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Sense Of Belonging And Community In An Alternative Education Program: Perceptions Of Former Graduates And Teachers

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SENSE OF BELONGING AND COMMUNITY IN AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM: PERCEPTIONS OF FORMER GRADUATES AND TEACHERS

By

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Doctor of Education

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Abstract

A qualitative research design was used to inform the question: How do graduates and educators in a former alternative education program describe their sense of community and how did it inform their experiences? Four graduates and four educators, as members of an alternative education program, participated in semi-structured interviews. All participants were White. This study used the central concepts of two motivational theories: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory and self-determination theory as analytical frameworks. Six themes emerged from these eight interviews. These themes identify the importance of meeting students’ basic needs, especially their need for community and belonging. Results of this study identify the significant role being part of a community can play in informing the educational experiences for students and the professional experiences of educators. Specifically, the development of sense of belonging and the development of meaningful relationships appears to positively inform the learning process.
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Thank you to my family and friends for all your encouragement and kindness through my educational journey. To my husband, Patrick for your unconditional faith in me and generosity of unhesitating support. To my children, Abigail and Ethan, thank you for your patience and humor while serving as a constant reminder of what is truly important.

Thank you to my fellow EdD 8 cohort members and the educators who guided us. You taught me so much about the learner and the learning process. A special thank you to the supportive seven in the cohort who were a continuous source of support.

Thank you to my educational colleagues throughout my experiences in education. I dedicate this quote to you because you taught me what it means to work in community as part of a number of great teams.

When you ask people about what it is like being part of a great team, what is most striking is the meaningfulness of the experience. People talk about being part of something larger than themselves, of being connected, of being generative. It becomes quite clear that, for many, their experiences as part of truly great teams stand out as singular periods of life lived to the fullest. Some spend the rest of their lives looking for ways to recapture that spirit. (Senge, 2006, p. 13)
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction to the research topic and question, my rationale for the study, and identifies the importance of the study for the reader. It discusses the importance of meeting students’ basic need for belonging and community as a means to address the underachievement of students and further explores the limitations of such initiatives. Additionally, this chapter explains the personal significance and theoretical foundations for this study. I employed the motivational theories of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991), which focus on meeting learners’ basic needs, as frameworks for my research. This chapter also traces connections between my research and Ernest Boyer’s concepts in Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate (1992). Lastly, I provide an explanation for the research methodology I used in the study.

Introduction to the Research Topic and Question

The multiple roles I have held in education have informed my journey to find the focal point of my research. My journey was shaped by each role because it provided me with new insights into students, their needs, and their learning processes. The importance of appropriately meeting students’ needs, specifically their need for belonging and community so that they can grow as learners and achieve to their highest abilities, appears to me to be woven throughout each of these roles. No matter whether I was working with a student labeled as gifted or underachieving, as I reflect back, I see strong similarities between each role in the steps I took to be an effective educator. These
experiences helped me understand that meeting the needs of students as individuals and helping them feel a sense of belonging in their school community, are critical for their growth and achievement. As a result, I have a deeper understanding of the importance of creating community in the classroom, and that to do so begins by developing relationships and getting to know each student and their needs.

I am able to identify in each of my experiences as an educator times when recognizing and addressing individual students’ needs was beneficial for their growth. In my former role of a Student Achievement Specialist, one of my responsibilities was to analyze data and to identify students who might benefit from additional support in reading or math, as they entered high school. I looked purposefully beyond data points from standardized tests in order to help determine students’ needs. I visited each feeder middle school to engage in conversations with other educators about each student, in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of each one’s needs. I also involved parents and the students in the dialogue about the option and rationale of participating in programing to help students’ improve their reading and math proficiency. In this role, I utilized data tools and dialogued with others, to develop a deeper understanding about how best to meet students’ needs.

My role as a school counselor allowed me to have a more intimate and personal knowledge of students’ needs, as I attempted to support them in their personal and social development, academic development, and college and career readiness. This role required me to see students and their needs both at the micro and macro levels. My job often required me to address students’ immediate needs, but I also needed to see, anticipate, and prepare for how to support and meet the needs of students during the four-year period
in which I worked with them. Striving to build capacity in all learners by building relationships, identifying individual students’ needs, and creating a learning community where students felt they belonged were the central goals I worked to achieve in my role as a teacher and in each of my roles as an educator. As a result, this study focused on motivational theories related to meeting students’ needs and how they can positively inform educational practice. Although many small learning communities such as A.V.I.D. (Advancement Via Individualized Education), gifted education, and alternative education programs may highlight the qualities of educational programming focused on meeting students’ needs, this study focused on one small learning community of which I was a member. It explores and exemplifies key elements of two motivational theories and the potential of integrating their central concepts to inform the learning experiences of students in positive ways.

Block (2009) stated, “communities are built from the assets and gifts of their citizens, not from the citizens’ needs or deficiencies” (p. 14). Applying this belief to the field of education challenges educators to examine how community is formed and experienced by students and teachers. As a member of several educational groups having a sense of community directly impacted my experiences, in my role as a learner and a teacher. My feelings of connectedness and value correlated to my success and my achievement. The more I felt connected, the more my gifts and assets led my life because I was valued for who I was and therefore, I was more comfortable with the group. I believe the above is true for most students. This was especially true for students in my work as an educator as part of a small learning community: a school-within-a-school program designed to support high school students who were identified as underachieving.
The program exemplified key elements in how organizations create community and shape the experiences of their membership so each member was able to share themselves and their abilities. The organization and methods used to form community in this program were influential elements for both students’ and educators’ experiences. As a result, I felt compelled to explore the question: How do graduates and educators in a former alternative education program describe their sense of community and how did it inform their experiences?

In all of my roles, I have been an advocate for students. At times, it meant helping students to find their voice and to express their needs in their learning environments because they were not met. At other times, it meant being a voice for students who were at times voiceless in education. Identifying that student as underachieving, frequently happens. Because students labeled as underachieving often do not feel a connection or sense of belonging within the classroom, they may not feel empowered to voice their needs, especially when they go unmet. Schools in the United States have historically been organized around students who “do school” well (Darling-Hammond, 1997). But a one-size-fits-all approach to education does not work for students who struggle academically and some of these students underachieve or dropout of school (Ravitch, 2014; Rury, 2013). Developing a deeper understanding of how students experience their education may help in identifying specific effective strategies to support students who struggle academically.

**Personal Significance**

This section identifies my personal connection to the importance of meeting students’ basic need for belonging through their membership in community. It explores
insights I developed through my role as a teacher, counselor, and coordinator of a small learning community designed to support students identified as underachieving. It also discusses how and why this question resonates with me after spending twenty-four years in public education as a professional educator.

Whether it was in my role as a teacher or counselor, I formed relationships with many different students during my career. As a result, I often encounter graduates in the community. However, it is the students who were members of this small learning community who approach me the most often and most enthusiastically. Comments such as “I never would have graduated if it were not for the program” or “that program changed my life” are common. In a time when public schools are struggling to engage learners and reduce the dropout rate, I have wondered about what was it about their experiences that prompts them to share this positive feedback. In our brief discussions, they often reference their relationships with the teachers and peers in the program and how this learning community positively informed their lives. These encounters intimate to me that in some way, this small learning community met students’ needs in ways they were not met in the general school community. Understanding what appears to be the empowered feeling created from a sense of community may be the transformational tool the field of education needs to better support students and increase their achievement.

To support students who, for a variety of reasons, struggled to find success in a traditional, large suburban high school setting, the small learning community’s (swas’) design was purposefully organized. Students in grades ten through twelve were referred to the program by their teachers or counselors through an application process. The process involved the counselor sharing information about the program with parents and
students. Students also had the option of attending the alternative high school in the district.

Overall, the students in the program were reflections of the demographics of the school as a whole. Through unofficial surveys I conducted to align services and support to students in the program, I learned that the ethnic diversity of students in the program was slightly higher than that of the school’s ethnic demographic breakdown over a ten-year period. Over this time, the school went from six percent of students of color to nineteen percent. The most significant demographic was in students who received Free and Reduced Lunch. In the same ten-year period, the general school population went from over seven percent Free and Reduced Lunch to over twenty percent received Free and Reduced Lunch. However, typically, sixty to seventy percent of students in the program received Free or Reduced Lunch. As a group, their most defining demographic was their socioeconomic need. There was no way to track or identify students who would be classified first-generation college students, but through my conversations with students, I knew that providing students with supports and services tied to service for first-generation students would be critical to their future educational opportunities. The average percentage of self-identified, first-generation students was typically between ninety-three and ninety-six percent when students responded to an informal survey.

When I was asked to join the community by the team of educators working in the program, I knew it was a good fit because their vision for students aligned with mine, and the opportunity allowed me to embrace a variety of roles. I had multifaceted roles within this small learning community: I served as the American literature teacher, counselor, and program coordinator for nine years. In my role as an English teacher, I supported students
by using the curriculum as a vehicle to build skills and knowledge. This meant making connections between the curriculum and students’ lives and by differentiating instruction to ensure students’ understanding of the content. As the counselor, I provided personal and social, academic, and college and career readiness support, which meant often serving as a conduit connecting individual students with resources to best meet their individual needs. A significant part of my role as the coordinator was advocating for the needs of all students and teachers. For example, I advocated for our teaching group to meet in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). I also led trainings with colleagues to help them support students by building their capacity through reading and note taking strategies. Advocating for students often meant teachers sent students to meet with me to address concerns rather than an assistant principal. Teachers expressed that even though they had attempted to support the student and address what might be troubling them, they wanted to fully address and hopefully resolve “what was really going on with the student”, which was being expressed through what appeared to be poor choices and perceived behaviors.

Each role provided me with a unique lens to witness students’ experiences and needs. As the counselor and program coordinator, I observed students’ apprehension about applying to the program out of worry they would be negatively labeled as “dumb” by peers, teachers, or their family eventually transform into feelings of success and belonging. For example, students advocated for designing T-shirts for the program during their junior or senior year, which implied that students felt a connection to their school through this program. Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) suggested this transformation occurred because they experienced membership and sense of community: “Two main
constructs that establish a successful learning environment are students’ sense of membership in the school community and their perceptions of support from important people within the school” (p. 134). I similarly believe the transformation from feelings of apprehension to feelings of belonging occurred because students felt valued and pride that they belonged to school through their membership with the small learning community. What generated this transformation? Sergiovanni (1994) suggests such a transformation occurred due to a:

bonding together of people in special ways and the binding of them to shared values and ideas are the defining characteristics of schools as communities. Communities are defined by their centers of values, sentiments, and beliefs that provide the needed conditions for creating a sense of “we” from “I.” (p. 4, italics in original).

Because of our shared belief in our students and the learning process, the other educators and I created and appeared to have experienced community with these students. I believe the experience as members of this program was transformational for all of us.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

I use two motivational theories as the frameworks and foundation for this research by exploring their relationship and application to the field of education. To maximize students’ potential, and to ensure their gifts and not deficits lead their education and life experiences, Maslow’s theory of Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991) identify critical needs in students that educators must meet and to support learners’ intrinsic motivation. Though operant behaviorists would disagree with these two motivational
theories because they suggested that behaviors are regulated by reinforcement e.g. extrinsic rewards (Deci & Ryan, 2008), Abraham Maslow’s theory of Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1970) suggested that human needs follow a hierarchy from necessity-based needs to more complex individual needs. The most widely held view of Maslow identified five levels of needs: (1) basic, (2) safety, (3) belonging and love, (4) esteem, and (5) self-actualization. As individuals satisfy each need, they are said to feel compelled and motivated to satisfy the next level of need; meeting these needs is what motivates them, with their goal to attain self-actualization (Neukrug, 2015). Later, Maslow explored the higher-level need of transcendence and whether it should be placed above self-actualization and if two separate needs ‘Know and Understand’ and ‘Aesthetic’ should go between the first four needs known as deficiency needs and self-actualization. For this study, basic needs are explored and framed by his original five needs (Maslow, 1970). For this study, basic needs are explored and framed by his original five needs (Maslow, 1970). See Appendix A for an overview of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. In this study, I used Maslow’s theory to analyze how students, who were members of the program with which I worked, might have experienced success in the small learning community due to having most of their needs met, specifically, their basic need for belonging through the creation of this community. Maslow’s theory also stated that meeting certain needs must happen for growth to occur, and he also implied that the development of relationships in a community could be critical to improve student achievement (Neukrug, 2015; Sergiovanni, 1994). For example, Sergiovanni (1994) stressed that community is the tie that binds students and teachers together in special ways, “to something more significant than themselves: shared values and ideals. It lifts
both teachers and students to higher levels of self-understanding, commitment, and performance – beyond the reaches of the shortcomings and difficulties they face in their everyday lives” (p. xiii).

Self-determination theory also informs the field of education and educational practice by emphasizing the importance of educators meeting students’ basic needs. The main concepts of self-determination theory formed part of the framework for my research. The literature focused on self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991), and its relationship to education holds as its premise that for individuals to be intrinsically motivated, meeting three basic psychological needs is critical: the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

**Boyer’s Scholarship of Application**

This section connects the work of Boyer as defined in the article, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1992) by explaining how his framework connects to this study. When discussing the educational system in the United States, Boyer (1992) noted “university scholars urgently need to respond to the crises of this century just as they responded to the needs of agriculture and industry a century ago” (p. 90).

The current crisis of the century in United States education is underachievement and effective ways to address this trend. (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond 2010; Ravitch, 2014). Boyer (1992) challenged educational researchers to explore the question of, “what does it mean to be a scholar?” (p.88) His “paradigm of scholarship with four interlocking parts” consisted of the Scholarship of Discovery, Scholarship of Integration, Scholarship of Application, and Scholarship of Teaching (pp. 89-90). Each
part challenged researchers to go in-depth and excel in their exploration “to go beyond the isolated facts…move beyond the traditional academic boundaries” (p. 89-90) in hopes to respond to pressing human needs and inspire future scholars in the classroom (p. 90). One of his four interlocking parts, the Scholarship of Application, suggested that theory must connect to the human experience and research must pragmatically improve how individuals experience their lives.

Through the use of what Boyer (1992) identified as the Scholarship of Application, I hoped to “relate the theory and research to the realities of life” (p. 90). My intent was to gain insights through educational theory and analysis of interview data, to inform educators of the need students have to belong to, and feel, a sense of community, in an attempt to address underachievement in the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2014). Mattingly (1991) suggested that research also has the power to teach: “narratives not only give meaningful form to experiences we have already lived through, but also provide us a forward glance, helping us to anticipate situations even before we encounter them, allowing us to envision alternative futures” (p. 237). It was my hope that my findings might inform the field of education about how to enhance the formation of future learning communities to better meet students’ needs in education.

**Research Framework**

Using the lens of two motivational theories as my framework, I explored graduates’ and educators’ sense of community and how it informed their experiences as members of a small learning community. I reviewed literature to provide a theoretical context. I also reviewed literature focused on the use of interventions and reforms that use the needs of students, as identified in these two theoretical approaches. I specifically
analyzed research related to building a sense of community for students, as part of their learning experience, and explored how it may have shaped student learning and educational experiences.

I conducted interviews of graduates of the small learning community and their teachers. The learning community was designed to support students who came from a lower-middle class suburban high school and struggled academically. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with a select number of graduates and educators who were members of the community.

Summary

This chapter introduced the research topic and question, the rationale for my study, and it identified the importance of the study for the audience. I also identified the importance of meeting students’ basic needs for community and belonging, as doing so has the potential to support all students, especially students who have underachieved in traditionally organized public high schools. Additionally, the chapter discussed the limitations faced by educators who seek to meet the needs of students. The chapter also acknowledged the personal significance and theoretical foundations of this study. An overview of the motivational theories of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991) provided details of why I selected theories based on students’ needs as frameworks for my research. Next, I made connections between this study and Boyer’s concepts in Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate (1992). Finally, the last part of the chapter provided an explanation for the research methodology.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This chapter begins with an examination of historical factors that informed the educational experiences for learners. Next, it examines the role education plays in informing the future of students and their potential opportunities. This is followed by a review of literature that explores the importance of meeting students’ basic needs as identified in the motivational theories of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991). Each theory holds as its premise that fundamental needs, especially the need for a sense of belonging, must be met in learning environments for students to grow and thrive in the classroom. Additionally, explored in this chapter is the literature focused on the importance of meetings students’ needs in education by identifying key elements that help schools and educators achieve and create a sense of belonging for all students. The chapter examines how educators can meet students’ need for belonging by analyzing studies on relationships and teacher characteristics, and studies of small learning communities and school-within-a-school programs. Also, the question of whether small learning communities promote tracking is examined by overviewing the de-tracking movement. The literature review concludes by examining the implications for the current educational culture in the United States, which at times appears focused on achievement and standardization. The purpose of this review is to provide an understanding of the elements that inform a student’s educational experience, specifically, a sense of community. In an attempt to promote growth and achievement for students who have underachieved, the review also intends to provide an understanding of its connection to
motivational theories, and their connection to education. This is done to help answer the question: How do graduates and educators in a former alternative education program describe their sense of community and how did it inform their experiences?

**Historical Context for the Need to Build Community in Schools**

The purpose and role of public schooling in the United States have influenced how students are educated and how they experience their education. This section provides context for how feelings of belonging and the creation of community in K-12 schools are connected with students’ learning.

In the past decade, attempts to address the growing concern of underachievement took the form of standardization of curriculum and legislated policy changes. However, broad interventions to the re-structuring of schools and curriculum design through laws and legislation, most notably, No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2003) and its reauthorizations, have had limited results (Carter, 2012; Rury, 2013). For example, Ravitch (2014) described the impact of this type of educational reform as negative. She stated: “with the distance of nearly a dozen years, we can see the damage done by NCLB to the nation’s educational system” (p. 314). Darling-Hammond (2013) stated these limited results are due to limitations in the policy because of its one-size-fits-all attempt to address the issue of underachievement. Ravitch (2014) expanded on her concerns about reforms such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind) because of their intense focus on achievement benchmarks. She noted:

the test scores provide a way to rank children, but the labeling in and of itself serves no educational purpose. The test does not measure the many dimensions of
intelligence, judgement, creativity, and character that may be even more consequential for the student’s future than his or her test score (p. 316).

Carter (2012) and Sergiovanni (1994) pointed out in their research, educators are at times limited in their attempts to meet students’ basic needs because much of their focus is on creating and implementing curriculum aligned to standards and achievement benchmarks. They suggested that earlier reforms did not address or support the critical role relationships, sense of belonging, and creation of community can play in informing students’ learning and achievement. However, Darling-Hammond, Bae, Cook-Harvey, Lam, Mercer, Podolsky, and Stosich (2016) see a positive move in the most recent reauthorization, Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. Even though it still involves standardized tests as a form of measurement, the authors noted, “ESSA marks an important move toward a more holistic approach to accountability by encouraging multiple measures of school and student success” (p. 1).

Sergiovanni’s (1994) case study found that how students feel about their learning environment and their learning experience may be informative in creating effective strategies to address underachievement challenges. Research indicated that students’ sense of belonging and community in school-based settings, and their positive relationships with adults at school, are effective tools to promote success (Lagana-Rirordan, Aguilar, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, Tripodi, & Hopson, 2011). The researchers also suggested that schools create a fertile environment for these relationships to develop. That is, the formation of community is critical for the achievement of students who are identified as underachieving because being part of a community often empowers them in the classroom and in school. Northouse (2013) stated that educators must take the
initiative to meet this basic student need and “accept the responsibility to carefully manage the people…and build community to provide a place where people can feel safe and connected with others, but are still allowed to express their own individuality” (pp. 222-223). He suggested the bridge to opportunity involves engagement in school through feelings of connectedness, which are created through the development of a sense of community in school. However, elements of factory-like structuring and teaching continue to be present in the large modern high school (Carter, 2012) and are at times at odds with attempts to form and create community. For instance, as Rury noted about 19th century school reformers, “many promulgated a vision of uniformity in schooling that drew parallels to industrial founders” (p. 75). Carter (2012) noted that these same concepts may still have a presence in the organization of some of the schools today. Sergiovanni (1994) advocated the structuring and organization of schools to transition from factory-like schools to schools whose focus is on creating community. He expressed that experiencing community is a critical element of students’ and teachers’ learning experiences at school. Specifically, he suggested that smaller learning communities that are transformational and foster feelings of belongingness. Block (2009) described small learning communities as “‘the unit of transformation.’ The small group is the structure that allows every voice to be heard” (p. 95). Watkins (2005) noted when students feel heard by adults, they feel empowered to own their learning: “in classrooms where a sense of community is built, students are active agents and more engaged” (p. 51).

