist in most alternative programs. So much more could be learned and improved if there was a focused, goal-oriented, collaborative approach focused on instruction and practice.

In order to promote professional development that focuses on classroom instruction, educators in alternative schools should:

• engage teachers in defining clear goals for professional development and instruction based on the analysis of student data, making specific and explicit the skills that they need to develop in order to be successful;

• correct the imbalance of time spent discussing students—their behavior, circumstances, and problems—and focus more equally on teachers' instruction, curriculum, and the academic performance of students;

• “embed professional development in teachers' daily work through joint planning, study groups, peer coaching, and research” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 4); and

• support and assess both teachers' instruction and professional development through regular and ongoing supervision and feedback.

None of these directives are revolutionary, inventive, or complex. But implementing them may be painful and labor intensive if done right. Most schools and districts are
hindered by dealing with imposed policies and initiatives, sorting out competing priorities, and other distractions to be able to tackle suggestions like those above in a coherent and diligent manner. Because of their small size, collaborative environments, reliance on one another for support and troubleshooting, ability to make a difference for some of the most challenging students, and independence, alternative schools are already primed to become places where teachers and administrators could work together to own the challenging task of instructional improvement.

To enact this vision of professional development, alternative schools need to break away from the linear approach to professional development—both in terms of where it comes from and how it is conducted. Typically, models of professional development are produced and handed down in a linear progression from policy makers to district leaders to school administrators to teachers who may or may not translate it to students. There is also a linear, top-down method of teacher development—one-day meetings where information is poured into teachers. On both accounts it is like a poorly constructed game of telephone; by the time the desired result reaches most students, the message is so diluted and altered that it never has a chance to make an impact. Additionally, there is little coaching, feedback, or reflection to both support teachers in implementation and hold teachers accountable to instructional improvement and student learning. A constant influx of new priorities also results in an array of initiatives that are never fully implemented. What this method fails to account for is that teacher change does not take place linearly; it is a recursive process that cannot take root with a top-down approach.
At the Cambridge High School Extension Program (HSEP), the alternative school where I teach, we have embraced this recursive process and worked toward a collaborative, goal-oriented approach to improving teacher practice. As a team, we agreed to put an intentional focus on our practice, balancing the attention we pay to our instruction and our students. We have both Student Support Team meetings, where we focus on student issues and attendance, and Professional Development meetings, where we examine the academic work we are doing in the classroom; thus, the amount of time spent discussing students and instruction is more equitable.

To determine our goals for professional development, our principal engaged the faculty in the Data Wise (Boudett, City, & Murnane, 2005) process, which is an eight-step process that asks teams to:

1. Organize for collaborative work
2. Build assessment literacy
3. Create a data overview
4. Dig into student data
5. Examine instruction
6. Develop an action plan
7. Plan to assess progress
8. Act and assess. (p. 5)

We examined multiple data points—MCAS scores, our own assessments of writing, ACCUPLACER (a test of college readiness), and our Professional Development, Curriculum, and Course Materials. As a result of our data analysis, we determined that
approximately 50% of students were not able to write with the level of skill necessary to score “Proficient” on the state test and were not meeting grade level or college-readiness expectations as defined by the state standards. Observation, curriculum review, and task analysis indicated that teachers were not focusing on integrating writing into their curricula or using a common writing rubric to assess work and inform instruction. To address this problem and improve student performance, we formulated the following theory of action (Elmore, Peterson & McCarthey, 1996):

If HSEP teachers and administration:

1. Implement writing across the curriculum,
2. Use a common rubric to teach and evaluate writing, and
3. Work as a group to assess student writing and modify instruction

then, students’ writing will begin to meet MCAS, grade-level, and college-readiness expectations.

Using this theory of action, we formulated both a learner-centered problem and a problem of practice—both of which over the past two years have been refined as we continue to re-evaluate our students’ needs and our progress in the classroom (Boudett, City, & Murnane, 2006). In addition to bi-weekly professional development meetings as a whole team, we have called meetings of a smaller professional development team consisting of the principal, the instructional coach, the special educator, and a classroom teacher. We use these weekly meetings to refine lesson plans and assignments, discuss observations, and troubleshoot. This structure of whole group professional development supported by a smaller group embraces the collaborative nature of our school and has given teachers
the support they need to actually begin to implement changes in their classrooms. The teachers receive assistance with all of their activities—as a team, in their planning, and in the classroom—and are provided opportunities for feedback, reflection, and discussion about instruction. Although this approach is time consuming, it is an essential part of refining our practice and improving student learning together.