Deci and Ryan (2008) and Sergiovanni (1994) noted the need to address the issues of student underachievement, and to do so, educators must better understand that how students experience learning is as critical to the learning process as what they are
learning. Sergiovanni (1994) specifically stated “If we want to rewrite the script to enable good schools to flourish, we need to rebuild community. Community building must become the heart of any school improvement effort” (p. xi). An additional factor in selected classrooms is that some students feel pressured to fit in. These pressures may be intensified by preconceived beliefs held by certain teachers about their students’ experiences, their cultures, and their values and beliefs, which are at times reflected in the curriculum and in their expectations. School and learning environments may not be engaging for students who do not feel a connection to what they are learning because they may not feel they belong due to these preconceived beliefs (Sergiovanni, 1994). Sometimes, these students feel a need to conform, or that they should leave who they are and their experiences outside the classroom by not sharing details of their lived experience within their classroom, especially if their lived experiences are not aligned to the teacher or the dominant majority (Sergiovanni, 1994). According to von Glasersfeld (2005), in the past when educators examined the learning process, they “failed to question the way in which what we know is related to our reality” (p. 4). However, when students’ feel a personal connection to the subject, they are likely to become more engaged in their learning. These are the experiences where learning becomes knowledge (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). Unfortunately, some of the research suggested this does not occur consistently in classrooms. Langer (1997) posed the question: “how often do we, so practiced in how to prepare information for a lecture, continue to present a prepared lesson without noticing that the class is no longer paying attention?” (p. 12). Langer (1997) also stated “learning is much more meaningful and long-term when we work with it and mold it in ourselves rather than just be told what is knowledge” (p. 124). Creating
learning environments where students feel comfortable to engage in the learning process and can dialogue and explore ideas in a learning community allows educators to create constructivist learning environments that will “seek to support learning, not control it” (Gould, 2005, p. 109). When the above occurs in classrooms, educators are doing what Fosnot and Perry (2005) suggested is essential for real learning: creating life-changing constructivist learning environments where information becomes knowledge. Educational research focused on the importance of meeting students’ needs asserted that through the development of learning environments that foster relationships, educators may more effectively address the issues of underachievement in education (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991; Sergiovanni, 1994; Van Ryzin, 2011).

The Importance of Building Community in Secondary Education

The creation and role of the high school have evolved the purpose of secondary education and preparing students for life after high school (Rury, 2013). This continues to be true of the public high school. One question that looms is whether large public high schools are adequately prepared to meet the current needs of all students? Are all students able to achieve in the current practices in education? The current level of underachievement in the United States suggests the answer may be no. The level of underachievement also suggests a closer examination of how to best meet students’ needs to ensure they are maximizing their academic potential may be informative (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Carter, 2012; Ravitch, 2014; Rury, 2013). For example,
in the school year 2014-2015, the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for public high school students rose to eighty-three percent…Asian/Pacific Islander students had the highest ACGR (90 percent), followed by white (88 percent), Hispanic (78 percent), Black (75 percent), and American Indian/Alaska Native (72 percent) students” (retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coi.asp).

While the rise is encouraging, the result is seventeen percent of students overall did not graduate within four years with a regular high school diploma. The breakdown of data also highlights the discrepancy in graduation rates by race and ethnicity.

Creating opportunities for learners to build their knowledge through formal schooling has required the institution of education to grow and change (Rury, 2013). The changes that have occurred in high schools and in their purpose have shaped the way students learn and how secondary students experience learning. As the American high school developed, schools were no longer small one-room-school houses, as urbanization changed the framework and influenced the current model of the modern high school (Rury, 2013). Rury stated: “industries tried to meet the needs of mass production manufacturing…and the basic organizational form of schooling was shaped by the central institution of the industrial era: the factory” (p. 92). Elements of this factory model still have a presence in how the United States configures schools, such as in their organizational structuring. For example, Rury (2013) noted that “schools were organized to increase efficiency, to raise the quality of a standardized product” (p. 92). This appears when schools group children by age and each year transition them to the next grade without accounting for what they may have learned (Rury, 2013).
The formation of the high school also became an important element of the nation’s institutional culture (Rury, 2013, p. 85). Part of the nation’s cultural expectation is the concept that high school should prepare students for the world of work. According to Rury (2013), “administrative progressives sought to make the high school an instrument for preparing young people for the labor market” (p. 152). It is generally assumed in the world of work that the acquisition of knowledge through schooling often results in increased social and economic power. However, the challenge for some youth who underachieve or are pushed out of school is they have little social or economic power, which limits their opportunities throughout their lifetime and may limit their contribution to society. Darling-Hammond (2010) articulated this challenge when she stated, “those who do not succeed in school are increasingly becoming part of a growing underclass, cut off from productive engagement in society” (p. 23). The goal of preparing students to enter the world of work or continue their education is still identified as the main goal of secondary education. When only some, but not all, students feel empowered and prepared to continue their education after high school, it can become a barrier for their ability to thrive (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Carter, 2102; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2014). Darling-Hammond (2010) stated, “we often behave, as a nation, as though we are unaware of the equally substantial inequalities in access to educational opportunity that occur from preschool through elementary and secondary education, into college and beyond” (p. 22). Carter (2012) identified the changing and growing needs of the world of work when she explored challenges related to advances in technology. These advances require citizens to be more educated and skilled for entry into the labor market. For those that do not achieve a high school diploma and drop out of school, the social and
economic consequences are significant to both the individual and society (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Carter, 2012; Ravitch, 2014). The consequences are so powerful that some researchers, such as Alivernini and Lucidi (2011), have identified it as the dropout crisis.

The consequences of the dropout crisis are impactful and have personal and societal consequences (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Carter, 2012; Ravitch, 2014). The monetary impact and resulting limited quality of life for those who drop out of high school is profound as they tend to earn significantly less than those who graduate from high school (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Carter, 2102;). In addition, the disparity between the median incomes earned for high-school dropouts versus those who complete high school and those that earn a college degree are substantial (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Carter, 2102; Darling-Hammond, 2010). For example, “in 2014, median weekly earnings for people with a bachelor’s degree or higher were $1,193, compared with $488 for those with less than a high school diploma” (retrieved from https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2015/more-education-still-means-more-pay-in-2014.htm).

Implications for society as a whole are also significant due to the economic toll of the dropout crisis, which generally results in an increased reliance on public assistance, elevated numbers of incarcerations, increased reliance on welfare, higher poverty rates for future generations of children, and higher healthcare costs (Carter, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2014). The challenge faced by educators and policy makers is to find effective strategies to address this crisis by ensuring all students achieve a quality high school education and acquire the skills needed to pursue additional post-secondary training or education, or both, if desired. According to literature focused on students’
needs, to counter the dropout crisis requires that educators look at how students experience their education; more specifically, if educators are meeting students’ needs, especially their sense of belonging (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991; Sergiovanni, 1994; Van Ryzin, 2011). Sergiovanni (1994) suggested, that as a society, we must empower all learners because “democratic communities help students to be as well as become. (p. 124).

**Theoretical Frameworks**

I employed two motivational theories that identified the basic needs of individual learners as theoretical frameworks for my research. Both theories focused on the conviction that students’ basic needs must be met for growth in their learning and achievement to occur. According to these theories, educators must meet basic needs to maximize students’ potential to ensure their gifts and not their deficits inform their education and life experiences. The two motivational theories: Maslow’s theory of Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991) identify critical developmental needs of adolescents. When these needs are fulfilled, students are more likely able to maximize their potential in and out of the classroom.

Literature focused on Maslow’s theory of Hierarchy of Needs suggested that human needs follow a hierarchy from necessity-based needs to more complex individual needs. Maslow (1970) identified “five levels of needs: (1) basic, (2) safety, (3) belonging and love, (4) esteem, and (5) self-actualization” (p. 4). As individuals satisfy lower-level needs, they feel compelled and motivated to satisfy the next higher-level of need; that is, meeting these needs is said to motivate them (Neukrug, 2015). Maslow’s theory also
suggested individuals feel motivated by their most pressing needs. For example, if basic needs are not met, functioning and focusing on higher level needs will not occur (Neukrug, 2015).

Literature that explored how to foster growth in adolescents recognized that meeting students’ needs is fundamental to maximize their achievement and growth (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004; Carter, 2012; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Deci, et al., 1991; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Neukrug, 2015; Ryan, Stiller & Lynch, 1994; Schaps, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1994; Van Ryzin, 2011). The theory noted that by creating learning environments that meet students’ basic needs, such as safety as identified by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, students were more likely to take risks with their learning and challenge themselves by exploring possibilities and higher-level thinking (Neukrug, 2015). However, the work in education is not finished with creating safe learning environments. The literature focused on Maslow’s theory and its relationship to education concurred that educators must actively meet students’ need for what Maslow identifies as the need for belonging and love (Battistich et al., 2004; Carter, 2012; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Deci et al., 1991; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Neukrug, 2015; Osterman, 2000; Ryan et al, 1994; Schaps, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1994; Van Ryzin, 2011). Neukrug (2015) identified the importance of developing students’ sense of belonging and love when he stated:

When an individual has basic needs satisfied and feels secure, he or she will most likely begin to desire connection with others...if the desires for love and belonging are not met, an individual will most likely remain within this level and be unable to move toward fulfilling other higher order needs. (p. 2)
The theory argued that until individuals have their basic need for belonging and love met, they cannot fully grow and achieve; a sense of belonging serves as an essential prerequisite for individuals to develop a sense of self-worth or self-esteem, and ultimately, self-actualization. Maslow (1970) stressed that only after individuals feel anchored by sense of belonging can they achieve a sense of self-esteem. Belonging is so critical to self-esteem that Maslow placed self-esteem at a higher level in his hierarchy. He stated, “I believe that the tremendous and rapid increase in…personal growth groups and intentional communities may in part be motivated by this unsatisfied hunger for contact, for intimacy, for belongingness” (p. 43). Maslow’s theory suggested that people have a fundamental need to feel like they are part of something bigger than themselves; that they belong with others. This is especially true for adolescents (Battistich et al., 2004; Carter, 2012; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Deci et al., 1991; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Neukrug, 2015; Osterman, 2000; Ryan et al, 1994; Schaps, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1994; Van Ryzin, 2011). Educators at times make assumptions about students’ needs by either misidentifying them or not recognizing all of them. (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Nodding, 2005). More specifically, as Kunc (1992) observed, American schools and societies:

have practices and programs to support physiological needs (e.g. subsidized breakfast and hot lunch programs), safety needs (e.g. traffic, sex, drug and health education) …yet, creating caring communities has not been a mission or practice in the overly tracked, segregated, exclusive schools of the 20th century. (p. 3)

Sergiovanni (1994) suggested that creating supportive learning environments starts by knowing students well enough to know what those needs are. He suggested that is it not
enough to assume we know the individual needs of learners in the development of some interventions. Kunc (1992) also argued for the acknowledgement and need to explore more deeply how educators and schools create and support the learning experience for diverse learners. Specifically, he argued for the support of meeting students’ basic psychological and emotional safety needs to the same degree we support other basic needs. To help students achieve, educators must meet the basic needs of students as identified by Maslow.

Aligned with the concepts of Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory identifies the necessity for educators to meet students’ needs for growth and for optimal achievement to occur (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991). Self-determination theory identifies the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic and universal and “the individual differences within the theory do not focus on the varying strength of needs but instead focus on concepts resulting from the degree to which the needs have been satisfied versus thwarted” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 183). One, autonomy needs are a student’s perception of sense of choice and self-regulation in learning. Two, competence needs are identified as students’ perception of recognition for effort on schoolwork and to be treated as individuals. Three, relational needs are students’ perception of support, acceptance and belonging from teachers and peers (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, & Pelletier, 1991; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Osterman, 2000; Van Ryzin, 2011). These three needs are relational and inform the development of each other, resulting in the potential for increased motivation. See Appendix B for a visual diagram of their correlation.
According to Deci and Ryan (2008), understanding and developing students’ motivation happens when advancement occurs in their sense of autonomy. They also suggested that it is not the amount of motivation one has, but rather the type of motivation that is most impactful in producing positive effects on an individual’s sense of autonomy. In their overview of self-determination theory and its connection to education, they stated that the type of motivation individuals internalize influences their well-being, performance, and ability to learn. Deci and Ryan (2008) identified two types of motivation: controlled and autonomous. Controlled motivation focuses on external regulation “e.g. reward or punishment and introjected regulation: approval, guilt, shame, acceptance as sources of energizing factors” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182). Deci and Ryan (2008) stated that controlled motivation often used in rewards or punishment, or through the use of approval, guilt or shame, does not build a sense of autonomy in individuals. Alternately, autonomous motivation, cultivated by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, is said to build a sense of autonomy in individuals. Deci and Ryan (2008) noted that when people are autonomously motivated, they experience a self-endorsement of their choices and actions and feel affirmed by their internal sense of worth, so they don’t look to external sources of affirmation. The research about this type of affirmation hypothesizes that adolescents have an innate need to feel empowered by their choices, develop positive and supportive relationships with adults and peers, and demonstrate a sense of autonomy and competence. Deci and Ryan’s (2008) research found an increase in students’ sense of autonomy when educators used autonomous motivational techniques and did not try and motivate students through rewards and punishment or techniques using guilt or shame tactics.
Another key finding was the direct tie between motivation and student engagement. For example, in their examination of education intervention programs, Battistch et al. (2004), Van Ryzin (2011), and Watkins (2005) identified engaging learning opportunities as those that solicit and incorporate students’ interests and prior experiences into the learning environment. They also found that the students they studied demonstrated higher levels of engagement and motivation. Battistch et al.’s (2004) research focused on a school improvement plan called the Child Development Project (CDP), “aimed to enhance academic, social, emotional and ethical learning” (p. 2).

Through the examination of the effects of an elementary school intervention in their longitudinal study “first done in a single suburban district serving mainly white middle-class students and then schools serving more diverse and disadvantaged student populations… The second sample is predominantly composed of white (53%) and African-American youth (46%), with only 1% of students being of other ethnicities. There are slightly more girls (54%) than boys (46%) in the sample” (Battistch et al., 2004, p. 12) they found that all students benefited from experiencing a sense of community because they felt a connection and a place where who they were and their interests mattered. The authors also stated, “it could be particularly great for those students who, traditionally, have not been well served by our schools – the socioeconomically disadvantaged and socially disenfranchised” (p. 13). Their research in twenty-four schools found that, as the poverty level increased, students and teachers were less likely to feel part of the school community (Battistch et al., 2004). Conversely, in their analysis at the classroom level, they found that caring teachers were directly connected to a students’ sense of belonging and were independent of the schools’ poverty
level (Battistich et al., 2004). Their research findings indicated that students who participated “in CDP had positive effects on teachers’ classroom practices, that these practices in turn influenced students’ sense of community, and that these changes in sense of community brought about desirable changes…including academic attitude, academic motivation, and academic behavior” (Battistich et al., 2004, p. 23). However, their research did not find a direct correlation between the programming and academic achievement, but in a follow-up study, they found students who participated fared better during middle school than those who did not (Battistich et al., 2004).

In their analysis of self-determination theory in the classroom and its connection to motivation and student engagement, Niemiec and Ryan (2009) stated, “when students’ basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported in the classroom, they are more likely to internalize their motivation to learn and to be more autonomously engaged in their studies” (p. 139). However, when these needs are not met, “people tend to adopt extrinsic goals that will lead to external indicators of worth; they will let external standards and other people determine their worth, rather than the internal feelings of worth that results from need satisfaction” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 183). Niemiec and Ryan (2009) identified in their overview of self-determination theory and its implications to education that the effects for learners are that a reward-or-punishment-approach fostered by extrinsic goals often results in “creating a sense of being controlled and diminishes feelings of autonomy” (Deci et al., 1991, p. 335), which leads to diminish motivation. In their analysis of self-determination theory in educational practices, Deci et al. (1991) noted that self-determination theory “is concerned primarily with promoting in
students an interest in learning, a valuing of education, and a confidence in their own
capacities and attributes” (p. 325).

Van Ryzin’s (2011) research explored students’ perceptions of the school
environment and their link to engagement in learning, and ultimately, motivation. He
used “a sample of 423 (M age 15.72 years; 46.7% female; 77.6% white; 30.9% eligible
for FRPL) students from five small secondary schools in the upper Midwest” (p. 1568) in
his research. A breakdown of other demographics was not provided. His findings
suggested that the school environment may be a source to implement effective change in
student achievement. He concluded that students’ perceptions of their learning
environment informed their engagement in the learning process, “which in turn, was
linked to change in hope and academic achievement over time” (p. 1576). Schools that
target interventions to support students’ perceptions of autonomy, competence, and
relatedness by creating a sense of community “may be able to promote engagement,
hope, and academic achievement” (p. 1568). His research revealed that “higher levels of
these developmental assets among secondary school students have been linked to a range
of positive outcomes, including greater academic achievement and superior psychological
adjustment” (Van Ryzin, 2011, p. 1568). Deepening educators’ understanding of
students’ needs and how to appropriately meet their needs, may be the necessary tool to
effect change in student engagement, and ultimately, the potential for change in student
achievement.

Supporting Students’ Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness

Supporting students’ autonomy is an important step in meeting students’ needs
because it empowers them to rely on intrinsically motivating factors rather than external
factors that are often in the form of a rewards-versus-punishment approach (Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Schaps, 2003; Van Ryzin, 2011; Watkins, 2005). Reeve and Halusic’s (2009) work explored how to help teachers put motivational principals from self-determination theory into practice by providing a framework to help educators understand how to implement autonomy-supportive teaching strategies. They analyzed the benefits and rationale for its implementation into teacher practice: “students benefit when teachers support their autonomy, as evidenced from their enhanced motivation, engagement, learning and psychological well-being” (p. 146). The authors also challenged educators to give careful thought to developing students’ inner resources rather than relying on external motivation or by approaching learning through a controlled versus a structured methodology. They encouraged “finding ways to coordinate instructional activities with students’ inner motivational resources…rather than neglecting or by-passing these inner resources in favor of directives or compliance requests…” (p. 149). Allowing for choice in the classroom was one example of autonomy supportive teaching because it permits students to feel they have some control in their learning. That is said to lead to an increased feeling of maturity and responsibility, which are “especially important for at-risk students who may feel like their home lives are often out of their control” (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p. 110). However, building a students’ autonomy is not sufficient. For growth to occur, teachers and classrooms must also build communities that bolster each student’s sense of competence.

Creating learning environments that support and encourage students’ sense of competence was a key element that a number of studies identified (D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Deci et al 1991). Deci et al. (1991) defined competence as
“understanding how to attain various external and internal outcomes and being efficacious in performing the requisite actions” (p. 327). In D’Angelo and Zemanick’s (2009) study of the Twilight Academy, an alternate education program within a large urban high school, they described the effects of students who experienced academic success. Their research focused on the alternate education program made up of sixty students in grades nine through twelve with ages ranging from 14 to 20. D’Angelo and Zemanick’s (2009) research described the students as, mostly performing “below grade level in the content areas and had experienced a great deal of academic difficulty in the reading comprehension realm” (p. 213). They said that most students also experienced “other behavioral elements that would define them as at-risk” (p. 213). D’Angelo and Zemanick’s (2009) stated that within the classroom, “there was a wide range of ages and abilities…the focus was to find the appropriate motivation for each student because traditional teaching methods and environments had failed” (p. 213). In their detailed analysis of this intervention program, they found that students began to build their confidence in themselves and their abilities because they experienced small success in their learning and saw themselves as capable. D’Angelo and Zemanick (2009) identified the significant change that occurred in this school, and that it happened when students began to develop a sense of competence through feelings of success, support, and encouragement. Specifically, one third of the participants, in Grades 9–12 and who ranged in age from 14 to 20 years, acknowledged that relationships played a key role in their successes. No additional details about the demographics of the participants were identified. The authors stated that “with this newfound openness to learning, the teachers were able to motivate the students to put forth honest efforts in other activities. This wave
of momentum was contagious and followed through to the end of the year” (p. 215). The authors also noted that to create an effective program such as the Twilight Program required “identifying the need and support for those needs …. and a collaborative approach to its creation” (pp. 217-218).

Other key elements that support students’ sense of competence are also critical for successful intervention programs. A number of studies identified positive feedback as another important tool for developing a sense of competence in students. In their analysis of self-determination theory and its role in informing educational practices, Deci et al. (1991) acknowledged in their analysis of methods of how to integrate self-determination theory into educational practice that “positive feedback has generally been found to increase intrinsic motivation because it enhances perceived competence” (p. 333). In D’Angelo and Zemanick’s (2009) description of the goals of the intervention, The Twilight Program, it paralleled the goals most educators have for all learners: “ultimately, the goals of this program were to get the students to believe in themselves, believe that they could be successful, and believe that they could become contributing members of society” (p. 213). Engaging and being a part of the learning process helps students develop autonomy and competence. However, these conditions do not always happen, especially for students who struggle to achieve because they may not feel they belong at school.

Other need-based theoretical studies explored and identified the need for feelings of belonging in school through the creation of a sense of community identifying them as critical motivational elements. Also explored was the rationale of how and why it is necessary to foster community and sense of relatedness into the educational experiences
of students. When Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) studied alternate education students’ perceptions of their schooling environment by comparing their perceptions between their traditional school and their alternative program, they identified that “two main constructs that establish a successful learning environment are students’ sense of membership in the school community and their perception of support from the important people within the school” (p. 134). In their study, they researched alternate education programs in sixteen suburban public school districts. Each school’s purpose was to transition students back to their home schools (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). The “median stay for the participants in their study was 16.5 months… and included students enrolled in seventh to twelfth grade…totaling thirty-six participants…who were asked to participate in their study at the beginning of their stay” (p. 135). The researchers noted that students’ perceptions of the alternative and public school environments were significantly different. Most notably, students perceived teacher support to be higher at the alternative school and that students “felt a greater connection to the school when they felt respected and were shown care from significant adults in their lives” (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015, p. 139). Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) concluded in their findings that effective intervention programs “emphasize the importance of the teachers-student relationship and a sense of belonging with the school community” (p. 139).

Shaps et al.’s (2003) research also found similar results in their study of the Child Development Project. Their study explored the importance of strengthening students’ sense of community in school through their membership in the Child Development Project, a program designed to promote sense of community in schools. They examined the effects of community at twenty-four elementary schools in six school districts across
the United States. The most significant benefit they found was that the program strengthened students’ sense of community in school, “which in turn fostered academic motivation and aspirations, desirable character-related outcomes, social and emotional learning, and avoidance of problem behaviors” (p. 23). The authors also found that all students would benefit from a sense of community in schools, but those who are most vulnerable in society have the opportunity to gain the greatest benefit because a wider range of pupils become valued. This is supported by Watkins (2005) as he noted: “when classrooms operate as communities, a wider range of roles becomes available, both for the classroom and for each participant: students began to view themselves in different roles and speak about themselves in different ways” (p. 53). Meeting students’ need for relatedness through the development of community can serve as a powerful tool in educational reform because it may inform how educators structure school environments and interventions. Research suggests that reforms that targeted students’ sense of autonomy, competence, and especially their need for relatedness or sense of community, can promote engagement and motivation, thus, resulting in increased academic achievement (Battistich et al, 2004; Carter, 2012; D’Angelo & Zimanick, 2009; Deci et al, 1991; Ryan et al., 1994; Van Ryzin, 2011). This was the case in Ryan et al.’s (1994) study of 606, comprised 154 boys and 156 girls from seventh grade and 164 boys and 132 girls from eighth grade students (no other demographic information was identified), from public middle schools in Rochester, New York. They examined the correlation between the way students described their relationships with teachers, parents, and peers and measures of academic motivation and self-esteem. He found that students who felt a strong sense of security with parents, teachers, and friends were linked with motivational
outcomes. Support for this belief was also present in Sergiovanni’s (1994) work in multiple case studies, when he challenged each organization to define for itself what community is going to be and what it will look like and feel like for its members. All efforts by educators need to feel motivated by creating what he calls “authentic community” because Sergiovanni (1994, p. xiii) asserted that community should not just be used as a fringe term; it should be actively threaded throughout the core of the school. Based on his studies on the role of community, Sergiovanni (1994) stated, “if we want to rewrite the script to enable good schools to flourish, we need to rebuild community. Community must become the heart of any school improvement effort” (p. xi).

In a review of the literature concentrated on the motivational theories that focus on student needs, especially self-determination theory, a number of key components were identified as critical elements for schools and classrooms to integrate into learning experiences. When these three needs are met, students are said to be more intrinsically motivated and engaged in learning (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Niemiec and Ryan (2009), in their overview of self-determination theory and its connection to education, defined intrinsic motivation as the “behaviors done in the absence of eternal impetus that are inherently interesting and enjoyable... emanating from the self than from external sources and are accompanied by feelings of curiosity and interest” (p. 134). The challenge for educators in integrating self-determination theory is figuring out how to cultivate intrinsic motivation in their students. The implication for teachers and organizations that incorporate self-determination theory into their practice is that they must facilitate the creation of community in order to promote a student’s sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Ryan 1991).
The goal of autonomy-supportive teaching is to identify, nurture, and develop the inner motivational resources that already exist in students (Reeve & Halusic, 2009). Reeve and Halusic (2009) encouraged educators to embrace the students’ lens on their learning experience, as “few educators think about student motivation in terms of vitalizing inner resources, while relatively many think in terms of environmental contingencies (behaviorism), tutoring (social cognitive), and modeling (social learning)” (p. 146). The authors constructed a six-item questionnaire to help educators identify how they could integrate autonomy-supportive motivating style teaching into their classroom practice. Learning environments that support students’ autonomy and competence are often associated with increases in achievement, but a key foundational piece to their achievement is first meeting each student’s need for a sense of belonging or relatedness through the creation of community. (Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Schaps, 2003; Van Ryzin, 2011; Watkins, 2005). Schaps’ (2003) review of intervention programs identified that the main goal of programs he studied was to “change the relationship of students to school, building up the positive aspects of that relationship so that it can become a strong and stable protective force rather than (or in addition to) focusing directly on individual risk factors” (p. 49). The findings from the literature support the notion that how students experience their learning is as critical as what they learn (Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Schaps, 2003; Van Ryzin, 2011; Watkins, 2005).

**Key Components to Creating Sense of Community**

This section highlights the key elements necessary to create a sense of community within schools, classrooms, and interventions to support students. Sergiovanni (1994) stated the first step to meeting students’ need for belonging is to explore how groups
create community. Using the work from the numerous schools he studied, he advised that each organization define what community is going to be, look like, and feel like for its members. He also stated that it is through the questioning of accepted truths about educational norms that education can make the necessary changes to meet students’ needs (Sergiovanni, 1994). Deci (2009) researched integrating self-determination theoretical approaches in schools. He found that people in leadership roles need to believe in, model, and lead the reform. He stated that “administrators and teachers must internalize the structures that constitute the reform and then implement them in working with students” (p. 245). If those who are leading the change in the learning community do not embrace it, it will not create effective learning environments for students.

**Small Learning Communities**

The creation of smaller learning environments is an important step schools can take to better meet students’ needs. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and self-determination theories identified belonging and relatedness needs as basic needs that must be met, but in large learning environments schools struggle to meet these basic needs of students. Studies indicated that one of the first steps in creating a sense of community for students requires breaking large schools into small learning communities (Deci, 2009; Deci et al, 1991; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Doing so allows educators to get to know their students and colleagues, their needs, their perspectives, and their interests and backgrounds. Carter (2012) used a case-study approach as a methodology to focus on forty-two sophomores, junior, and senior students’ perceptions of an alternative high school serving ninth through twelfth grade students, in New York. No other demographic information was identified regarding the participants. The school was small and had small class sizes, but
it also implemented “student-oriented curriculum stressing interdisciplinary learning, internships, extensive guidance services, an uncensored student newspaper, and opportunities to take college classes” (p. 178). Carter (2012) concluded that many elements contribute to the success of an alternate education program, but the way school and intervention programming is organized “has been found to impact retention of at-risk students and the dropout rate. Small schools, and those with a low student-teacher ratio have been shown to be effective with dropout–prone youth” (p. 182). The creation of small learning communities is one necessary step that has potential to help meet the needs of students, but it must also accompany the development of positive relationships between peers and students and their teacher. As Carter noted, “closeness and a sense of belonging are very important to at-risk students, who, by their very definition, tend to be alienated and disenfranchised” (p. 186).

The Significance of Relationships

Lagana-Riordan et al.’s (2011) research of students’ perceptions of their traditional versus alternate high school experience found that students felt that in the larger traditional school, their teachers were not able to meet their needs due to their large classes and little time for individual attention. The authors conducted interviews with students who attended a Solution-Focused Alternative High School, a school designed on the strengths of students, made up of 374, of whom 44.1% were Caucasian, 36.6% were Hispanic, 18.2% were African American, 0.8% were Asian American, and 0.3% were Native American (p. 107). They invited forty-seven students to participate in interviews; thirty-three completed interviews. Students ranged in age from sixteen to nineteen years old. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) employed a case study method to “examine the
traditional and alternative school experiences of at-risk students” (p. 106). Some of the key findings in the study were that students felt labeled by their traditional school environment, stating “they treat you like sheep that need to be herded. Everyone has to fit into a box” (p. 108). In De’Angelo and Zemanick’s (2009) study on the alternative education program, The Twilight Academy, students also said that relationships played a key role in their successes. Their research identified that significant time to develop relationships with adults and peers was purposely allocated, and that “this was possible because of the small student-administrator ratio. As rapport was built student by student, the behavior consistently improved” (p. 216). In his analysis of school reforms that integrated self-determination theory, Deci (2009) also acknowledged the important step of breaking large schools into smaller learning communities (SLCs) when he stated “a key aim in creating the SLCs is to provide the context within which teachers know both their colleagues and students…both feel a sense of relatedness” (p. 247). This relatedness or sense of community helps teachers to understand the perspectives, experiences, and interests of their students to help better meet their needs. The relationships created by community help shape the values, beliefs, and norms for individuals. These key elements are significant to students because they become guiding forces for students throughout school and in how they experience their learning, as these guiding forces may dictate their subsequent efforts, attitudes, and future goals (Sergiovanni, 1994). Ultimately, each of these different studies suggested that through the development of community and relationships, schools may have the power to elicit positive changes in the lives of their students.
Relationships with Teachers and Other Adults

The influence of positive, caring relationship with a teachers or other adults in a student’s life was identified as a critical element for the basic need of sense of belonging or relatedness to be met for a student. The literature identified how important it is for students to have teachers who are positive and caring and possess qualities such as being genuine and supportive (Battistich et al., 2004; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Ryan, 1991; Ryan et al., 1994; Schaps, 2003). Battistich et al.’s (2004) research results from his school improvement plan called the Child Development Project (CDP) identified “a number of general teacher characteristics (e.g., teacher warmth and supportiveness) …were strongly related to students’ sense of community…” (p. 15). Schaps et al. (2003) in their study of another Child Development Project identified the importance of teacher-student relationships in the connections he makes to motivation and engagement by stating “students who experience their school as a caring community consistently become more motivated, ambitious, and engaged in their learning” (p. 52). Of particular note is the impact of a perceived positive relationship with the teacher and how it works in informing a student’s education: “students’ positive connections with their teachers and their perceptions that teachers care about them are what stimulate their effort and engagement” (Schaps, 2003, p. 52). Lagana-Riordan et al.’s (2011) case-study interviews of students attending a solution-focused alternative high school (SFHS) found that the students identified what they perceived to be uncaring attitudes and a feeling of being negatively judged by their teachers from their large school and saw these as deterrents for their engagement and learning. The authors shared that these same students also were able to identify the
impact that teachers they perceived to be genuine and caring had on their sense of belonging at their new smaller alternative school. They said a majority of students reported feeling valued and respected because these teachers were able to focus on “student’s strengths and help them obtain the tools they need to succeed academically...teachers convey messages of acceptance and can teach students that they can over-come their obstacles” (p. 109). Each of these studies emphasized the important role the student-teacher relationship played in facilitating “sense of belonging within the school community, since it is not only related to academic success but social and emotional functioning” (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015, p. 139). To effect change in a learning community, educators need to be in meaningful and positive relationships with the members (Sergiovanni, 1994). Sergiovanni (1994) said, “students are not clients, customers, or cases, but objects of stewardship. Stewardship requires that adults have a personal stake in the academic success and the social welfare of each student” (p. 102).

According to Edgar-Smith and Palmer’s (2015) study of alternate education programs in sixteen suburban public school districts, when students make a lasting connection with one adult and feel a sense of belonging it appeared that their personal and academic outcomes are significantly higher than those students who do not have these relationships. Connections are not the only area where students need support. They also need access to and the support of counselors and counseling services as well.

**Key Programming Elements of Interventions: Counseling Services and Support**

A number of studies identified the need for counseling services and support as a critical programming element in also supporting students’ academic and non-academic necessities if an intervention was going to be effective in meeting their needs (Carter,
2012; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Lagana-Riordan, 2011). Nodding’s (2005) research on students’ needs identified the reality that academic issues often reflect social problems, and realistically, “we can’t solve one without attending to the other” (p. 153). One way to begin to address issues is through including counselors in programming designs and providing counseling services for adolescents. Carter’s (2012) research on interventions was most direct in calling out interventions for their lack of focus on supporting students’ needs when she stated: “little attention is given to the important role that counseling services play in creating an effective learning environment. This is an important issue because having a supportive environment is a critical factor that impacts students” (p. 178). In identifying positive key programming elements of interventions, D’Angelo and Zemanick (2009) stated that “a counselor is a must. This person should be familiar with the culture of the school and resources available” (p. 213). The authors also identified that within the programs they researched “a good deal of time was extended getting to know each student as an individual and providing counseling as to how to change behavior” (p. 215). In their research of alternate education programming, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) also recognized the key role mental health resources and support played in informing students’ educational experiences and how counseling support helped meet their needs. They stated, “these findings highlight the importance of a safe and positive school culture…this may be particularly important for at-risk students who have often suffered from trauma” (p. 112). Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) recommended “developing wrap around mental health and social services within the school environment…schools should make knowledge about mental health needs a priority” (p. 112). According to the studies identified, providing counselors and counseling services as
part of key programming elements of interventions will help as an avenue to achievement by ensuring schools meet students’ basic needs.

**Characteristics of Effective Educators**

This section discusses the key characteristics of educators that are identified as being the most impactful in positively affecting students by meeting their needs in supportive learning communities. One key characteristic identified by Battistich et al. (2004), D’Angelo & Zemanick (2009), Edgar-Smith & Palmer (2015), Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), Ryan et al. (1994) and Schaps (2003) stated a critical component for students is the development of a trusting relationship with their teachers. This is often done by creating a relationship where the teacher makes all attempts to refrain from judgment. Establishing this type of relationship allows for the development of the whole student-their beliefs, their culture, and their skills and frustrations-not a censored version of the student in the classroom as an accepted member. Students do not always feel that they can share all aspects of who they are because in some classrooms they may feel that there are negative consequences from sharing certain aspects of their lives with their teacher and classmates. This lack of feeling empowered to have a voice in their classroom due to the imbalance of power reflects and builds mistrust between students and teachers, which was exemplified by multiple students interviewed by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) who shared that “they felt demeaned by school rules and regulations” (p. 109) because there was often no flexibility to work with the fact that “not all students have the same life circumstances or obstacles to overcome… leading some to feel ‘pushed out’…which can lead to poorer graduation rates and other academic outcomes” (p. 109). These students said that because they had unique circumstances and lived experiences, they did not
always conform to the expectations and norms of the community around them. As a result, they did not feel part of the learning community. They did not feel that they belonged.

Another key quality identified in the literature is an educator’s ability to show compassion to all students no matter their background or life circumstances. Research presented focused on educator compassion concurred that when teachers focus on the strengths of students rather than their deficits, it sent the message to students that they were valued and belonged in the classroom community. Teachers who showed compassion helped students to overcome their obstacles and helped them believe in their own abilities and believe they were capable. This often led to higher instances of academic success (Battistich et al., 2004; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 1994; Schaps, 2003). In the Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) study, students shared “they appreciated the interest that their teachers took in their home lives and the fact that teachers seemed to see the whole person, including the obstacles that the students faced at home” (p. 110). In their analysis of the alternate education program, The Twilight Academy, D’Angelo and Zemanick (2009), noted how developing a high level of trust can be transformational to the learning process:

once trust was established, the students began to see and believe that their teachers exhibited a genuine concern for their well-being that they had never seen before. After this trust was established, students began showing confidence in their teachers and were able to achieve academically at levels many never thought, or wanted to think, was possible. (p. 216)
The modeling and communication of compassion by educators provided students with learning environments where they felt safe to try at their schoolwork, rather than not even attempt to try, out of fear of trying and not succeeding. In this learning environment, their sense of autonomy and competence were supported through a shared sense of community. The above studies identified growth and achievement occurred. For example, in D’Angelo and Zemanick’s (2009) study of the Twilight Academy, “out of the 12 students who were eligible to graduate, 11 achieved this goal, and the 12th earned her diploma after enrolling in summer school” (p. 217). In the findings from the Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) study, they also identified how sense of community informed students’ growth and achievement: “the solution-focused model enabled students to achieve academically despite a multitude of obstacles” (p. 113).

Being flexible and compassionate as an educator does not suggest that there should be a lack of accountability or a lack of high expectations. Rather, high expectations and rigor are noted in the literature for their important roles in building community and achievement as mutually supportive goals. Research by Battistich et al., (2004), Carter, (2012), Deci, (2009), and Schaps, (2003) found that educational practices which integrated needs-based theoretical concepts and included high expectations resulted in greater academic achievement. Successful learning environments prioritized and maintained high expectations for learning for all students, and they paired it with challenging and engaging learning opportunities (Battistich et al., 2004). Studies indicated that schools and programs that focus on building community in school and also include academic press (e.g., high expectations and rigor) and academic support may be particularly beneficial for students who underachieve (Battistich et al., 2004; Carter,
Alternately, community building may have limited results, “unless complemented by ‘academic press’…academic press prevails when teachers and administrators, and also parents, expect all students to make significant academic progress…these additional priorities of academic press and support are likely to have powerful effects on achievement” (p. 55). Schap’s (2003) research on the role supportive school environments played in promoting academic success concluded that building community without high expectations and rigor (academic press) did not have as much positive effect on achievement. High expectations alone will not lead to success though, as other educator characteristics of effective teachers are also identified as significant to promoting growth in students. For example, teaching practices that are autonomy-supportive and instructional practices that included students’ interests.

Lagana-Riordan (2011) and Reeve and Halusic, (2009) identified additional teacher characteristics they believe help meet students’ basic need for sense of belonging through the creation of community. These characteristics appear to be some of the most significant to promoting growth in students. They identified them as autonomy-supportive teaching practices and defined them as follows: non-controlling, but structured approaches to classroom instruction that includes clear expectations, guidance by using a coaching approach to instruction, constructive and non-evaluative feedback, and flexibility. Lagana-Riordan (2011) and Reeve and Halusic (2009), also identified instruction focused more intently on formative assessment rather than summative assessment. Formative assessments allowed students to receive immediate and non-evaluative feedback through a coaching approach to their learning.
Moreover, Reeve and Halusic’s (2009) research on integrating self-determination theory into educational practice found that student engagement was higher when teachers built their lessons around students’ interests, provided rationales, and framed lessons around intrinsic goals rather than using external goals. They stated it “requires prioritizing the students’ perspective during lesson activities” (p. 148) because allowing students to have a voice in their educational experience, even when done to express negative reactions or frustrations, helps in the building of trust that sustains productive learning communities (Reeve & Halusic, 2009). The challenge for educators is to identify the unfulfilled need being expressed in students’ perceived negative expressions (Nodding, 2005). Reeve and Halusic (2009) stated “when teachers acknowledge, accept, and even welcome expressions of negative effect, they communicate an understanding of the students’ perspectives” (p. 150). Niemiec and Ryan (2009) suggested an effective way to address and avoid negative frustrations is for educators to answer the universal question in education “Why are we learning about this?” They also noted, in a learning community where students have a sense of belonging, supporting their sense of autonomy by providing a meaningful rationale for a given activity, and explaining why and how it connects to them, results in a stronger investment by students in their own learning.

Teachers are not the only influential adults in students’ lives. Educational leaders in communities and schools also play an important role in ensuring that schools and classrooms meet students’ need for a sense of community (Carter, 2012; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Deci, 2009). In D’Angelo and Zemanick’s (2009) study of the Twilight Academy, they identified support from school leadership as one of the most influential factors in the success of creating community: “the most significant ingredient for success
of the program was the support of district administrators and school board members” (p. 217). The authors advised leaders to take a collaborative approach when trying to create learning communities. To ensure support by school leaders, those in leadership positions must take action that includes transparency and continuous communication of practices and regularly soliciting input from all stakeholders. Doing so acknowledges the requirements of each element to be considered in creating learning communities where students’ individual needs are met. The design of a school-reform approach must begin with the realization that “teachers and students alike have inherent psychological needs to feel competent in relation to their environment, autonomous in regulating their behavior, and related meaningfully to others…[they have an] inherent need to be respected during the process of school reform” (Deci, 2009, p. 246). The challenge for school leaders is to balance the varied expectations of how to bring effective strategies like those discussed above while meeting expectations of high-stakes accountability so that students can benefit from their learning experience.

**School-Within-A-School Models**

A school-within-a-school model (SWAS) is one example of small learning communities where larger high schools have attempted to create smaller learning environments to meet their students’ needs (Dewes, 1999; Greenfield & Klemm, 2001; Lee & Ready, 2007). Dewes (1999), Greenfield and Klemm (2001), and Lee and Ready, (2007) identified that at the foundation of all of the programming studied was the attempt to meet students’ basic need for belonging through the creation of community. Each case study’s findings highlighted the importance of different programmatic elements that must be successfully implemented for any type of small learning community to meet the needs
of students effectively. Often, this was done in a school-within-a-school model by creating theme-based units of study or through the creation of different types of houses (Lee & Ready, 2007). These themes or subunits were created for all types of learners from gifted education programs to career-and-technology-themed subunits. The implementation and creation of school-within-a-school programming were quite varied. Exploring literature on various studies over a 20-year period reflected the diversity of programming. These three case studies on school-within-a-school programming reflect this diversity.

Dewes (1999) study of swas programs defined swas programing as autonomous in its functioning within the larger school; it had its own faculty, budget, and students, and its members self-select in their participation. The only common ground was in physical space. Dewes’ (1999) study of the swas programs identified that “a school-within-a-school can contribute to a greater feeling of ‘community’ among participants, which facilitates student attainment” (p. 3). Dewes (1999) also noted other advantages such as “the advantages of replicating the qualities of a small school…and it appears to be a cost-effective approach to school reform” (p. 2). Limitations to the model were also acknowledged in Dewes’ (1999) research, which suggests that students’ need for community is not always achieved because “this model can sometimes create divisiveness in schools because it tends to realign organizational structures and fracture preexisting relationships” (p. 3). Even though Dewes (1999) said that there were limitations to her research, the conclusion she reached was supportive of the swas model as she stated, “this model seems to hold promise especially for disadvantaged students,
who are affected positively by smaller schools but are more likely to attend larger schools” (p. 4).