For professional development to take root, teachers and administrators must own the process and the responsibility. At the crux of this process is examining teachers’ actual practice—from planning, to assignments, to instruction, to reflection, to modification of future practice. Teachers must become comfortable with shifting their focus from the students to their practice and understanding their practice as separate from who they are as people (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). Without this distance it is impossible for themselves or others to honestly critique and hone their practice. When alternative programs begin to own their own professional development, leverage the inherent strengths in their communities, and depersonalize practice, then alternative programs will begin to improve their instruction and offer professional development that is coherent, data-driven, and goal oriented.
Appendix 1

Principal/Teacher in Charge Survey

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

- Male          Female   Age:     Race/Ethnicity:          
- Subject(s) Taught:                           
- Degree(s) Held:                             
- Years teaching:    Certification(s):         
- Years in an Alternative School:              
- Years as an Administrator:   Certification(s): 
- Years as an Administrator in an Alternative School: 
- How long do you expect to remain in alternative schools?  
- How often is professional development offered at your school?  

**Open Response Questions:** Please answer the open response questions as thoroughly as possible.

1. Please describe your school and faculty.

2. What makes your school alternative?

3. When you began working in an alternative school, did you feel prepared for the demands that you faced? Why or why not?

4. In general, are teachers prepared for the demands of an alternative school? If not, what are the areas of concern?

5. How would you describe the professional development at your school?

6. What topics/issues/strategies has your professional development covered in the past three to five years?
7. What is the goal of the professional development offered at your school?

8. How have the professional development experiences influenced the teaching in your school?

9. What challenges would you want professional development to address?

10. Is the professional development offered at your school relevant to working in an alternative school? Please explain.

11. Do you offer mentoring or coaching experiences for your teachers? How would you assess the impact of these experiences?

12. What collaborative learning experiences have you experienced or encouraged during your time in an alternative school? Were they helpful or effective? Why or why not?

13. What opportunities for reflection or feedback do you provide? How useful are they? Why?

14. What role do you play in professional development as an instructional leader?

15. As an administrator/teacher leader, what supports are offered to you in terms of being the instructional leader?

16. Overall, how would you assess the professional development offered at your school? Why?

17. Please present any additional comments, thoughts, or concerns about professional development at your school, professional development in general, or professional development at alternative schools.

18. If you would be willing to participate in an interview, please include your email and contact information.
Appendix 2

Teacher Survey

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

_____ Male _____ Female  Age: _____  Race/Ethnicity: ____________
Subject(s) Taught: ________________________________________________
Degree(s) Held: _____________________________________________
Years teaching: _________ Certification(s): __________________________
Years in an Alternative School: _________________________________
How long do you expect to remain in alternative schools? __________
How often is professional development offered at your school? ______

OPEN RESPONSE QUESTIONS: Please answer the open response questions as thoroughly as possible.

1. Please describe your school.

2. What makes your school alternative?

3. When you began working in an alternative school, did you feel prepared for the demands that you faced? Why or why not?

4. From whom or where have you learned the most about your practice as an alternative school teacher?

5. Where do you go when you need help with classroom instruction?

6. What topics/issues/strategies has your professional development covered in the past three to five years?

7. How would you describe the professional development at your school? Please explain and provide examples.
8. What is the goal of the professional development offered at your school?

9. How have your professional development experiences influenced your teaching?

10. What challenges would you want professional development to address?

11. Is the professional development offered at your school relevant to working in an alternative school? Please explain.

12. Have you had any experiences with a teacher mentor or coach? How would you assess the impact of these experiences?

13. Describe your experiences, if any, of serving as a mentor or coach for other teachers. How did this influence your own learning as a professional?

14. What collaborative learning experiences have you experienced during your time in an alternative school? Were they helpful or effective? Why or why not?

15. What opportunities for reflection or feedback do you have? How useful are they? Why?

16. What role does your principal/administrator/teacher leader play in professional development or as an instructional leader?

17. Overall, how would you assess the professional development offered at your school? Why?

18. Please present any additional comments, thoughts, or concerns about professional development at your school, professional development in general, or professional development at alternative schools.

19. If you would be willing to participate in an interview, please include your email and contact information.
Appendix 3

Interview Guide for Administrators

1. Tell me about your school. What does your school do that makes it alternative?

2. Describe your relationship to the main school. How does this connection / lack of connection impact your work/professional development?

3. What do you think is necessary to change or influence teachers' practice?

4. In my data, conversations among teachers and as a team seem to be very important. Could you tell me about the conversations that are happening?

5. Some of the survey data suggested that teachers intend to stay teaching in alternative education for the remainder of their career. Why do you think this is?

6. My data also seemed to suggest that when alternative teachers need help, they seek it out whether from other teachers, textbooks, other resources. Do you think alternative teachers are more resourceful than traditional teachers? Why/not? Does the environment foster it?

7. Describe your professional development experiences.

8. What role do you play in professional development?

9. How has professional development impacted the teaching at your school? How do you know?

10. Do you see professional development as an individual experience or team activity?

11. How would you evaluate the PD available to you?

12. Do you have any additional comments about professional development in alternative schools?
Interview Guide for Teachers

1. Tell me about your school.

2. Describe your relationship to the main school. How does this connection / lack of connection impact your work/professional development?