In another study done by Lee and Ready (2007) of five large high schools across the United States that fully integrated the school-within-a-school model into their programming found mixed results in terms of its overall effectiveness. The full integration approach in each school studied meant that every student was part of a theme-based unit. Each theme focused on a potential career or academic pathway and with that came the potential for and limitations of tracking (Lee & Ready, 2007). The authors shared some of the challenges and limitations of this holistic approach as it generated social division and stratification. For example, one assistant principal at Adams high school worried the creation and recruitment of students into subunits stated that “we are stratifying the high school in ways that I don’t think are healthy” (p. 135). She felt the organization of subunits was driven by the school and not student-driven, which created division. Lee and Ready (2007) also identified that competition for spots in each school-within-a-school program also created division at a certain level, rather than the intended sense of community. In a review of their findings, one recommendation Lee and Ready (2007) made for school reform is to create learning environments “that weaken the links between social background and student outcomes (mostly achievement, even more important-learning, and perhaps graduation)” (p. 158). One approach they recommended was through careful consideration of the use of themes for swas subunits, “even if the students choose to be there” (p. 158). The authors noted that students shouldn’t be limited in rigor or opportunity by the subunit they select. Lee and Ready (2007) did find positive correlations when students were allowed to have options. However, because
many of the high schools they studied did not allow movement between each subunit and not all students were self-aware to make good choices that were in their best interests, the researchers encouraged educators “to remember that even adolescents in high school are still children, and children need some guidance in making good choices” (p. 146).

Another important consideration faced by the five high schools they studied was the variation of rigor and expectations from teachers. They recommended that in the “subunits, even those that served non-elite students, it was possible to…integrate courses across subjects, and still retain rigorous content and solid instruction” (p. 160). Another curricular recommendation from Lee and Ready’s (2007) study was that “all secondary schools move toward a narrower and more common curriculum with mostly academic content” (p. 160). For students who need more academic support, they also recommended longer and more continuous instruction in content areas, but “there is no reason why currently low-performing students cannot be allowed to engage fully in their high schools’ or their sub-unit’s curriculum” (p. 160). A final take away for schools and school leaders looking at a holistic implementation of a school-within-a-school program was they must, according to the authors, “be willing to examine all aspects of high school” (p. 161). More specifically, Lee and Ready (2007) challenged the field of education with the question: “Should our nation’s schools simply reflect the society in which they operate and the citizens whom they serve, or should schools be one location that attempts to improve our society?” (p. 162). They expressed that some schools were able to successfully create subunits as school-within-a-school programs that challenged the “givens” in the nation’s education system and society. Lee and Ready (2007) stated
“All high schools operate under a rich and dense set of assumptions—the ‘givens’ of U.S. secondary schools” (p. 162). But, the authors also caution that purposeful conversations and efforts must happen, to address this question because “unless school-within-a-school schools are quite careful, they will magnify rather than weaken social stratification in their students’ educational outcomes” (p. 163). Though cautious, Lee and Ready (2007) concluded that “U.S. high schools should be smaller than they are, and that the school-within-a-school design could be an economically feasible means to accomplish this aim without tearing down large high school buildings and constructing new small ones” (p. 164).

A study of a different type of a school-within-a-school program was conducted in Hawaii. One third of the student participants identified as Native Hawaiian or part-Hawaiian, twenty-four percent identified as Japanese Americans, and fifteen percent identified as White, and the rest identified as one or more races in Greenfield and Klemm’s (2001) study which traced the development of a swas program designed to better serve the needs of students who were underachieving. They found that early in the program’s inception “teachers did in fact see positive results emanating from their work” (p. 20). The challenge to this continued success, according to Greenfield and Klemm (2001) was trying to use the same approach to meet everyone’s needs by trying to use a one-size-fits all approach to all the students in the school, which did not work because it was a directive and management of the program wasn’t strong enough. Greenfield and Klemm (2001) stated the early success of the swas program encouraged the principal to “expand the program to a much larger group of students and teachers. And this is where the real problems apparently began” (p. 20). Some of the problems identified were that
participation was no longer a choice for staff or students. All ninth and tenth grade students were required to participate and faculty who “had not originally ‘bought into’ the program or participated in its planning, development, or governing…had to deal with strategies they had not necessarily endorsed” (Greenfield & Klemm, 2001, p. 20).

Greenfield and Klemm (2001) similarly identified the loss of voice and choice for both students and teachers as the biggest contributor to the cessation of success. In other words, the autonomy of students and educators was not supported, which lead to negative perceptions of the program. Their study identified the factor that was most resented by teachers: the lack of voice and power that some had in the decision and implementation process (Greenfield & Klemm, 2001). They also identified “a major force behind the project’s original success – a strong management determined to make the project work” (p. 21) as ultimately one that became a major force behind its demise. Greenfield and Klemm (2001) noted that although this management system and determination were necessary to promote change, “it becomes counterproductive when change participants perceive that the project will be made ‘to work’ regardless of the cost to them” (p. 21).

Greenfield and Klemm (2001) stated that the swas program continued to exist, but only found success again when it returned to key programming elements, such as the choice to participate for both students and teachers. The study found teachers needed to feel included and supported, and school leadership must be willing to listen to their concerns rather than impose directives for them to participate. Each of these case studies exemplifies critical elements which were identified earlier as necessary basics of motivation theories focused on meeting students’ basic needs. No matter what the physical structuring or naming is of the learning environment, meeting students’ needs
for autonomy, competence, self-esteem and belongingness through the creation of community was critical for students’ growth as learners and achievement.

It should also be noted that the literature focused on school-within-a-school programs as part of reform models has diminished significantly over the past ten years. As the focus on school reform has become more focused on standardization as a means of attempting to address achievement, it appears there is a parallel decline in the literature focused on swas-types of programming. The shift in labels used to describe small-learning-community reform, and programming designed to build community within large schools also reflects this shift in focus.

**Small Learning Communities and Tracking**

Education historians differ in their interpretations of when tracking became a formal policy and practice and at whom the policy and practice were aimed. According to Hallinan (2004) tracking started as an educational practice to address the influx of immigrants into the United States in the early 1900s. The implementation of tracking attempted to try and address the differing needs of students primarily due to limited English skills. Rury (2013) noted, “schooling became an increasing social issue…the population attended school for greater lengths of time” (p. 64). As a result, schooling became a tool used to create division and inequity as Native-American and African-Americans were not allowed access to an education because “most of the institutions established…were for whites only” (Rury, 2013, p. 81). Tracking for Native-Americans and African-Americans took the form of boarding schools and segregated schools (Rury, 2013). From “Issues A-Z: Tracking” (2004) inequities began to be legally addressed by the “U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights… where effects of tracking
students have been a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, [which] bars racial discrimination in federally financed education programs and prohibits tracking under some circumstances”.

Even with this uncertain history, with the development of the high school, tracking continued as an educational practice to direct teenagers into identified post-secondary and career pathways. For instance, Hallinan (2004) noted in her analysis of tracking and the de-tracking movement that “junior high and high school students were assigned to academic, general, or vocational tracks” and that “the practice was especially prevalent in large comprehensive high schools” (p. 73). Though schools implemented tracking using different protocols, typical characteristics of traditional forms of tracking were associated with a hierarchy status, the potential of negative labeling from peers and teachers, and a varied learning experience for students in differing tracks based on what educators and schools identified and perceived as a student’s deficits or needs (Oakes, 1985). As a result, students had different school experiences based on their perceived and real needs. The use of tracking also highlights the influence of a school’s judgment on a learner’s educational experience.

Educators and policy makers began to question the practice of tracking in the 1970s because they “feared America was in danger of losing its competitive edge…and began insisting that all students have access to a rigorous academic curriculum” (Hallinan, 2004, p. 73). The new emphasis on more rigor and standardized curriculum as a means of preparing every student for post-secondary schooling created a modern form of tracking within core subject areas (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Hallinan, 2004; Harris, 2012). The need to address the potential for inequity through the use of tracking in
schools has been a major focus of educational research. Research that examined the role tracking played in segregating and limiting educational opportunities for students from underrepresented backgrounds brought attention to these issues as common educational practices (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Hallinan, 2004; Harris, 2012; Slavin, 1990a; Slavin, 1990b). Attempts to eliminate tracking, known as the de-tracking movement, have been met with mixed results. One criticism expressed by some researchers focused on small learning communities. They expressed concern that students were being tracked into ability groupings while organized in small learning communities (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Hallinan, 2004; Harris, 2012; Slavin, 1990a; Slavin, 1990b).

Tracking and grouping in homogeneous groups based on the actual or perceived ability of learners emerged as an attempt to address the varied prior achievement and learning needs of diverse students. To explore the subject of tracking, Hallinan (2004) conducted a survey of 174 public high schools in Maryland, and found “two-thirds of the high schools used tracking in the four core subject areas, while 13 percent didn’t track students in the core subjects, and the remaining schools tracked in some but not all core areas” (p. 75). As an educational practice, she found that tracking was supported by some educators because the homogenous grouping allowed educators to focus their teaching on specific learners and needs without having to try to differentiate their teaching within large classes. Hallinan (2004) also said that teachers “find that tracking facilitates instruction by making it easier to gear lessons to the ability level of the whole class” (p. 74). The tracking of high-achieving students into homogeneous ability grouping was found to be strongly supported by parents and educators because “students assigned to high-ability groups make greater gains in achievement” (Hallinan, 2004, p. 74). Parents
and students wanted what they perceived to be the best opportunity to potentially earn college credits during high school. They believed high ability groups were the best way of achieving this advancement and believed it could provide the potential for an increased social status and monetary benefits while allowing high-achieving students to potentially earn college credits at no cost while still in high school (Hallinan, 2004).

Tracking also has the potential to limit students in their academic pursuits. Hallinan (2004) also noted that the most notable modern form of tracking occurs in math curricula. Students enter math sequences with little ability to advance to more rigorous courses; once placement on a track in middle school or junior high occurs, they generally continue on lower tracks throughout high school (Hallinan, 2004) with little to no opportunity to excel or change the track identified for them. Additionally, in this same study, Hallinan (2004) found that “students assigned to low ability groups score lower on standardized tests than if they had been placed in mixed-ability groups” (p. 74). As a result, some schools have taken the steps to de-track classes. The de-tracking movement also came with challenges. In her research of de-tracked classes, Hallinan (2004) identified that teachers shared that “teaching in a de-tracked school is far more difficult than in a tracked school” (p. 75). Educators also shared that in de-tracked classes, meeting students’ needs was more challenging. Hallinan (2004) stated that “teachers often report that they must ‘teach to the middle’ or omit some of the curriculum because they don’t have time to instruct students at every different level” (p. 75). She shared that the movement to de-track classes has not stopped most schools from having some form of tracking, though it has drawn awareness to the potential for inequity and “underwhelming curriculum provided to students in low-track classes” (Hallinan, 2004, p. 76). De-
tracking has also highlighted the role educators’ expectations and beliefs may play in informing students’ overall achievement. De-tracking “challenged widely held beliefs regarding the notion of ‘ability’ and the role it plays in determining the kind of curriculum to which students will be exposed. More educators are now convinced that nearly all students are capable” (p. 76). Tracking in varying forms continues to be woven into the educational experiences of students. Archbald and Keleher (2008) continued to explore the influence of tracking in United States. Their research focused on integrating data analysis into decisions about academic programming and the subsequent tracking of students. Although policies and practices around ability level grouping vary significantly among schools, Archbald and Keleher (2008) found that “80 – 85% of U.S. high schools have ability grouping in courses” (p. 26) in their research, which explored key data systems design needs. The concerns identified in their research about tracking are mainly focused on those students put in low achievement tracks and whether doing so perpetuates an increase in racial and class segregation (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Hallinan, 2004; Harris, 2012).

In reacting to an educational culture that continues to implement various forms of tracking, Archibald and Keleher (2008) argued that motivation for any school reform must be generated by informed decision making and that using data-driven tools, such as the analysis of grades and test scores overtime, is the only way to accomplish this goal. The importance of braiding data into making educated decisions about programming, and then using it to analyze these decisions overtime, requires schools and teachers to learn and reflect on their practices of grouping students. The authors also argued that before schools abandon “one model in favor of the next, it may be more prudent to identify and
document shortcomings of one’s program, and then focus on fixing a specific problem. That is, design local interventions based on substantiated needs” (p. 40) Using data to analyze trends is one means of substantiating a school’s needs. Archbald and Keleher (2008) also explore another aspect of tracking: “inter-track mobility to refer to the degree of movement of students up or down in course levels from one year to the next” (p. 33) They noted that although it is less rigid because it allows movement from year to year, rather than for example, a ninth grader remaining in the same track throughout high school, there is a need to measure and analyze inter-track data. Doing so helps to ensure “standards are staying consistent…and the data can be disaggregated to show mobility rates for categories…[as a result] such disaggregation is essential to examine equity and fairness questions” (Archbald & Keleher, 2008, p. 34). Ultimately, they argued that just removing tracking does not improve achievement. Archbald and Keleher’s (2008) research implored schools to use data sets as a way of monitoring students’ course selection into and out of certain tracks, analyze their achievement, and notate student educational records (SER) data. They stated that making informed decisions about students’ educational experiences “requires the ability to monitor detailed patterns of student placements in tracks, the causes and appropriateness of those placements, the mobility ‘up’ and ‘down’ among tracks, and the relative academic effects of different paths through the school curriculum” (p. 28) Finally, Archbald and Keleher (2008) stated that schools must ready themselves with the following information and show the prevalence of the following:

Students ‘stuck’ in lower-level tracks despite high test scores and good grades;
minority or other categories of students under-represented in honors courses; girls
under-represented in upper math or science courses; students with poor grades and/or test scores being placed in upper level test scores. (p. 27)

Archbald and Keleher (2008) ascertained that the benefits of gathering this data will be value-added information because it will allow schools to identify successful courses, or those courses that “diminish percentages over time of minority students in lower level tracks; diminish enrollments over time in remedial courses; and equivalent levels of measured academic growth irrespective of track placement” (p. 28). They concluded by urging schools to organize and use data to make informed decisions about course offerings to appropriately meet students’ needs. Archbald and Keleher (2008) stated, “only by producing information from data of these types can local educators really know how well their high school program is performing, where the gaps are, and how to improve performance” (p. 40).

Another more recent study conducted by Harris (2012) investigated the role of tracking in educational practice. The author’s research investigated how deficit thinking often plays a role in school reforms, even after the implementation of content standards and de-tracking efforts. She asserted that students’ educational experiences are still influenced by the deficit thinking of some teachers, even in de-tracked schools (Harris, 2012). Harris (2012) stated that educational reformers believed that “standards-based reform could help to address the inequities in students’ academic experiences” (p. 129), but she argued that though it created common curricular frameworks “and the potential to ensure more equitable educational experiences for students…its impact can be compromised by the deficit beliefs that exist about low-income students and students of color” (p. 130). Her research examined five middle schools over a five-year period who
implemented the school reform model America’s Choice (Harris, 2012). The reform model was designed to address gaps in students’ skill and learning by promoting de-tracking, a school-wide-no-ability grouping approach, and a standards-based curriculum. Another element the America’s Choice model promotes is “large schools are encouraged to create small learning communities through the creation of houses and/or grade level teams” (p. 133). What Harris described (2012) in her research was “interview data that further supported the perception that many students within the America’s choice middle schools had academic challenges that made the implementation of standards-based curriculum instruction difficult” (p. 136). She also discovered that beliefs about students’ capacity and motivation to learn influenced how teachers responded and worked to meet their students’ varied academic needs. Harris (2012) stated, “the data from this analysis show that standards in and of themselves did not remedy the challenges that schools and teachers confronted with students of varying academic skills and engagement” (p. 143).

She stated that deficit beliefs “held by teachers about students and their families can become an institutional barrier” (p. 144) no matter what a school’s organizational structuring looks like. She further noted “there is some debate within the school reform movement over whether teachers’ beliefs need to change before we see changes in their practice” (p. 144), which suggests there is much more work to be done if the field of education is going to help all students achieve. In a less than optimistic view, she concluded by stating “these findings suggest that even if formal learning groups via tracking, ability grouping…are eliminated and standards implemented, the inequity in educational experiences will still exist for students who have social and academic differences” (p. 144).
At the center of the issue on tracking is the use of lower-track course offerings, which are designed to purposefully address the issue of underachievement, and their lack of demonstrated effectiveness through measurements of achievement. The question remains whether achievement disparities are solely due to the homogenous tracking of students or whether attribution to other factors should be considered. Research conducted by Archbald and Keleher (2008), Hallinan (2004), Slavin (1990a), and Slavin, (1990b) identified that most often, students tracked in lower-ranked academic classes experience a simplified curriculum, lower teacher expectations, and teachers who often lack the experience and the skills to be effective in meeting their needs. Although the majority of literature on tracking focused on the potential for negative academic achievement, the possibility exists that addressing the negative effects of tracking through purposeful and thoughtful programing created through the use of data and analysis may result in effective programming (Archbald & Kelher, 2008). Hallinan (2004) stated, “de-tracking may never become widespread, but changes [made in tracking] are expected to improve the achievement of all students, particularly those who are ill-served by the negative aspects of tracking” (p. 76).

**Challenges to Building Community in a Culture of Achievement and Standardization**

In an educational culture focused on achievement and standardized curriculum and testing, some literature might suggest that our current educational crisis is not one of lack of achievement; rather, it is a lack of a sense of community and belonging. Researchers suggest that these current practices may create divisions through its creation of different subgroups of students which may threaten the creation of, and experience of,
community. Experiencing community in their learning environment is critical to meeting students’ basic need of belonging, according to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan 1991).

In an attempt to answer whether students are learning, measurable evaluations and data measuring standards, defined through laws and policies such as No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind, 2003) and its reauthorizations, have been implemented to assess the effectiveness and quality of K-12 education. However, legislating interventions and standardizing curriculum has not produced the type of results which demonstrate that data-driven standardization interventions designed to meet the needs of all students have been successful (Carter, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Deci, 2009; Watkins, 2005). The lack of achievement led researchers to explore answers to the following questions, which exemplify the challenge faced in United States’ education: What happens when the traditional structure, sometimes in the form of a factory model, only meets the needs of some students? What happens to those students who need a different type of classroom and community to succeed?

Creating rigorous standards and curriculum for all students is the goal of many interventions and legislated policies in an attempt to address underachievement gaps in education (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Deci et al., 1991; Ravitch, 2014; Watkins, 2005). The NCLB Act of 2001’s criteria for meeting, or failing to meet, measures for annual progress, rests on whether or not subgroups as defined by race, ethnicity, disability, and so forth meet, certain standards (Curcic, Gabel, Zeitlin, Cribaro-DiFatta, & Glarner, 2011). Schools often struggle to support students to meet these predetermined goals and
standards (Ravitch, 2014) because they do not acknowledge the student as an individual with unique needs (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Tamatea (2005) referred to this as “the ‘McDonaldization of School’” when she stated, “schools are beginning to look the same and they are mass producing children to be citizens of McDonaldized society” (p. 119). This approach to education places value on conformity and uniformity, and makes it the criteria for belonging or being part of a community (Carter, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Deci, 2009; Tamatea, 2005; Watkins, 2005). Watkins (2005) posed the challenge to educational researchers to conduct research that addresses challenges in education that will also broaden the discussion from a narrowed focus on achievement test to other means of achieving the goals and outcomes of education. Kunc’s (1992) research on the role of meeting students’ basic need for belonging and community identified the conflict created for students and their learning in the current educational climate. His research identified the two choices students have when “a school system makes belonging and acceptance conditional upon achievement…they can either decide that they are incapable…and resign themselves to a feeling of personal inadequacy, or, they can try and gain acceptance through achievement” (p. 4). With this message comes an expectation of needing to achieve perfection for acceptance (Kunc, 1992). Curic et al. (2011) noted that the creation of sub-groupings was a direct result of the achievement and standardization movement. They stated:

NCLB’s criteria for meeting or failing to meet annual progress rests on whether or not subgroups defined by race, ethnicity, disability, etc. meet standards. This leads to failing schools to find blame with the most vulnerable members of their
communities, undermining the inclusive belief in differences as resources. (p. 121)

The term “demographics” is currently used to identify students who, through testing, have been determined to have the most needs based on low test scores. Paradoxically, it is the use of the term “demographics” that seems to become a barrier to meeting these same students’ most basic needs: community, because they are ostracized for their lack of achievement. Tamatea (2005) argued that the identification of subgroups who do not achieve may create division and sometimes place blame within learning communities. The groups who meet achievement benchmarks may resent those who do not achieve in high-stakes testing because in some cases it can result in whole school interventions or negative reputations (Carter, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Deci, 2009; Tamatea, 2005; Watkins, 2005).

**Challenges Faced by K-12 Educational Leadership in Meeting Students’ Basic Needs**

Exploring the key concepts of needs-based theories suggests that the learning environments experienced by students need to be purposefully created and supported (Tamatea, 2005; Watkins, 2005). Creating learning communities focused on meeting these needs is challenged by the pressure to meet national and state standards. Specifically, educational leaders are facing this pressure to try to meet students’ needs, in the current educational climate that is focused on linking student achievement with standardization. In the current era of accountability, test scores and graduation rates determine a schools’ failure or success (Carter, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Deci, 2009; Tamatea, 2005; Watkins, 2005). Curic et al. (2011) noted
the primary challenge among school administration is: How do leaders effectively ensure high levels of success and achievement while navigating the significant amount of time, energy, and resources this type of culture demands, as it pulls from other efforts to create a sense of community and meet other basic needs of students? As school leaders, the participants in Curic et al. (2011) study were so focused on “NCLB and the attention it requires to students categorized demographically, and the policy’s managerial requirements. This left them emphasizing accountability rather than collaboration, and the consequences of failing to make progress rather than the consequences of segregation and exclusion” (p. 124). Navigating societal expectations that emphasize accountability through standardized tests while also trying to ensure the needs of students were appropriately met, school leaders were often presented as a dichotomy rather than a reconciled effort. In multiple studies explored above, where accountability and community are reconciled, many of the studies highlight that school leadership played a critical role in facilitating student achievement. Leadership that supports teachers’ autonomy and supports the autonomy of small learning communities was seen as a fundamental element needed to successfully create learning communities that effectively meet students’ needs (Greenfield & Klemm, 2001).

If a societal goal is to provide all learners with the skills needed to be productive citizens, then focusing efforts on creating learning environments that meet students’ needs, especially the need for a sense of belonging, might be one of most effective strategies to help facilitate growth and achievement. Instead of it being a conversation of achievement or sense of community in educational research, I propose the conversation
needs to be on creating a sense of community and achievement in the future, for educational research. I concur with Kunc’s (1992) statement:

What is needed in our society and especially our education system is not more rigorous demands to achieve and master so that our youth will move closer to the idealized form of perfection. What is needed is a collective effort among all of us to search for ways to foster a sense of belonging in our schools…for when we are able to rely on our peers’ individual strengths rather than expecting to attain complete mastery in all areas, then belonging begins to precede achievement, and we may be welcomed into community, not because of our perfection, but because of our inherent natural and individual capacities. (p. 5)

The need for sense of community and the need for belonging are identified by psychologists as basic needs for all human beings. However, not all learners have this basic need met in their learning environments. Research suggests that until learners’ basic needs are met, growth and achievement will elude them. In other words, how students experience their learning is as important as what students learn.

**Summary**

This chapter provided a historical context of past events that have informed the educational experiences of learners from various underserved backgrounds and a rationale to explain how education informs students’ futures and potential for opportunity. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991) and how they influenced the field of education in relation to the basic needs of adolescent learners were discussed. Each theory holds as its premise that fundamental human needs, especially the
need for a sense of belonging, must be met for growth in learners to occur in school settings. Next, the literature review focused on the implications of meeting students’ needs in education by looking at key elements in educational practice and structures. The literature discussed held an emphasis on the variety of small learning communities, including the school-within-a-school model were reviewed. Concerns whether the creation of the small learning environment may in fact be a form of tracking were also examined. The final topic in the chapter was the implications for the current educational climate with reflections on the challenges that this type of high-stakes accountability climate imposes on schools that seek to address underachievement gaps through first meeting students’ basic and individual needs. The purpose of this review was to provide an understanding of motivational, need-based theories and their connection to education. Additionally, in an attempt to promote growth and achievement for all students, its purpose was to provide an understanding of the role a students’ sense of community and belonging plays in informing their educational experiences.
CHAPTER THREE

Methods

This chapter identifies the rationale for the selection of eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews during the early spring of 2017. I conducted four interviews with graduates and four interviews with educators, all of whom were members of the alternative education program that is referenced in this study. It also identifies the setting, the research site, the participants, and their demographic information. Data-collection methods, such as the structuring of questions and the content analysis and coding scheme, are also discussed below. Finally, the limitations and Approval to Conduct Research are also outlined for this qualitative interview study that attempted to answer: How do graduates and educators in a former alternative education program describe their sense of community and how did it inform their experiences?

Research Paradigm

Qualitative research allows for authentic discovery. As Merriam (1998) suggested, “research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education” (p. 1). She also suggested that meaning is derived from qualitative research through exploring and trying to understand someone’s lived experience as it is constructed by an individual’s interactions with his or her social worlds. As a researcher, my goal was to explore my topic in a way that “furthers our understanding of the subject” (Clark & Rossiter, 2008, p. 67). A qualitative interview study supported my goal of deepening my understanding of the lived experiences of graduates and educators because as Weiss (1994) stated, “a
A qualitative interview study may well be the method of choice if our aim is to describe how a system works or fails to work” (p. 10). This approach also allowed me “to make meaning of our experience” (Clark & Rossiter, 2008, p. 67). The authors also state, “before we can teach anything, it must first make sense to us in some way, by putting our understanding in words that make sense to someone else – in other words, narrating it – furthers our understanding of the subject” (2008, p. 67). The reflections and insights each participant shared may inform educators about how to enhance the formation of future learning communities to better meet students’ needs (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch 2014).

Eisner (1991) stated that “one of the most useful human abilities is the ability to learn from the experiences of others” (p. 202). My goal as a researcher was to give voice to respondents; more specifically, their experiences and their perspectives within this alternative education program. I selected a purposeful sample of graduates and educators of this program through a qualitative interview study of an alternative education program that embodied the concepts of motivational theories and created a sense of community.

**Data Collection Settings**

Due to the small number of educators who were involved in the alternative education program and my limited access to graduates, I did not launch a pilot study. Interviews were conducted in person in seven of the eight interviews. One interview was conducted over Facetime due to distance barriers. Those interviews done in person were conducted at locations identified as convenient by the participant. Two took place in my home, two were done at restaurants, one at a library, one at a school, and one at the State Capitol building.
The setting of this study was focused on a version of a school-within-a-school program. Based on the literature, it was evident that the program at the center of this study embraced elements of the model, but it was not fully aligned to many of the models described in the literature. For example, it was not a stand-alone program that functioned separately within a larger high school. Only some of the classes were organized separately. Additionally, it was not organized around a specific career focus as many of the programs described in the literature were. Lastly, students were allowed to enter and exit the program and were included in this decision-making process. This was unlike the majority of the programs in the literature where students were placed and tracked for their entire high school experience.

Description of Research Site

Students who chose to become members of the program shared the common characteristic that they were “at risk” of not graduating from high school. For some students, the most challenging issue related to their academic progress connected to gaps in their understanding, most often in reading-based classes. For others, issues related to their academic progress were connected to physical, mental, or chemical health issues and/or other personal challenges. Each member of the program represented at least one element that would define a student as “at-risk” for not graduating high school. The one element that was not universal was their cognitive ability. Ability levels were more diverse than in other classes in the high school and it was common to have students who were identified as gifted in the program. Each grade level had 50 members in the core academic areas of English, social studies, and science. There was also a work component to the program, which tried to make connections between the knowledge and skills
students were learning in their classes and the application of these skills to the real world and their future. The program also acknowledged that many students needed to work in order to support themselves or their families.

The scheduling of classes also intended to support the students. The class schedule ran the first two periods of the day to attempt to improve their regular attendance. Classes were also held the first two periods because of the potential for an increased comfort for students by being in classes where they were members of a community. Additionally, the school was on a block schedule of four 90-minute class periods divided into four quarters. As a team of educators, we modified the schedule and split the period into 45-minute periods, creating two semester-long classes: for example, American literature and American history were paired together.

The location of the program was within a regular high school setting. The students took most of their classes with the rest of the general population. To create a small learning community, classrooms organized together, almost in a circle. The concept of the circle was often purposefully continued in classroom arrangements. For example, the desks were often arranged in a circle because there is never a back row to hide in within a circle. Additionally, if there were difficulties with a student, the team would meet with the learner as part of the circle to discuss and strategize how to address the issue(s) that appeared to be impeding the student’s success.

The curriculum mirrored the general education curriculum in content and standards, but teachers taught in a way where they used the curriculum as a vehicle for building and enhancing academic and social skills. For example, the teachers in the program would meet in their professional learning community, and as a group, would
identify reading and notetaking strategies to implement in all academic areas. If students were reading an article in social studies and a different one in biology, they were taught how to use the same reading and note-taking strategy in their approach to each content-area article. The goal was for students to build transferable skills and knowledge.

As part of their application to the program, students identified their goals for school and their rationale for wanting to join the program when they applied. The process encouraged and helped develop them to be active members in their learning. By applying, they were agreeing to meet the expectations for regular attendance and what was deemed by the faculty as appropriate behavior. Parents were also involved in the application process and indicated, through their signatures, their approval for their students’ involvement. It is important to note, students had the ability to opt out of the program at any time. If students left the program, we encouraged them to make the decision that would best support their needs as a learner.

Participants

The selection of graduate and educator participants was based on what Merriam (1998) defined as “convenience or network sampling” (p. 63) and Weiss (1994) noted is a “snowball sampling” (Weiss, 1994, p. 25) method. Four interviews with graduates and four interviews with educators were conducted. Since the program no longer existed after the 2011 academic year and the student data information system for the district in which the program was located changed, no accurate tracking system of graduates was in place at the time of this study. Thus, participants were identified and selected by being asked if they were willing to be interviewed. In some cases, contact was made through former educators or former graduates, as some of the interviewees were part of the program.
before I became a member of the community. Some participants were only accessible through contact with other interviewees. In my attempt to show respect for their participation, each graduate and educator was assured that they were not obligated to continue if at any time they felt they needed to opt out of the interview. To protect the anonymity of the eight interviewees, the full interview transcripts were not included in the dissertation.

I tried to “select respondents purposefully so that I obtained instances of all the important dissimilar forms present in the larger population” (Weiss, 1994, p. 23). There were two White graduates that identified as females and two White graduates that identified as males who were interviewed. They were each given pseudonyms. See Appendix C. They ranged in age from 25 – 34 years. All would be considered first-generation college students. Of the participants, Andrew had attended technical school and currently runs his own contracting company. Nick had attended some community college and currently holds a leadership position at the state capital. Anne currently attends a four-year program and is studying counseling and also manages a restaurant. Natalie recently completed her master’s degree in special education and works as an educator. Presently, each graduate interviewee is employed and living independently or with roommates, partners, or spouses.

The graduate participants were disproportionately representative of the lower socio-economic demographics of the school at the time; however, they were representative of the students in the program. Conversely, the ethnic background of graduates interviewed does not accurately reflect the demographics of the school or the program. In both cases, the percentage of non-White students varied in the school and in
the program, but remained below twenty-five percent of the overall population. I made contact with a number of students of color who were members of the program, but due to what they identified as challenging life circumstances, they were not able to or perhaps not willing to participate in the interviews.

My selection of educators for the four individual interviews included those who were part of the program during its full implementation. Ultimately, the learning community was phased out due to budget cuts, but a minimalized version of the program existed for two more years. Like the graduate participants, educator participants were given pseudonyms. See Appendix C. Three, Anthony, Dan, and Jerry identified as males and one, Donna, identified as female. All were White and reflected the ethnicity of the teachers in the program and the school. The educators I interviewed ranged in age from their early-forties to their mid-sixties. The range of teaching experience while working in the program also reflected the same range. Anthony had only been teaching for three years before being asked to teach in the program. Donna, one of the creators of the program, had taught for decades. Each educator was asked to teach in the program by a current teacher, or they were a founding member of the program. None of the educators were forced to teach or were placed in the program. Educationally, all possessed, or earned their master’s degree during the time they worked with the program. The master’s degrees were all earned in one of three areas: Anthony and Donna had master’s degrees in reading, Anthony and Dan had administration degrees, and Jerry had a master’s degree in counseling. Currently, Anthony works as an administrator, Jerry has retired, Donna has retired but is still involved in extracurricular activities, and Dan is an educator in another district after working as an administrator for ten years.
Researcher Positionality

One of the advantages of qualitative interviewing is that it allowed me to enter into the world of those being interviewed, but it required vigilance on my part to ensure that the constructed worldview of those I was interviewing was not informed by my own perceptions and experiences as a former member of the community. As an interviewer, examining and questioning personal biases throughout was a conscious and purposeful act. Even though I am no longer a teacher or counselor to the graduate participants of this study, and they are not reliant on me for grades or for counseling services, there may have been some hesitation to be uncensored and truly honest in their answers due to the influence of my past roles or the fact that I was doing the interviewing (Morgan, 1996).

As someone who was a member of this community, I was aware of my potential bias during the constructing of questions, since I have been approached by graduates who have only expressed positive thoughts about their experiences. I also recognized that I might have been influenced to ask questions to generate positive answers in facilitating discussion. To address potential for bias in my construction of questions, I referenced two surveys to inform the content and structuring of my interview questions. The first survey, by Chavis and Acosta’s (2008) was Sense of Community (SCI) Revised: The Reliability and Validity of the SCI-2, and the second survey was the Classroom Community Scale (CCS) survey developed by Rovai (2002). In each interview, I listened with intent and used subtle prompts for clarification. I also encouraged members to ask questions and draw conclusions, thus, allowing for my role to serve as a guide for their responses (Breen, 2006; Morgan, 1996). For example, my last interview question asked
them to share elements they felt were important for me to know that they may not have had the opportunity to discuss in their earlier responses.

My role as an interviewer needed to be generative and not limited by my lived experiences as a White woman who has lived in the central Midwest her whole life and who is currently living in a suburban middle-class community. Growing up, I experienced a more working-class socio-economic level that was more diverse than one I currently live in or the one used in this study. All these lived experiences informed who I was as researcher and it was important that I recognized it and addressed it throughout the interview process and throughout my analyses. For example, I shared and discussed with participants’ regarding their transcripts to ensure accuracy and respect for their perceptions of their experiences as members of this alternative education program. Though attentive to the potential for differences to negatively impact the research process, I also found balance because as Weiss (1994) stated, “there are so many different interviewer attributes to which a respondent can react that the interviewer will surely be an insider in some ways, an outsider in others” (p. 137). Thus, I framed my research practice with the intent to practice culturally sensitive research approaches, which are defined by Tillman (2002) as efforts and “attempts to review, understand, and respond to unequal power relations that may minimize, marginalize, subjugate, or exclude the multiple realities and knowledge bases” (p. 6). I was also attentive to the central concepts in Pollock’s (2004) work on Colormute theory which illuminated how teachers avoid race talk through colormute discourse. This was reflected in my research in my intent to use as Pollock (2004) identified as de-racialized speech while conducting interviews and de-racialized speech in my construction of questions and analyses. My
purpose was to try and prevent colormute talk identified by Pollock (2004) as a tool of colorblindness that denies race and racism, and perpetuates our failure “to describe accurately the complex dynamics of our existing inequities” (p. 144). Though all participants in this study were White by not identifying or disregarding race would, as Pollack (2004) argued only perpetuate inequity. The lack of diversity in the pool of participants left the following questions unanswered by the research: One, whether or not and in what ways might students have experienced marginalization, isolation, and othering as members of the program? (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015) Two, would these lived experiences or “counterstories” (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015) have supported or refuted the central themes that emerged? And three, to what extent would the inclusion of more diverse perspectives have enriched the data and analyses of the experiences in the alternative education program? Though a lack of diversity in the participants in this study is a limitation to this research it is my hope that the interviewees that did participate provide unique and varied lenses on the learning community. Ladson-Billings (2013) stated that when we “move into the complexities of real life (p. 39), we as individuals represent multiple identities. McCoy and Rodricks (2015) noted “critical race theory is strengthened because of its intersectionality with other oppressed identities such as gender, sexual orientation, or class in its analysis. In fact, critical race scholars are critical of any analysis that focuses solely on race and fails to consider other marginalized and oppressed identities” (p. 8). Throughout my research, I tried to align my process and analysis to be aware of the central concepts of critical race theory, but I also recognize my lack of fully integrating it as a limitation in this study. It is my hope that my
limitations as a researcher and the limitations in the research did not de-track from the findings in this study.

My awareness, my preparation of questions, or specifically the proactive alignment of questions to theoretical concepts, and my experience as a counselor, was advantageous. I was able to use prompts from my training as a counselor and interviewer to elicit more depth to some responses. Or in some cases, I used wait-time to allow the interviewee to make connections and acknowledge their own insight into their lived experience. Weiss (1994) stated, “our best guarantee of the validity of interview material is careful, concrete, level, interviewing within the context of a good interviewing partnership” (p. 150). Additionally, the interviewees may also present limitations as the lapse in time may have also contributed to how and what they remembered about their experience in this alternative education program. These same limitations may also have been true for educators; time and life experiences after their membership may have influenced their lens and how they remembered their experience. Ultimately, I hope the new insights and conclusions from this study will inform the field of education about how to enhance the formation of future learning communities to better meet students’ needs.

**Data Collection: Qualitative Interview**

My selection of a qualitative interview study as a form of research was based on the fact that I believe meaning from the telling of graduates’ and educators’ stories was actively constructed by: the members in their retelling, the researcher in how and what was asked, and the researcher’s analyses and experiences. But, this study was also constructed by the readers in the connections they made and their willingness to explore their past experience, and possible new understanding (Flyvbjerg, 2010). Using
qualitative interviews and insights gained from my literature review, I constructed questions to align to the theoretical elements identified in the motivational theories of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and student-developmental theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991). See Appendix D and E. Though taking a quantitative approach in this study may have provided informative results, I selected a qualitative approach because, as Stake (1995) identified we as researchers should be interested in the stories about programming and people in education because “of their uniqueness and commonality. We seek to understand them” (p. 1). After I selected my form of research, I created a concept map identifying potential needs that may be identified in the responses of each interviewee. See Appendix F and G.

In some cases, multiple needs had the potential to be identified by the interviewee in his or her response to a question. I did this to generate rich responses aligned to my research topic, as well as to help with the analysis of responses later in my research. I created semi-structured interview questions for graduates and educators because as Merriam (2001) stated, “this format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to the new ideas on the topic” (p. 62). My intent through the qualitative interview process was, as described by Finlay (2011) “to move beyond what the participant says of the experience to what is revealed in the telling” (p. 180).

The interview provided the opportunity for graduates and teachers to process and reflect on their experiences and the experiences they created for students. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) stated, “knowledge is neither inside a person nor outside in the world, but exists in the relationship between persons and world” (p. 53). To excavate the
information from this relationship between persons and world required the interviewing process. I shared my questions with interviewees prior to the interview to allow them to remember and reflect on their experiences. I was surprised at how many of them had written notes for our interview. One interviewee had six pages of notes!

Interviews were conducted within a three-week time period and each interview was recorded on an iPhone using the voice memo feature. The interview was saved using only initials, and then emailed to a transcription service in Mumbai. A first review of transcripts was done within two days of receiving them. I reviewed them while listening to the interviews to ensure the transcriptions were accurate. A second review of transcripts was done to ensure accuracy, to deepen my understanding of each interview, and to begin the process of analysis. Other research tools such as a pen and paper were used sparingly during interviews to notate significant body language, or to highlight a concept, or a rephrasing/clarification of a question or a response. These notes helped inform my analysis and understanding of the interview content. The interviewees and I dialogued about their interviews to affirm the accuracy of their respective transcripts.

Data Analysis

Codes were created and developed to identify emergent motifs across the interviews. As Kvale and Brinkman (2009) stated, “the coding of a text’s meaning into categories makes it possible to quantify how often specific themes are addressed in a text, and the frequency of themes can then be compared and correlated with other measures” (p. 203). Before interviewing the participants, I created overarching categories based on each motivation theory during my creation of questions to help identify their alignment to the needs identified in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and student-determination
theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991). See Appendix F and G. The coding scheme used letters to pinpoint needs and numbers to distinguish the element or concept within each of the need categories. Codes for similar concepts were created to accomplish what Kvale and Brinkman (2009) refer to as meaning condensation, which “entails an abridgement of the meanings expressed by the interviewees into shorter formulations” (p. 205). The first cycle of coding used a concept coding approach to begin my analysis of the interviews. Using the central concepts of self-determination theory as an initial framework to identify and organize the concepts shared in the interviews allowed me to synthesize and move toward consolidated meaning. During a second cycle of coding, I did what Saldaña (2016) described, “the primary goal during second cycle coding is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of first cycle codes” (p. 234). Through the second cycle of coding, themes based on the concepts in self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991) emerged from the content of interviews. Each of these themes reflected that through graduates’ and educators’ experiences in this small learning community, the basic needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness (belonging) were supported through community and informed their educational experiences. Organizing these data around these themes provided insight to the research question: How do graduates and educators in a former alternative education program describe their sense of community and how did it inform their experiences?
Approval to Conduct Research

I received approval to conduct research by Hamline University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), on January 10, 2017. See Appendix H. All eight participants received an emailed consent form, which explained the purpose of the study and defined their role in the study. The letter noted that participants could discontinue their participation at any time during the study and that continued participation was voluntary. See Appendix I.

All research documentation, transcripts, and information about individual participants were kept confidential on a password-protected personal computer. Participants were aware and consented to the usage of quoted statements from their semi-structured interviews as part of the research and final published dissertation. Pseudonyms were used throughout the research to maintain anonymity and provide confidentiality. The risks of disclosure were shared with participants and were identified as minimal. I shared that names of schools and interviewees would not be used in the dissertation and that individual identifiers would be minimal, but there was the possibility that discovery of them as participants could occur. Professionalism and respect was the foundation of all interactions and work with regard to this research study.

Summary

This chapter described the research method and a rational for selecting qualitative interviews as the data-collection method for this study. It also identified the selection of using semi-structured interviews as a means of gaining insight into the research question. Additionally, this chapter acknowledged the identification and selection process for participants, sampling methods, data collection process and the limitations as an
interviewer requiring my vigilant attention in the research process. Lastly, the two sets of interview questions used to conduct the interviews with graduates and with educators are included. See Appendix D and E. As the researcher, they helped me to gain a deeper understanding of my research in an attempt to answer: How do graduates and educators in a former alternative education program describe their sense of community and how did it inform their experiences?
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

The results of the interviews were used to explore the perceptions of graduates and educators of a former alternative education program that appeared to have success in meeting the needs of students who were labeled as struggling academically. I hoped to deepen the understanding of this phenomenon to inform dialogues by educators about how community is formed in schools and classrooms. Using two motivational theories as frameworks for the research, my goal was to contribute to the discussion in the field of education about how to enhance the formation of future learning communities to ensure that students’ basic needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness are met as part of their educational experience. This chapter identifies the coding approaches used to consolidate meaning, and ultimately, the identification of the six themes that surfaced. As part of my coding, I used the theoretic concepts of two motivational theories: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991) to help consolidate meaning from the identification of the theoretical concepts acknowledged by participants. From these concepts, themes began to emerge. The six themes provided the structure for my analysis of the qualitative interviews of four graduates and four educators in this qualitative interview study.