3. What experiences have impacted/influenced/changed your teaching?

4. In my data, conversations among teachers and as a team seem to be very important. Could you tell me about the conversations that are happening?

5. Some of the survey data suggested that teachers intend to stay teaching in alternative education for the remainder of their career. Why do you think this is?

6. My data also seemed to suggest that when alternative teachers need help, they seek it out whether from other teachers, textbooks, other resources. Do you think alternative teachers are more resourceful than traditional teachers? Why/not? Does the environment foster it?

7. What role does the principal / lead teacher play in your PD?

8. How has professional development impacted your teaching?

9. Do you see professional development as an individual experience or team activity?

10. How would you evaluate the PD available to you?

11. Do you have any additional comments about professional development in alternative schools?
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TEACHING EXPERIENCE

High School English Teacher: *High School Extension Program, Cambridge, MA*  
9/06 – present

- **Instructional Coach** (2012-present), duties include: working with teachers to develop and implement analytical and writing tasks in their classrooms; observing and offering feedback on classroom instruction; participating in triad planning discussions
- **Lead Teacher for Curriculum and Instruction** (2007 — present), duties include: supporting new teachers; planning and development of teacher professional development program; conducting teacher satisfaction surveys of professional development; developing curriculum maps; and designing templates for curriculum work and lesson planning; coordinating, developing, and analyzing school-wide writing assessment
- Worked with principal to develop, write, and implement School Improvement Plan, which included utilizing the DataWise process to identify a school-wide area for improvement
- Teach English classes, including Academic Writing, Writing and Literature, and Senior Seminar

8th and 11th ELA Teacher: *Prospect Hill Academy Charter School, Cambridge, MA*  
9/05 – 6/06

- Taught English Language Arts, Advisory, Tutorial
- Wrote 8th and 11th curriculum aligned to MA frameworks; authored middle school reading benchmarks and skill sets
- Whole-School (K-12) Faculty Cabinet Member; Upper School (6-12) Faculty Cabinet Member
- Discipline Task Force Member
- Calderwood Writing Fellow

7th Grade ELA Teacher: *Frederick Douglass Charter School, Roslindale, MA*  
9/03 – 6/05

- Taught English Language Arts, Direct Review, Advisory, and MCAS Prep.
- Wrote 7th Grade ELA curriculum aligned to MA frameworks
- Achieved 92% MCAS passing rate for ELA, 2003-2004
• Wrote vocabulary book tailored to my students’ needs
• Member of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership Team
• Coordinated the administration of a school-wide, reading level test; compiled, analyzed, and presented the data to teachers in order to inform instruction
• Recommended by Head of School for a site visit team
• Lead Teacher, After-School Program (2004-2005)

6, 7, 8 Teacher: Robert F. Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA
9/01 – 1/02

• Taught Language Arts and Literary Studies, as well as Social Studies and Math
• Conducted After-School Learning Center

Teaching Assistant and Writing Lab Tutor: Northeastern University, Boston, MA
9/99 – 6/01

• Taught College Writing I & II – complete responsibility for curriculum, teaching, grading
• Implemented my own course curriculum

CERTIFICATIONS

Director/Supervisor, ELA 9-12 pending
Professional Certification (MA), 8-12, English/Language Arts 2010
Initial Certification (MA), 5-8, English/Language Arts 2006
Non-violent Crisis Intervention Program (CPI) 2006

PRESENTATIONS

Graduation Rate Summit: The Power of Community Partnerships 2007
Sponsored by: Massachusetts Department of Education and Pathways to Success by 21
Presentation: Creative Program Design and Credit Recovery for Supporting At-Risk Students
• co-presented with Dr. Joseph Dolan, Principal of High School Extension Program

Beginning Teacher Conference 2007
Growing the Future: Meeting the National Challenge to Recruit, Develop and Retain New Teachers
Sponsored by: The Beginning Teacher Center of Teachers21 and Simmons College, The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and The National
Commission on Teaching and America's Future

**Presentation:** *Curriculum Counts: Creating a Strong Curriculum as Part of the Induction Process*

- co-presented with Kathleen Dunn, Simmons Professor, and Laurie Rybechi, Westford Academy

**EDUCATION**

**Ed. D, Curriculum and Teaching**

*May 2013*

- Boston University, Boston, MA
- Junior Fellowship: full scholarship awarded
- Dissertation: Professional Development in Massachusetts’ Public Alternative Schools

**M.A.T., English** (*urban charter school cohort with a focus on urban education*)

*2004 - 2006*

- Simmons College, Boston, MA

**M.A., Writing and Composition Studies**

*1999 – 2001*

- Northeastern University, Boston, MA

**Honors Bachelor of Arts, English; Communication Certificate**

*1995 – 1999*

- Saint Anselm College, Manchester, NH

**PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

- **ASCD**
  *2006—Present*

- **NCTE**
  *2008—Present*

- **NSDC**
  *2008—Present*