Research Interview Categories

After I conducted the interviews, I needed to identify a means to “understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 1). In my approach to my research, I identified central
concepts and the emergence of themes. See Appendix J. As Saldaña (2016) stated, “there are methods for synthesizing the collective…to move toward consolidated meaning. That meaning may take the symbolic form of a category, theme, concept, or assertion” (p. 20).

Upon completion of my research, the central concepts of needs-based theories evolved in my transcribed interviews as an outline for my first analysis. I took the thematic codes that emerged and used them “as a prompt or trigger for the written reflection on the deeper and complex meanings they evoked” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 44). The last part of analyses involved visually organizing and discussing my interpretation of the results in an attempt to extend my thematic findings into fully developed concepts. This chapter presents the findings of eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews to help answer the question: How do graduates and educators in a former alternative education program describe their sense of community and how did it inform their experiences?

Using qualitative interviews allowed me to “integrate multiple perspectives…[and allowed me] to describe an organization, development, or event that no single person could have observed in its totality (Weiss, 1994, p. 9). Though interviewing only graduates or only educators was an option, I purposefully selected individuals who could share both perspectives. I did this to achieve what Weiss (1994) suggested as a way to deepen and augment understanding, by “including as respondents people who view our topic from different perspectives or who know about different aspects of it. Our aim would be to develop a wide-ranging panel of knowledgeable informants…chosen because he or she could significantly instruct us” (p. 17). As a former member of this small learning community, including other educators’ perspectives helped ensure my conclusions and insights were not constructed from my own potentially biased
perspective. Their insights affirmed and challenged my conclusions, while providing enriching new insights.

**Graduate and Educator Interviews and Analysis**

The four graduate interviews depicted individualized experiences in this program, but, at times, their narratives were so aligned to the basic needs identified in both motivational theories that I had to affirm my questions were not phrased in a leading fashion, so that they prompted these responses. I was most surprised during the interviewing and analysis process by how aligned the graduates’ descriptions were to the concepts identified in self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991).

Originally, I constructed questions aligned to the central concepts of these two motivational theories to ensure a balance of questions and to create a potential tool for my analysis as “theoretical categories place the coded data into a more general or abstract framework” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 108). Taking this step helped illuminate the needs identified by participants, but after reviewing transcripts multiple times, it became clear that though my preplanning of questions ensured I got responses aligned to theoretical concepts, the exact alignment of specific concepts to specific questions did not necessarily occur. For example, one graduate identified concepts connected to his or her sense of autonomy and relatedness in response to question one, but the same question evoked an answer focused on sense of competence by another graduate. I also found that in the retelling of their lived experience, new thoughts and insights emerged, and that at times, their responses to prompts varied as they filled in answers given to earlier questions. As a result, complete ideas or insights developed in segments throughout each individual
interview, especially as the interviewees’ comfort increased, and their retelling often cultivated new insights or memories. I also found that for some interviews, when participants were detailed and verbose in their answers, they, at times answered, or partially answered, questions I had intended for later in the interview. Taking steps as the interviewer to connect earlier points and rephrasing prompts allowed for these participants to deepen their responses. Ultimately, their insights were able to be connected as full ideas in my analysis.

In my creation of questions for the educators, as with the graduates, I constructed questions aligned to the central concepts of the two theories to again ensure a balance of questions and to create a potential tool for my analysis. This tool helped identify the concepts and needs associated with the theories in my first round of coding using a concept coding approach. Though the educators’ responses were more aligned to the central theoretic concepts than graduates’ responses, I also did not find direct alignment of questions to one specific theoretical concept. All eight interviewees varied in their responses by alluding to concepts in their retelling at times. This resulted in their insights developing in segments at times throughout their interviews. As with the graduates, taking steps during the interview and in my analysis to help educator participants connect and deepen their responses, was a purposeful step I took as the interviewer. These steps led to rich responses, and as I read and reread the transcripts, I began chunking concepts as I did with the graduates’ responses. I did so as a means to explore more deeply, not just what the educators potentially did as a group, but how the educators might have generated this experience, and the effects of the experience for both learners and educators. My intended goal for the interview study was to have “the interviewees bring
forth new and unexpected aspects of the phenomena studied; and during analysis of the transcribed interview [allow] new distinctions to be discovered” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 112). Both graduates and educators provided new insights and unexpected insights about of the effectiveness of this alternative education program.

Although many of the concepts of the two motivational theories were touched on, after multiple reviews of transcripts and two coding analyses, I determined that chunking the responses into themes provided the most informative insights. As Kvale and Brinkman (2009) stated, “A theoretical reading of interview texts can draw in new contexts for regarding the interview themes, and bring forth new dimensions of familiar phenomena” (p. 238). The intertwining of their descriptions about their experience, and the concepts of the theories, resulted in the emergence of central themes, which I used to organize my analysis. From the ten graduate-specific questions and ten educator-specific questions, there were six themes that emerged: 1) Before becoming a member of the community, school was a negative experience for the graduates; 2) Experiencing membership in a learning community positively informed graduates’ actions and attitudes; 3) How we gather in community matters and informs the educational experiences of students by enriching the learning process; 4) Relationships with peers and especially educators in the community profoundly informed graduates’ educational experience; 5) The creation of community builds capacity in educators; and 6) A shared vision can empower a team of educators to create transformational learning communities that can also positively inform students’ futures. These themes, and the attributes that connect to the concepts of the theories, are substantiated by participants’ responses and are reflected by their perspectives in the findings discussed below.
Theme 1: Before Becoming a Member of the Community, School was a Negative Experience for the Graduates.

The above theme developed out of responses from all four of the graduates, as they revealed negative associations with school and the negative expressions of those feelings. The responses are categorized by apathy towards school, what seemed to be poor behavior and truancy, anxiety, poor perception of self/sense of worthlessness, and/or a lack of understanding and underachievement. The identification of these associations, as elements that informed graduates’ educational experiences, contributed to the development of this theme. The graduates described their experience with school as negative before becoming a member of this alternative education program. Although their responses were not limited to these questions, most of the participants’ responses, which contributed to the development of this theme, were prompted by questions focused on how they saw themselves as students, and in discussing their feelings about school, before becoming a member the program.

Three of the four graduates, Anne, Andrew, and Natalie, said that they “just didn’t care about school” before becoming a member of the alternative education program. Their rationale for their feelings varied, but most identified not seeing a purpose in school, and all three stated that their attendance was based on compliance, as captured by the quotes: “I was there because I had to be. I wasn’t learning anything. It was a time filler.” Anne said that her lack of caring was influenced by her “bad group of friends and a lack of guidance.” She stated that her mother was a single parent who worked a lot, her father was not in the picture, and her focus was on taking care of her brother. She shared
that school wasn’t important to her and at the time she didn’t care about it because she didn’t have anyone telling her it was important it.

All the graduates’ responses continued to support the theme that school was a negative experience prior to their membership in the program as they all pointed to poor choices and truancy as expressions of their negative feelings. All four of them indicated that they used truancy as a way to avoid the stress of school. Anne and Andrew said that they either socialized or played video games when they were truant. The other two graduates, Nate and Natalie, identified truancy as a strategy to avoid the anxiety associated with their lack of understanding or their struggles with school. Specifically, Nate identified his struggles with ADHD because it contributed to his lack of understanding and this led to feelings of anxiety. As Natalie put it, “sometimes the classes were so hard that I wouldn’t even go to them. That was a problem obviously-you can’t just not show up to class.” Nate also described how his perceived lack of sense of competence negatively impacted his relationships with his parents and his self-worth because he felt he was a disappointment:

I wasn’t a big fan of school. It was mostly based on the ADHD and the fear of not being able to do what I needed to do for school and to make my parents happy. To make them proud because they did their best raising me. I was a good kid and didn’t want to let them down, but it felt like I was.

His statement above identifies that his experience with school was framed by his lack of autonomy and competence, which was reflected by the lack of skills to navigate his learning, as well as the lack of tools or resources to control the course of his
educational experience. This supports the theme shared by all the graduates that school was a negative experience before becoming part of the community.

Feelings of anxiety associated with school were also identified as a contributing factor as to why school was a negative experience. Most often, this factor that informed the larger theme was developed in response to questions about how they would describe themselves as students, and how they think the alternative education program influenced their schooling experiences. A lack of autonomy and competence, and a lack of relatedness or belonging, resulted in school being a source of anxiety for Andrew, Natalie, and Nate. They indicated that their anxiety and shyness contributed to experiencing school negatively. Nate identified being called on, whether he did or did not know the answer, as being “a terrifying experience” because he felt that he was continually “being judged by peers and teachers.” Andrew’s anxiety presented itself through what he identified as extending quite a bit of energy navigating his physical placement in the classroom, to best ensure “he would go unnoticed and therefore, calm his anxiety.” He stated, “I was a shy student. I was towards the back, but more like the middle back, so I didn’t have to participate.” Group or partner work was also identified by Natalie as inducing high-anxiety because she felt embarrassed and stupid for her lack of understanding of concepts in front of her peers. As she shared,

Who was I going to partner up with? The smart kid who is sitting next to me?
That’s great because I don’t know what he knows or what she knows, and then they’re going to call me out because I don’t know what they are talking about.

All three of these participants reported that often these feelings of anxiety led to the loss of autonomous feelings, resulting in feelings of hopelessness or an attitude that
there was, for example, “nothing they could do” because they were “worthless.” These three graduates identified feeling like this in school until they became members of the program. Natalie’s description exemplified this experience when she described her thoughts as a high school student: “I’m failing. There’s nothing I can do. There’s no amount of extra credit I can do at this point. I was basically sitting in these classes and I mean I was worthless.” This was also supported when Nate shared, “I knew in the back of my head that I just didn’t learn like everyone else. I’m not normal. I just had very low confidence.” The powerful feelings and the effects anxiety had on informing how these graduates experienced school is most evident in Natalie’s statement: “It just felt safer not to try.”

The descriptions of their negative experiences with school prior to becoming members of the alternative education program suggested that their lack of sense of autonomy and competence may have been informed by their lack of belonging or relatedness. Although this theme developed from a multitude of prompts, identifying how they viewed themselves as students and their descriptions of how they experienced school seemed to elicit the most responses and contributed to the development of the theme: before becoming a member of the community, school was a negative experience for the graduates.

**Theme 2: Experiencing Membership in a Learning Community Positively Informed Graduates’ Actions and Attitudes.**

The above theme emerged from both graduates’ and educators’ responses. It first emerged from stories where graduates described significant changes to their attitudes toward education after becoming members of the alternative education program.
Responses were often framed into two categories: 1) before being a part of the program and 2) after joining the program. Most of the responses were generated by the questions: how would you describe yourself as a student, and how did you feel about school after joining the program? All four graduates identified that their attitude toward school, themselves as learners, and their own lives became more positive after joining the program. Everyone identified that “they found their voice” and felt empowered “to advocate for themselves and seek help” if they needed it. Andrew said: “I was more comfortable with the class and not afraid to let my voice be heard.”

When responding to questions that asked them to compare how they felt about school or their relationships before, and after their membership in the alternative education program, all four graduates identified that their experience as members of this community was transformational, and that it positively informed how the experienced school. They acknowledged that after they became members in the community, their attitude about school and life in general became more positive. Their responses indicate that their need for belonging and relatedness was better met through their membership in the community. Meeting these learners’ basic need for belonging and relatedness may also have positively supported their competency and autonomy needs in other classes and in school as a whole. This is reflected in Nate’s description of how he began to experience school “after the program”. He shared,

It helped me in my other classes overall as well. I was still a little more nervous and anxious because I was not in my comfortable environment, but the program was very impactful to who I became and I felt more welcome going to school and dealing with teachers.
Nate continued to share how experiencing membership in a community positively informed his actions and attitude toward school: “Examining who I was before, during, and after [the program] spread. It obviously spread to my other classes and I was able to just be and not be the guy in the corner not wanting to be included or involved.” Although the following statement was made individually by Nate, it is reflective of the graduates’ experiences as a whole when they describe the impact of having their basic need for belonging and relatedness met, and in how it changed how they experienced their education.

The theme also developed from all four educator’s responses to the questions: 1) describe how the program helped students in ways that may have been different from their other non-program classes, and 2) how do you think graduates will describe how it felt to be part of the small learning community, and what was beneficial for them about the program from your perspective? All four educators identified the significant impact of creating a learning environment where students felt it was safe to take risks in learning and thus feel safe to learn. Each educator saw this type of learning environment as a way of cultivating and contributing to an increase in students’ skills and students’ ability to successfully navigate their high school experience (competence). This was reflected in graduates’ actions, specifically better attendance, credits earned, and overall positive interactions with others (autonomy). Anthony shared, “we tried to create a community, so the kids could feel safe coming from whatever environment they come from to learn.” Meeting this basic need of safety was recognized by all four educators as a basic social-emotional need, not a physical need. This was interesting because the concept of meeting students’ safety needs in schools is mostly connected to physical safety needs. All of the
educators identified that feeling safe to learn was not consistently experienced by learners outside of the program, and that these factors may have contributed to struggles with their competence, autonomy, and self-esteem. Donna stated, “we provided a protective environment. Many of them who didn’t feel safe in school could come and feel safe in an academic way.” Jerry articulated the difference as “it gave them an option to try. It made the program a safe place to try.” Donna and Dan also identified the role the students themselves, played in creating this safe place, through their support of each other. Donna stated: “they were their own community. I was always amazed at the safety net that they put up for each other. That they took care of each other. They would come to us and say, so and so is in trouble, we need to help them.” Creating a community, specifically one that was a safe place for students to learn, was unanimously identified by all the educators as one of the significant ways in which the community helped students. They also believed that students would identify this factor as impactful to how it felt to be a member of the program.

According to all four educators’ responses to the two questions listed above, consistency and clear expectations, communicated to students with positive intent, also informed the development of this theme. Students knowing what to expect, from teachers in the program, and knowing that there would be support, contributed to the program feeling safe to them by “limiting a lot of uncertainty.” As Dan said, “we expected the same things. It was high expectations for them. It may not be high expectations for an AP kid, but those expectations were consistency.” Jerry described the effects of this approach on students’ autonomy as “the treatment that they felt more like adults and less like they were being told what to do, motivated them.” All four educators detail that they thought
graduates would describe the program as consistent and there “weren’t any got-you’s” because “they knew that they would come in there and there would be some kind of support. They knew if they had a problem or issue that there would be somebody understanding.” The clear and consistent approach was identified by all educators as positively informing graduates’ educational experiences.

The last thread that, from the educators’ interviews, contributed to the theme was the personalization experienced by student members. The personalization that graduates experienced was identified by all the educators as something they believed graduates would identify as a benefit about being part of the community. As Dan stated: “We knew them and they knew us…the way you treat kids, the personalization, that’s where it all came from.” Meeting graduates’ basic need for relatedness, by developing close relationships with others, was a new experience for many graduates. All four educators acknowledged that the steps they took to know and help each student individually helped them build and inform the graduates’ other basic needs for autonomy, competence, and ultimately, their self-esteem. As Jerry shared, “we tried to include different ways to learn for each of them.” Donna, the only female teacher I interviewed, acknowledged that mistakes were made, but did not see them as limiting the benefits of a strong personal relationship. Rather, being fallible may have made their relationship and efforts more effective. Donna acknowledged that at times as a team, “we made mistakes, but they knew that they could come to my room, your room and say, ‘I need help. I screwed up.’ Maybe seeing it modeled, helped!” The words “unconditional” or “non-judgmental” were never used by any of the educators explicitly, but were implied by all of the educators in their responses to the two questions: 1) Describe how the program helped students in
ways that may have been different from their other non-program classes? And 2) How do you think graduates will describe how it felt to be part of the small learning community, and what was beneficial for them about the program? From both graduates’ and educators’ responses, the following theme emerged: experiencing membership in a learning community that met basic needs, positively informed graduates’ actions and attitudes.

**Theme 3: How We Gathered in Community Mattered and Informed the Educational Experiences of Students to Enrich the Learning Process.**

This theme also developed from both graduates’ and educators’ responses. As in the development of theme two, the development of this theme, often came from graduates conceptualizing their responses by categorizing them in two parts: 1) instructional approaches and their learning experience as members in the program and 2) instructional approaches and their learning experiences in classes that were not part of the small learning community. All of the graduates pointed to the program’s instructional approaches as impactful because they felt that they acknowledged and met their individualized needs. For example, Anne said:

> it was a program that allowed me extra support in the areas that I needed. It was just a program that was geared towards the education that I needed versus just being in the general population. I was not alone, the other students with me also had similar needs.

All of the graduates also identified that they felt known and valued as individual learners with unique learning needs. Andrew’s description suggests that a community that embraced an individualized approach to learning may have strengthened his sense of
competence and autonomy, as he shares “I had real actual conversations with the teachers. I also started staying after more and asking questions. In other classrooms, I didn’t do that.” Anne described it as “the way you guys taught and the smaller classrooms actually felt like somebody was helping me, guiding me versus like the other classrooms.”

Each graduate referenced the structuring of the community into two shortened classes, held over a semester on a block schedule, rather than one 90-minute class, and the smaller class sizes, as effective to facilitating their learning. Each of these factors was identified as significant to how the graduates experienced school, and each saw it as an influential factor that helped increase their comfort and success in learning. For example, Natalie stated:

the parts of the program that I really valued were how the class was shortened and we would switch classes. I was still receiving the same academics, but it was in a shortened amount of time - after an hour of receiving direct instruction my brain can fry. That was really helpful for me because I personally lose my attention after a certain amount of time. I also loved the smaller class sizes. It just felt more intimate.

Nate specifically identified how the schedule helped him focus, and the instructional approaches, organization, and smaller class size supported him and his needs associated with his ADHD. He shared that given his unique needs as a learner, he valued and benefited from being treated and taught as an individual:

I didn’t feel like I needed to try to impress them or get them to like me. They understood me it seemed, as well as, my ADHD. They seemed to understand that
this is not just some kid that's slacking off. He doesn’t want to do his homework. He doesn’t want to study and do well in a test. No. there's more to it than that.

And that's where I think again I felt a lot more welcomed and supported in class because the teacher was there understanding who I was, and who my classmates were, and our needs, and not just a bunch of students in a classroom. Being in the program, it's just got my brain, got my focus, got who I was, on a better track individually, along with so many other people and their own individual track.

Educators touched on and reiterated some of the same concepts in their responses, which strengthened the emergence of the theme: how we gather in community matters and informs the educational experiences of students to enrich the learning process. The development was directly tied to all four educators’ responses to the question: how would you describe the program to someone outside the community? The unified perception by educators, like with the graduates, was that the purposeful structuring and organization of the program significantly informed students’ and educators’ experience as members of this alternative education program. All four educators asserted that the community and physical organization of classes, and the fact that the counselor’s office was built into the physical organization built autonomy, competence, and ultimately, self-esteem in students. The physical elements of purposefully placing classes earlier in the day, in close proximity to each other, and organizing smaller classes, helped students as Dan noted, “we had individual contact all year. We were identified as impactful because we kept together as a group” and as Jerry shared “we had everyday accountability.” It also allowed the counselor to have regular contact with participants, as Jerry stated, “I was right there as well. That made for a total connection for the whole year, which is what
they needed.” Donna also identified that the physical space contributed to their sense of safety as well: “Our physical layout tied cohesiveness, but it also provided a special place they could come to. They could find one of us in the downstairs corner.” Three out of the four educators acknowledged the potential for negative feelings, or that the students as Dan noted, “felt possibly segregated from other people or branded or worried about being negatively labeled.” Anthony, who worked with the tenth-grade students identified that “they were nervous to be part of it at first. Sixty percent came from one middle school and forty percent came from one of the other middle schools, so you had a kind of a division at the start of the year.” Dan noted that “they were different in the classroom because of their academic level, but when they got in the hallways they were socially equal.” Andrew felt “like a little community themselves because of what they were going through.” The purposeful organizational steps of this program were identified by all the educators as elements that promoted relatedness and belonging.

Educational experiences were also informed by students feeling a part of a community. This sense of community was identified by the four educators as something that positively informed the educational experiences of the graduates. When educators responded to the questions that asked them: how might graduates describe their membership and the relationships in the program? Dan stated: “the program legitimized a lot of them and it made them feel a part of the school…they were always high in the voting for homecoming queen and king.” Anthony, the only one who worked with the tenth-grade students, was the sole educator to question the development and formation of the community. He identified that being more purposeful earlier on in the students’ membership in the community may have been an area where the team could have had a
greater impact on informing students’ educational experience. “I didn’t get to see the gelling of the community that the 11th and 12th grade teachers saw among the students. Not until spring.” The tenth grade was the first grade-level where students could choose to be members, and Anthony’s individual insight was that:

> upon reflection, it would have been good to address [purposefully building community] with the team of adults. How do we really try and get that gelling to happen earlier? It would have been nice to be more thoughtful about that for the tenth grade, rather than focus so much on skill development.

The last element, support, was identified by all four educators as a critical element that informs how we gather in community, and also contributed to the development of the theme: how we gathered in community mattered and informed the educational experiences of students to enrich the learning process. Support was identified by all for educators as the informative role that school leadership and community members played in supporting the program. Educators’ answers came in response to the question: if you were to create an intervention-based program in education now, what would you include? And, how did it feel to be a member of the team? How was it different or similar to other educational experiences? The support of key figures, identified by all the educators as critical, were “the administrators” and “the staff”. In response to the question Jerry also identified “the parents. You have to show what this program is going to do to affect their child positively.”

Acknowledging students as individuals, and as learners with individualized needs through the organization of the alternative education program positively informed all four
graduates’ educational experience and supports the finding that how they gathered in community mattered and informed their educational experiences.

**Theme 4: The Creation of Community Builds Capacity in Educators.**

This theme developed only from educators’ responses. Educators’ sense of autonomy, competence, and self-esteem increased as they were members of the community as well. This was identified by all educators, but most strongly by two participants who were hired or invited to teach in this alternative education program early in their careers. All their answers were in response to two questions: 1) If you are still working as an educator, what elements from the program or educational practices still inform your practice as an educator? And 2) If you were to create an intervention or an intervention-based program in education now, how would you structure it and what elements would you include? The development of the theme emerged out of two threads in their answers to the above questions. The first thread appeared in their stories of how they came to teach in the program. The second thread developed through the educators’ stories of how teaching in the program impacted who they were as an educator. Three of the four educators identified that “they were invited to teach in the program.” The one member who did not identify as being invited was an original creator. Jerry joined the program as he neared retirement, “though he had been invited two years earlier.” He shared “I had some reservations, but after observing and seeing how the classes were run and taught, I committed to it. It was enjoyable, but was very, very difficult work.” His description suggests that his membership contributed to the building of his autonomy and competence, even at the end of his career. Unlike Jerry, both Dan and Anthony were invited to teach in the program early in their teaching careers. Dan, who entered into
teaching as a second career shared: “I was hired specifically for that program piece.” For Anthony, he was already teaching in the building and at first felt “it was scary to join the group.” This was not because of the students, but because of the other educators involved in the program as “they had a lot of pull in the building. A lot of experience and here I was, this new person.” The educators depicted the impact of the community on who they are as educators. Their descriptions all contributed the theme: the creation of community builds capacity in educators, because as each of them stated: “they are a better educator because they taught and worked in the program.” They identified that these beliefs informed their practice as educators and were cultivated through their membership in the program.

**Theme 5: Relationships Profoundly Informed Graduates’ Educational Experiences.**

This theme, focused on relationships within the community, was by far, the most often identified by graduates as an impactful element that informed their educational experience. This theme emerged solely from graduates’ responses. The replies that contributed to the development of this theme were prompted by two questions focused on their relationships with their peers and the teachers in the program. Positive relationships with their peers in the program were identified by all the graduates as an informative aspect that positively informed how they experienced school once they chose to become members of the program. Natalie, Nate, and Andrew spoke strongly about the influence of these relationships as a factor that informed their educational experiences. Their feelings are reflected in the statement made by Natalie: “the program felt like an open environment where I didn’t feel like I was getting judged at all, because the other kids that are around me were the same. Everyone seemed to work well together. The cliques
weren’t there.” The same three graduates specifically identified the diversity in social groups, and general diversity of the program as being of significant value. They shared that the social hierarchy of popularity or sub-cultures of the school were often not present in the program’s small learning community. Often, this social hierarchy could inform how students see themselves and how they experience school. The diminished presence of these social constructs in the program’s small learning community contributed positively to their school experience as shared in Natalie’s statement:

the program was so diverse. You had some of these really preppy, what you think are the smart kids. They're in the program because they're struggling… the outside doesn’t always tell you what's on the inside. The different groups, the diversity within the program was really fun, just to get to know the different people.

The most impactful relationship though, as identified by all the graduates, was the one each graduate had with the teachers in the program. All the graduates identified the educators as supportive and caring. They believed that their teachers knew them as individuals and believed in them, and that sensing this made a difference. As a result, all of the graduates strongly pointed to, and made connections to, their relationship with the teachers in the program as a source for their increased confidence in themselves (sense of autonomy and self-esteem) and their abilities (sense of competence). This was reflected by the fact every graduate referenced the impact of these relationship between eight and ten times each in their interviews when responding to the ten question prompts.

For the most part when discussing the positive effects of their relationships with teachers, all the graduates spoke in general terms sharing statements like Anne’s: “you guys were concentrated on us. We were not just another student in the classroom. I really
did value the relationship I built with you.” However, Natalie pointed to a vivid moment with one of her English teachers as a transformation experience that informed not only her experience in high school, but how she currently approaches and works with students as an educator. She shared the following about her teacher:

she personally walked me to the library and said ‘If you like that kind of book, here are all the other books you’d like.’ I remember reading every book on that list. I’d never read anything other than picture books. I’d never read a book for leisure front to back. It totally changed my perspective. She took the time, one-on-one. I’ll never forget that. I read books now for leisure.

Whether they were peer-to-peer or student-to-teacher relationships the impact of these relationships positively informed how graduates experienced their education more so than any other factor identified by participants. This suggests that, individually and as a group, educators and learners have great power to be transformational in informing the learning process for all students.

**Theme 6: A Shared Vision Can Empower a Team of Educators to Create Transformational Learning Communities that Positively Inform Students’ Futures.**

Unified by their deep understanding of their students, their needs, and the goals of the program, this final theme emerged as an overarching theme developed from the educators’ responses to six out of the ten questions asked of them. In addition, the graduates also contributed to the development of this theme through their responses to questions focused on their experiences, after joining the alternative education program. It is through the culmination of all the interviews that I was able to identify this last theme.
As a group of educators, they were aligned in their deep understanding of the students and their needs. All of the educators described the students in the program using very similar language. Terms such as: “reluctant learners”; “history of failure”; “lacking skills/reading skills”; “falling through the cracks”; “challenging life circumstances that put them at-risk” were all terms used by educator participants to answer the question: how would you describe a student in the program? All the educators identified that these were the terms used by the school system to describe students and not aligned to deficit beliefs about students. All the educators also pointed to the fact that it was not cognitive deficits that led students in the program to be in need of additional support. Rather, all the educators viewed them much like how Donna described them, “they weren’t really different at all. They wanted to do well, they just didn’t know how and they didn’t have the support that they needed either out of school or in the school to do well.” All the educators also communicated a positive view of the learners as they identified the graduates as “pretty good students. Some had real talent in art, or other classes, or as athletes or musicians.” Donna identified when describing the program that it “provided a structure so they could become more. They learned how to advocate for themselves, but they could also learn that they were worthwhile.” Again, all the educators articulated the important role membership in the community played in meeting students’ basic needs for belonging/relatedness, autonomy, competence, and self-esteem. When responding to the part of the question about what elements would they be sure to include in creating an intervention, each educator identified the importance of as Anthony said “finding the right people.” This was defined as educators who as Donna stated: “believe kids can learn”; and as Dan said “who honestly likes kids and believe in the goodness in them”;
and lastly, as Anthony noted: “people who want to build relationships and not make excuses.” Anthony also shared: “who will not point fingers at kids or at families. Instead take these kids and move them forward.” Having an aligned positive view of all learners, was woven throughout the program in each educator’s beliefs about students and contributed to everyone’s shared vision.

The development of their shared vision was also informed by their shared sense of purpose. There are elements of supporting educators’ basic needs positively that also fueled their shared vision and shared sense of purpose. Responses from all the educators to the question about how the program helped students contributed to the development and identification of a shared sense of purpose and informed the development of the theme.

The vehicle for the development of the theme was truly the collegial relationships within the program. Much like with the graduates, the educators also identified that the development of relationships with both students and colleagues was the most informative element that contributed to their sense of community and ultimately in informing their own professional experiences. This sense of belonging and relatedness was transformational, which was evidenced by the relationships educators developed with students and with their colleagues in the program. They talked about the relationships as part of every response to all ten questions they were asked. It was also telling that all the educators used the pronoun “we” and not “I”, when they answered questions about how the program supported students, the purpose of the program, and how it informed graduates educational experience. Responses from Dan and Jerry stating, “we problem solved all the time” and “we got the right people together and we clearly defined how we
were going to meet those needs.” Or, as Donna stated, “we just loved them in different ways. We really did.” The pronoun “I” was used in statements like “I think we” and “I feel we.” It was never used to identify and individual educators action or achievement. They used terms such as “respect” “in sync” and “teamwork” to describe their experience. Two educators, Donna and Anthony, identified it as the best example of a PLC they have been a part of. Anthony stated:

It was truly the best model of a PLC that I’ve ever worked in. It had teachers who wanted to be there and used grading data and other data to try and help kids. I’m prouder of being part of that than any other committee that I’ve been a part of.

Graduates’ responses also contributed to the development of this last theme, as every graduate stated in their interview statements that aligned with the statements, “I don’t know if I would ever have graduated without this program.” Every graduate identified multiple aspects of the program that positively informed their futures throughout all their responses. Andrew identified that his need for autonomy was met because he was able to start seeing purpose in his life. He identified that it was the work experience class that helped him make connections between what he was learning in high school and what his pathway was going to be after high school. For him, this was an informative piece that helped him experience school more positively. It allowed him to more effectively navigate his current environment (school) because it created a sense of control and purpose for his future.

All four graduates identified that being part of the community built their confidence as learners (their autonomy and self-esteem needs) and it built their executive skills (their competence). Nate said, “It helped me get to where I needed to, to achieve
graduation and all the goals of becoming a successful student and moving forward in life.” The graduates identified and made connections to their membership, experiences, and learning in the community, stating that it positively informed their future learning experiences. Each graduate pursued post-secondary studies of varying forms after high school. All of the graduates identified their membership in the program, and their relationships with educators, as critical elements that informed their success and ability to navigate their lives after high school. The emotional impact of discussing her journey through education was evident in the interview, as Natalie found herself crying during parts of it. Now as an educator, she shared that she is keenly aware of the impact of the educational experience on the learning process, especially the impact it can have on informing one’s future. This is reflected in her statement:

I remember getting that acceptance letter to a university and I thought, ‘this is not happening’. I never thought that was in the cards for me. When I left there and went to another university for my master’s program, I thought this is so surreal, because if I were to look at myself ten years ago, I would have said absolutely that is not in the cards. I never thought that I would be where I am today. I think the program really did that for me. You guys really did help me get to this point. I never thought even really graduation was an option.

The most powerful statement about how the community informed students’ futures by building their autonomy, competence, and self-esteem was shared by Nate. He talked about his increased ability to navigate challenges he faced in his early twenties, when he lost both his parents soon after high school. He shared:
I will credit Dan and the program with helping me grow up. At 22 years-old I had to be a grown up. I had to take on a mortgage. I had to take on everything- the estate and all this. How do I plan my mother's funeral? The program really helped me with confidence. I needed to do this. I need to figure it out and take charge of this and I did. I wouldn’t have made it through that either skill-wise or emotionally without what the program did for me. It built me up.

Meeting learners’ basic needs of autonomy, competence, and self-esteem can be a powerful tool to positively informing students’ educational experiences, but it also has the potential to positively inform their futures, as described above, and ultimately supporting the theme: when students’ needs are met in a small learning community, it informs their future in a positive way.

Weiss (1994) stated, “it is possible that interviewing may cause someone to reflect on his or her life and, in consequence, make changes” (p. 123). The power of dialoguing about this experience for graduates and educators seemed to evoke a lot of emotion and it served to energize participants. This was often reflected during the interview, as participants in both groups at times fought back tears, cried, or expressed excitement at remembering an aspect of the program. But, it was also evident in the multiple emails I received following their interviews. Some asked about my research, or thanked me for the opportunity to discuss their experience, or to share how it has motivated them. Others even asked how they can advocate for educational programs like the one they experienced for the benefit of all students. It is my intent to take the insights and deeper understandings I gathered through my research, and through my analysis in Chapter 5, own as Kvale and Brinkman (2009) described, and reflect on: “the
researcher’s responsibility is to reflect on the possible consequences not only for the persons taking part in the study, but also for the larger group they represent” (p. 73).

**Summary**

It was an insightful, humbling, and honorable experience to listen to these individuals pull apart and examine the threads of their experience as one aspect of their educational tapestry. Weiss (1994) stated “many significant events of people’s lives can become known to others only through interview” (p. 2). It is through interviews of these individuals’ sharing their lived experience that knowledge of this alternative education program and its impact on their educational experience was deepened. This chapter’s discussion of the findings, and the details that support the existence of the six themes listed above, all rooted in the concepts of two motivational theories. I have included direct quotes as rich description of their lived experience and to honor their insights. Each quote was selected to represent and reflect the concepts and themes identified above, as well as, provide the reader with a vivid understanding of what was experienced, how it was experienced, and the meaning each respondent assigned to a specific experience (McMillian and Schumacher, 2001). In presenting quotes, I opted to remove vocal pauses and sentence stop and starts for the purpose of readability, while maintaining the individual essence, to value their individual voice.
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

As described in chapter one, my research journey began by reflecting on the various roles I held in education, as I was prompted to find a subject for my research that aligned to something that I was passionate about and interested in exploring more deeply. Through my reflection I discovered, no matter what my role in education has been, I see the threads of similarities between each role, in the steps I have taken to support students and to become an effective educator. These experiences helped me understand that meeting the needs of students as individuals, and helping them feel a sense of belonging in their school community, are critical for their growth and achievement. As a result, I have a greater understanding of the importance of creating community in the classroom, and that to do so begins by developing relationships and getting to know each student and their needs. Through this study, my goal was to deepen my understanding of graduates’ and educators’ lived experiences as members of an alternative education program, and to better understand what specifically informed their educational experience.

My purpose in this research was to contribute to the discussion in the field of education about how to enhance the formation of future learning communities to ensure that students’ basic needs for autonomy, competency, and relatedness are met as part of their educational experience. Understanding the empowering feeling created from a sense of community maybe the transformation tool the field of education needs to better support students and increase student achievement. This chapter begins with a discussion of the results, the connections between the literature review and the findings, as well as the limitations and implications for further research and practice.
Through critical analysis, I was able to determine that meeting the basic need for belonging through the formation of community can positively inform both graduates’ and educators’ experiences. The analysis process examined and identified what the revealing elements were for members of this alternative education program and what factors contributed to their sense of community. Two motivational theories and their central concepts were used as frameworks to help identify these elements. Key elements emerged for both graduate and educators, and they were aligned to meeting all members’ basic needs. For this study, I employed the work of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991). All interviewees identified that meeting their basic need for belonging and relatedness was important and informed their sense of community, and ultimately, their positive educational experiences in this community. Other concepts derived from Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991) were also identified as influential elements informing all the graduates’ educational experiences. As expected, there was not one element that informed their experiences, which was not surprising given the complex needs of both learners and teachers. Often, what was identified as central to informing graduates’ experience was the relational interplay between the basic needs, as one need supported and informed the others. For example, when a graduate’s need for belonging was met through their membership in the program, often, their competency and autonomy needs were also met, or began to be met as well. The graduate and educator participants’ identification of these three needs as elements that informed their educational and professional experience emerged through the interviews in this
qualitative study and took form into the six identified themes. Ultimately, the study provided insights and support for the idea that sense of community can positively inform how students experience their education. In addition, the study speaks to the need to create learning communities where educators can develop meaningful relationships with each other and their students so they can better meet students’ basic needs of: autonomy, competence, belonging/relatedness, and self-esteem. Concepts I identify as possibly informing future practice are the roles that Culturally Responsive Practices and the integration of ideas from “being known” research may play in informing a sense of community for learners. Based on my findings, doing so will positively inform how students experience their education and contribute to student achievement.

**Discussion of Results and Connections to Literature**

Implications of this study’s findings are significant for students, educators, and schools. Millions of dollars are spent trying to determine the most effective ways to increase student achievement. A contributing factor informing student achievement is how students themselves experience their own education (Sergiovanni, 1994). Having a sense of community as part of their education experience, through the development of feeling that they belong at school and have meaningful relationships, appears to positively inform the learning process. Other key factors are how and whether students’ other basic needs, including safety, are met in their learning environments. The findings of this study aligned to the concepts of the two motivational theories I used as a framework for my study, and ultimately, supported each of the themes. Using the six themes that emerged in the findings, the results and analysis will be discussed.
Theme 1: Before Becoming a Member of the Community, School was a Negative Experience for Graduates.

Both Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991) identified that the basic needs of belonging/relatedness, autonomy, and competence must be met, and serve as a prerequisite for learners to grow and achieve. As indicated in the literature, when students’ basic needs for autonomy, competence, and belongingness are not met, they are less likely to be motivated to learn and will look externally to other situations and people as indicators of their self-worth (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). The findings from all of the interviews with the graduates support the above analysis, as each identified that prior to becoming a member in the program, these basic needs were not adequately met. As a result, negative expressions through poor choices and challenging behaviors often defined their educational experience.

Deci and Ryan (2008) note that developing a student’s motivation occurs when advancement occurs in a students’ autonomy. Lack of autonomy was identified by graduates in their attitude of, “they just didn’t care” (Anne, Andrew, and Natalie) and through their actions, specifically, their lack of attendance. These indicate that their experience as part of the general school population did not support their sense of autonomy. They did not feel empowered to lead their educational experience, or that there was a choice in school; rather, they “had to be there.” Lack of a sense of competence, often seen as an inability to effectively deal and navigate their school environment, is also evident in their response. This was reflected by Nate’s statement “I just didn’t care…I didn’t see a purpose.”
Anne’s response suggests that her need for relatedness was not met: “I didn’t have anybody telling me to sit down and do my homework…I was always either watching my brother or not at home.” Relatedness is described as a need to have close, affectionate relationships with others. Anne identified that this ultimately changed with her membership in the community and the relationships that also developed. Although the graduates traced their own unique and individual experiences with school prior to joining the community, their stories were united through their general beliefs that they lacked a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the general education setting. They articulated how the lack of these needs being met became cyclical in their culminating effects, leading to a lower sense of self-worth (self-esteem). Reforms that target students’ sense of autonomy, competence, and especially their need for relatedness or sense of community can promote engagement and motivation, resulting in increases to academic achievement (Battistich et al, 2004; Carter, 2012; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Deci et al, 1991; Ryan et al., 1994; Van Ryzin, 2011). The challenge in education is defining what that approach should look like in its implementation.

**Theme 2: Experiencing Membership in a Learning Community Positively Informed Graduates’ Actions and Attitudes.**

The descriptions of graduate participants’ negative experiences with school prior to becoming a member of the small learning community suggest that their lack of autonomy and competence may have been informed by their lack of belonging or relatedness in the general educational environment. Studies from the research indicate that one of the first steps in creating a sense of community for students requires breaking large schools into smaller learning communities (Deci, 2009; Deci et al, 1991; and
Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). The belief is that doing so allows educators to get to know their students and colleagues, and more specifically, their needs, their perspectives, their interests and backgrounds. The findings of this study support the above because the alternative education program also met graduates’ need for belonging and relatedness. The responses from the graduates also identify the reciprocal relationship between this basic need of belonging and the basic need of safety, as one informed the other.

A significant discovery in the study was the substantial and positive role feeling safe played in how graduates experienced their education. The fact that all participants identified it multiple times not only highlights how impactful it was, but this finding indicates that this may be a significant barrier to learning in schools in general if it is not addressed. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1970) specifically defines safety as a sense of “security, stability, dependability, protection, freedom from fear, etc.” (p. 39). Descriptions of how it felt to feel unsafe in the learning process were described differently by graduates, but they were aligned by the graduates’ identification of how it inhibited their learning. This was indicated through their stories that described how much time and energy was put into thinking about and navigating avoidance strategies. It begs the question: what must these experiences feel like eight hours a day? The graduates shared that once they became part of the program, it felt safer to take the risk to try learning in classes. Most significantly, their sense of relatedness and belonging generated from their membership in a community appeared to create a sense of assurance that they felt safe to learn. Graduates also identified feeling that their membership supported their sense of safety, specifically because of the continuous and non-judgmental support of the teachers, and the feeling, as Natalie shared, “I feel like we really did form a community.”
The program did and it influenced my school experience because it gave me a positive feeling when I went to school, once I started the program.” In the research, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) findings highlight the importance of a safe and positive school culture. The findings in this study, suggest that like the participants in Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) study, meeting participants’ need for belonging and relatedness through their membership in this small learning community positively informed their sense of competence and autonomy, and they felt that they had could positively and effectively navigate their school experience.

All of the educators also identified the importance of creating a learning environment where students felt safe to take the risk and try learning. The educators’ interviews contributed to the findings and support the belief that small learning communities allow educators to get to know their students and colleagues and their needs, perspectives, interests and backgrounds. In doing so, they are able to develop meaningful relationships. The findings from educators’ responses suggest that the modeling and communication of compassion by educators provided students with learning environments where they according to Dan and Anthony: “felt safe to try at schoolwork.” Donna identified this when she said, “we provided a protective environment. Many of them who didn’t feel safe in school could come and feel safe in an academic way.”

Consistency was also identified by educators in the study as an element that help make the program a safe place for students. The educators identified that meeting basic needs through consistency and clear but high expectations with positive intent helped bolster students’ other needs of autonomy, competence, and self-esteem. As Anthony
identified, “We had an expectation of a C or higher, no D’s. It taught the kids to not just do the bare minimum, but to go back and try and fix something. We also supported them in achieving that C.” These findings are supported by the literature in Edgar-Smith and Palmer’s (2015) research, which identified that “two main constructs that establish a successful learning environment are students’ sense of membership in the school community and their perception of support from the important people within the school” (p. 134). The responses from the interviews of graduates and educators support this finding. As Natalie shared “you believed in me more than anyone. You guys got to know us on a completely different level. I feel like I could talk to you. That you actually cared if I had problems.”

The last element found to contribute to a sense of safety was identified by the educators who highlighted the importance personalization in education plays. Personalization was identified by the educators as a significant element that they felt graduates would identify as influential in how they experienced school. This finding is also in alignment to the research on integrating self-determination theory practices in educational practice, and on creating small learning communities from larger schools.

One significant discovery was that the responses and the concepts identified by the educators all speak to how belonging to the community informed their own autonomy and competence as educators. The above was reflected in the findings through the significant ownership all educators took to own their role, in not only in the creation of the learning environment, but also in their role in ultimately informing students’ educational experience and potential for success. The above speaks to the importance of how invaluable quality educators are in the creation of positive learning experiences.
Theme 3: How We Gather in Community Matters and Informs the Educational Experiences of Students to Enrich the Learning Process.

The significant findings from this theme were generated by responses from both graduates and educators. When creating community in schools and classrooms, decisions about how and what must be included as informative elements have been debated. Research done by Lee and Ready (2007) poses the question: “Should our nation’s schools simply reflect the society in which they operate and the citizens whom they serve, or should schools be one location that attempts to improve our society?” (p. 162). The findings from the above theme may provide insights, generated by responses from all graduate and educator participants, that schools can and must go beyond what has always been done and closely examine how schools can create a sense of community.

All of the graduates identified the purposeful organization of the community as being smaller than the general education setting, and the shortened classes as supportive of their individual learning needs and ultimately, positively informing how they experienced their education. These factors were central to the development of their sense of autonomy and competence. The central concept of both motivational theories, that students’ basic needs must be met for growth and achievement to occur, is validated by these findings.

Another perspective in the literature about how schools and learners should build community notes that there is debate about the potential pitfalls of creating small learning communities that are aligned to students’ needs. Even though the implementation and creation of small learning communities are actually quite varied, one of the models, a school-within-a- school model (swas) is one example of small learning communities.
where large high schools attempt to create smaller learning environments and to meet students’ needs (Dewes, 1999; Greenfield & Klemm, 2001; Lee & Ready, 2007). The concern identified in the literature stems from the potential of this type of programming to create divisiveness, track students, and allow some staff to expect less of students through lowered expectations (Dewes, 1999; Greenfield & Klemm, 2001; Lee & Ready, 2007). Earlier research identified that most often, students tracked in lower tracks experience a simplified curriculum, lower expectations, and teachers assigned to work with students, who may lack the experience and the skills to be effective in meeting their complex needs (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Hallinan, 2004; Slavin, 1990a; Slavin, 1990b). The findings from this study do not support the above concerns. As Andrew, a graduate stated, “I really valued how the class was shortened and we would switch classes. I was still receiving the same academics, but it was in a shortened amount of time”. In regards to lowered expectations and lack of teacher effectiveness, the findings from this study also do not support those concerns. All the educator participants in this study identified that teachers were not placed to teach in the program because they were not seen as effective; rather, they were invited in. The educators believed that the level of prestige and respect the teachers in the program had in the school was actually identified as high by Anthony: “at first it was it was scary to be asked to be a member. That group had a lot of pull in the building, a lot of experience, and very experienced teachers that I looked up to. Here I was this new person.”

Other elements about how community is formed and the importance of how it is formed were also identified in the findings including the instructional approaches used and the feeling of being valued as individuals as identified by the graduates. All the
graduates pointed to the instructional approaches as impactful because they felt that they acknowledged and met students’ individualized needs. This is supported by the response from Natalie: “it was a program that geared learning towards my needs and my classmates’ needs. You guys gave us strategies on how to learn.”

The research presented earlier in Reeve and Halusic’s (2009) work suggests that allowing students to have more of a voice in their educational experience, even when done to express negative reactions or frustrations, helps in the building of community (Reeve & Halusic, 2009). The graduates in this study supported this finding, as they also identified that they felt they could have a voice in their learning, as indicated by Andrew: “being in the program, I felt like I could walk up to the teacher and say to them what my point of view was, or what my thought was, or what can I do to fix this, rather than just accept it, and move on”. Ultimately, the study’s findings support that the graduates felt known and valued as individual learners with unique learning needs.

The unified perception by educators, like the graduates, was that the purposeful structuring and organization of the program significantly informed students’ and educators’ educational experiences as members of this small learning community. All four educators asserted that the community and physical organization utilized built autonomy, competence, and ultimately, self-esteem in students through their membership. There was an acknowledgment by Anthony and Jerry that the students “felt possibly segregated from other people or branded” or “worried about being negatively labeled as dumb.” However, the fact that the program only involved part of students’ school day and that they were still a part of the high school helped them, as noted by
Natalie, “feel better. That they felt they’re part of the whole school, but they felt like a little community themselves because of what they were going through.”

Anthony stated: “when the program was the strongest, administration supported us with the master schedule, rooms, and then gave us the autonomy to make it happen with the right people.” The literature also identified the significant role educational leaders in communities and schools play in ensuring schools and classrooms meet students’ need for sense of community, as well as those of teachers (Carter, 2012; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Deci, 2009). Anthony’s statement above affirms this, as does his statement “it can’t be handed down by administration saying ‘we’re going to run this program and we’re picking you to do it. Do it.” A study by Greenfield and Klemm (2001), noted that teachers also need to feel included and supported, and leadership must be willing to listen to concerns. Anthony articulates this need in his comment. The elements identified by all the educators as needing support all highlight and speak to the need of meeting educators’ needs for autonomy as a key element that informs their educational experiences, and ultimately, informs the educational experiences of graduates through how we gather in community.

**Theme 4: The Creation of Community Builds Capacity in Educators.**

The literature suggests that the design of a school-reform approach must begin with the realization that “teachers and students alike have inherent psychological needs to feel competent in relation to their environment, autonomous in regulating their behavior, and related meaningfully to others…[they have an] inherent need to be respected during the process of school reform” (Deci, 2009, p. 246). In this study, the findings from the educator interviews supported this assertion. The support emerged in educators’
descriptions of how they became members of the learning community and the pride reflected in their decision. Anthony described his membership in the program as increasing his sense of autonomy, competence, and self-esteem as an educator when he stated: “I felt it was a badge of honor that I was willing to do things that other teachers weren’t. Once I realized it’s helping kids, I felt proud of being able to help them.” The findings in the study also identified that they all felt an increase in their competence and gained self-respect for themselves as educators. This is reflected by all participants identifying in their interviews that they are a better educator because they were part of program. All of the educators depicted the impact of the community on who they are as an educator. They identified that these beliefs informed their practice as educators and were cultivated through their membership in the program.

**Theme 5: Relationships Profoundly Informed Graduates’ Educational Experiences.**

The responses from the graduates identified their relationships with their peers and especially the educators in the program were impactful elements that informed their educational experiences. The identification of a lack of negative judgment, and feeling that the typical cliques in high school were not present in the program, positively informed their sense of community. Other studies similarly identify the importance of educators doing their best to remove judgment from the learning environment, and the findings from this study affirm this, as evidenced through what Nate said: “I didn’t feel like I was getting judged at all because the other kids that are around me were the same. Everyone seemed to work well together. The cliques weren’t there.”

The literature also identifies how important it is for students to have teachers who are positive and caring, and also possess qualities such as being compassionate, trusting,
non-judgmental, genuine, and supportive, no matter the students’ background or life circumstances (Battistich et al., 2004; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Ryan, 1991; Ryan et al., 1994; Schaps, 2003). All of the graduates’ responses supported this point. All the graduates identified educators in the program as supportive and caring. They believed that the teachers knew them as individuals and believed in them, and that sensing this, made a difference to them. As a result, all of the graduates strongly pointed to, and made connections to, their relationship with the teachers in the program as a source for their increased confidence in themselves (sense of autonomy and self-esteem) and their abilities (sense of competence).

Anne described how the development of her relatedness and sense of belonging, through her relationships with the teachers in the program, informed her competence and autonomy. She identifies that she learned strategies to effectively navigate the course of her life:

I actually noticed that I can do this. I’ve always been unsure. I was always afraid to try if I didn’t understand something. I just thought, I’m going to run away from it and hopefully it’s going to go away. You guys taught me, ‘No, let’s face this. Let’s figure this out. What’s the problem? Let’s work out a solution, not run away from it’. And that’s when I switched my whole outlook.

The relationships created by this community helped shape the values, beliefs, and norms for the individuals who were members of this community. These key elements identified above are significant to students because they become guiding forces for students throughout their schooling experiences and inform how they experience their learning.
The above also suggests that individually and as a group, educators and learners have great power to be transformational in informing the learning process for all students.

Theme 6: A Shared Vision Can Empower a Team of Educators to Create Transformational Learning Communities that Positively Inform the Students’ Futures.

Kvale and Brinkman (2009) describe that interviews such as the ones in this study attempt:

- to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspectives. This kind of interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena. (p. 27)

As the researcher, I tried to understand “the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009, p. 27), the program, through the development of this overarching theme. Support for the theme developed organically from the educators’ aligned view of all learners in positive rather than deficit views, their shared sense of purpose, their mutual valuing of relationships, and their shared goal for learners, themselves, and the program. Through the gathering of all responses, I was able to identify and support this theme in the findings of this study.

Researchers tend to concur that when teachers focus on the strengths of students rather than their deficits, no matter what a student’s life circumstances happened to be, it sends the message to students that they are valued and belong in the classroom and school settings. Having an aligned positive view of all learners was woven throughout the program as exemplified by all educators’ beliefs about their students, which contributed
to their shared vision of student success. Findings from the graduates’ responses identify that this compassion helped them to overcome their obstacles and led them to believe they were more likely to be successful (Battistich et al., 2004; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 1994; Schaps, 2003). The educators appeared to be aligned in their responses by the fact that all reflected a positive view of learners. Much like the results in the interviews in the study conducted by Lagana-Riordan et al.’s (2011) and discussed in the literature, the graduates identified feeling valued and respected because their teachers were able to focus on “student’s strengths and help them obtain the tools they need to succeed academically…teachers conveyed messages of acceptance and could teach students that they can over-come their obstacles” (p. 109).

The findings also found that a key element that contributed to the shared vision of the team was the belief and practice of high expectations for their students. Studies also indicate that schools and programs that focus on building community, and include academic press and academic support, may be especially beneficial for students who underachieve (Battistich et al., 2004; Carter, 2012). Schap’s (2003) identifies, community building may have limited results, “unless complemented by ‘academic press’…academic press prevails when teachers and administrators, and also parents, expect all students to make significant academic progress…these additional priorities of academic press and support are likely to have powerful effects on achievement” (p. 55). The findings from this study support that the belief and implementation of academic press into their practice was what aligned and empowered them as a team of educators. The concept of
maintaining high expectations that also included support and a lack of judgement was one of the significant findings in the interviews as indicated in the graduates’ responses.

Also, evident in the findings was the importance of a shared sense of purpose in creating a shared vision. Jerry identified the impact and power that a shared sense of purpose among educators and school leaders could have on the learning environment of students. He describes what he saw as the effects:

you get the right people in the right places, and great things can be done. I think in a lot of ways we did some really good things for kids.” Anthony’s response similarly exemplifies that: “we were bonded by doing good in the world, doing good for kids. We we’re also bonded by the fact it wasn’t easy and it took an incredible amount of patience. But, we knew we had each other’s backs.

It was the educators’ responses that provided evidence of their shared goal for learners, themselves, and the program and contributed to the development of the theme. All of the educators articulated that it was through communication, teaming, and purposeful efforts to support students, that their shared vision emerged, and ultimately, impacted their sense of community and informed their professional experiences. Donna, one of the founding members of the program and an educator who has worked in education for decades, identified that her membership in the community was one of the most impactful experiences she had as an educator because of the shared vision and what it accomplished:

The professional collegiality was great and yet the sense of friendship and relationships with the group was amazing. I felt like we worked together and accomplished something for students that was amazing. I felt like I was really a
part of a professional learning community and for someone to be able to say that after an entire career is powerful.

To be able to, as a team, cultivate positive experiences for students in this small learning community was noteworthy for the educators. To be able to also positively inform their future, as a result the team working together under a shared vision, was humbling. As one educator shared:

The graduates I’ve talked to say, being successful is not ‘I can do algebra better’. It’s ‘I’ve learned how to cope with stress. I learned that I can do this. I learned that’. Just being proud of themselves for having accomplished something. A lot of them attribute that to the program and the team.

Anthony, Dan, Donna, and Jerry referenced experiencing former students coming up to them and saying “I never would have graduated if it wasn’t for you and the program.” Affirming as those statements are about the power of a shared vision, it was truly through the impact of informing students’ future life successes, that most strongly affirmed the following theme: a shared vision can empower a team of educators to create transformational learning communities that positively informs students’ futures. As Senge (2006) stated “few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision” (p. 192).

The findings from graduates’ responses also informed this theme. There was not one individual aspect of their membership in the community that was identified as “the element” or “action” that positively informed their futures. Rather, each graduate pointed to more than one aspect of the alternative education program. All the elements they identified, though, recognized that their need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness
was met in ways that it was not, when they were members of the general school population. Even when the graduates were asked: Can you describe how do you think the swas community influenced your school experience? In what ways was it for the better or for the worse? All the graduates responded much like Ann when she stated: “I was looking at this question earlier and I honestly can’t think of anything to be improved on, that was the one thing I was looking at and I can’t think of anything.”

**Limitations of the Research**

Two significant limitations were my limited access to graduates and the lack of racial diversity among participants. Due to the lack of a current student data information system to access accurate and complete lists of graduates and their current contact information, I was limited to using what Merriam (1998) defined as “convenience or network sampling” (p. 63) and what Weiss (1994) defined as “snowball sampling” (p. 25). The limitation, with regards to the graduates, was the lack of diversity within the pool of graduate respondents. All respondents were White, first generation, and lower-middle class participants, which was not reflective of the ethnic demographics of the program, but was generally reflective of the educational background and socio-economic level of the members in the program. I contacted twelve potential interviewees, two of whom were students of color. Due to what appeared to be life challenges, they declined to participate: one had just had a baby and the other was on active duty. This highlights the importance of recognizing as researchers that although participants may agree to participation, if they ultimately do not, we can never truly know their true motivations or what their responses would be to the questions posed to them. I also contacted two other educators, who like the graduates, could not commit the time to an interview due to new
jobs and feeling overwhelmed. Another limitation of the study is that the quality of these data was dependent on participants’ willingness and openness to describe and share their perspectives. Additionally, their reflections on their experiences and perception of impactful elements, was limited to their own lives. Lastly, in reflecting on the research discussed in the literature review the data, specifically the findings often did not discuss the role race and ethnicity played in informing the experiences of their participants. It left the following questions unanswered: 1) Whether or not and in what ways might students have experienced marginalization, isolation, and othering in the small learning communities that were studied? And 2) To what extent would the inclusion of more diverse perspectives have enriched the data and analyses of the experiences of their participants? (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

Lastly, as a former member of this small community, my own bias may have informed the questions asked, as well as and the analysis and interpretation of the data. It was important that I recognized it and addressed it throughout the interview process and throughout my analyses. For example, I shared and discussed with participants’ regarding their transcripts to ensure accuracy and respect for their perceptions as members of this alternative education program. Additionally, if my research is to have meaning, I must, according to Milner (2007) ensure “both researchers’ and research participants ‘voices, perspectives, narratives, and counter-narratives are represented in the interpretations and findings in the study. In this sense, one voice or narrative is not privileged over another” (p. 396). To proactively address the above concerns, I used the conceptual framework of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991) to inform my perception,
my construction of interview questions, and my analyses. Using the above frameworks as reference points better helped me scrutinize each step of research for potential bias. Examining and questioning personal biases throughout was a conscious and purposeful act.

Weiss (1995) stated the intent of “a qualitative interview study is to describe what has been learned from all respondents about people in their situation” (p. 153). It is through the analysis process that new knowledge about a specific issue can be generated. But, the question remains whether or not such a small group of informants justifies my attempt to generalize some of the findings. The argument in support of generalizing that Weiss (1995) presents is: “insofar as the dynamics of the group we study and the constraints to which they are subjected decide their behavior, we can expect the same behavior from any other group with the same dynamics and the same constraints” (p. 27). However, caution is warranted in interpreting results given the small sample number.

While the respondents who participated in the study were most likely representative of the members of the group, caution is warranted in applying these findings as universal. As one educator-participant shared, “it is not a one-size-fits all type of program”.

Thus, this study provides a snapshot of the lived experiences of some of the graduates and educators and the meaning they attached to their experiences, as members of this alternative education program. Therefore, these results cannot be extrapolated into generalizations for all classrooms and schools. This study explored the lived experiences of four graduates and four educators who were members of a former alternative education program. It is hoped that this study can contribute to an educator’s understanding of the importance of meeting students’ basic needs, especially their need to belong, through the
creation of community. It has the potential to inform how we gather in classrooms and schools to promote growth in students, and it has the potential to inform how we create and support intervention programming.

**Implications for Practice and Recommendations for Further Research**

There is a need in education to address the issues of engagement and underachievement and how both are related for students who struggle academically. To do so, educators must better understand that how students experience learning is as critical to the learning process, as well as what they are learning. Instead of it being a conversation of achievement or sense of community in educational research and practice there needs to be a shift in conversation to one focused on creating sense of community and achievement.

In chapter 1, I identified that multiple types of learning communities could be used to examine a sense of community in school-based settings, and how they inform the educational experiences of learners. I selected the alternative education program with which I was a member, but further research into other learning communities and the organizations of different types of schools is recommended. Will further research designed to explore meeting students’ basic needs yield similar results? Several areas for further research include: additional studies on the topic of sense of community and how it informs educational experiences using participants and groups of varying ages: E- adult learners; varying achievement levels: underachieving – advanced; and various organizational formats such as: small learning communities – hybrid and online communities. These studies may support the belief that basic needs are not limited by age or the physical organization of educational programs. The needs of all learners,
including adult graduate learners in all areas of study, will benefit when their basic needs are met in formal educational settings (Neukrug, 2015). Additionally, as the definition of learning environments continue to evolve and as technology informs both how we learn individually and in online classrooms, redefining how we build community in virtual learning environments will take on more significance (Turkle, 2015). Future studies exploring the role of meeting the basic needs of a broader definition of learners and their learning environments would be informative because the basic needs identified in: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1970) and self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991), are arguably to be universal to all types of learners. Both theories purport that for growth and achievement to occur in individuals, learners must have their basic needs met. It would be advantageous for the field of education to deepen the understanding of how each type of diverse learners’ basic needs are met by exploring how different types of students experience a variety of learning environments. Doing so may provide insights into effective ways to meet students’ basic needs through examining teachers’ qualities and practice, schools’ varied structuring and organization, and learner’s varied needs and experience within these environments. Further research focused on these areas may inform and increase the potential of student engagement and academic achievement. Understanding and using this knowledge to inform teaching practices would be the next step that I recommend.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching and Research focused on Being Known in High School**

Smith and Palmer (2015) state, “Two main constructs that establish a successful learning environment are students’ sense of membership in the school community and
their perceptions of support from important people within the school”. These are also present in the successful implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2007), and as a result, the concepts of Culturally Responsive Teaching must be part of informing future practice around the concept of building sense of community and in how students experience learning. Many of the central concepts of the two motivational theories I used as the framework for my research align to some of the same central concepts identified in Culturally Responsive Teaching. Both identify the need to support each learner as an individual with unique needs and experiences. Both speak to the need to create learning environments that encourage and promote students to share. The goal is for students to feel welcome and that they can share their authentic selves in the classroom. Both also speak to teacher qualities and practices that foster these elements. Lastly, both speak to the critical need to do so to promote students’ confidence and achievement. As a result, further research focused on the development and integration of Culturally Responsive Teaching and their role in building sense of community is also needed.

Though the concepts aligned to Culturally Responsive Teaching were not formally part of informing the alternative education program with which I worked, many of their motivations, goals, and practices resonated in the approaches and purposeful actions within the community. Given the increasing diversity of our learners in the United States, the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching in classrooms, and the inclusion of training in professional development, and teacher training, is important to the creation of learning communities, and is a must for all educational practice. As Villegas and Lucas identify, (2002) “preparing teachers to teach children of diverse racial, ethnic,
social class, and language backgrounds is a pressing issue in teacher education” (p. 20).

As members and leaders in education, there is a responsibility to ensure the creation of a respectful and trusting culture, and by creating learning communities where culturally responsive pedagogy has the following presence: “Culturally Responsive Teaching empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 106). This foundational element is critical for a sense of community to exist.

Another key element of Culturally Responsive Teaching, is the development of meaningful relationships and teachers knowing each student well. Villegas and Lucas (2007) state “to teach subject matter in meaningful ways and engage students in learning, teachers need to know about their students’ lives” (p. 2). A central concept of Culturally Responsive Teaching is knowing students well, and being able to utilize these relationships to foster growth, and apply knowledge of students’ individualized interests and needs, to support students and help them make connections between their own experiences and new information. (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Creating learning environments where Culturally Responsive Teaching concepts can be fully present, and relationships between students and teachers can develop, is critical for learning. Rychly and Graves (2012) noted:

students learn best when they are engaged in their learning environments and with the information to be learned. This engagement happens when students feel validated as members of the learning community and when the information presented is accessible to them. Students feel validated and capable of learning
when their learning environments and the methods used to present information are culturally responsive to them. (p. 45)

Teachers’ actions and attitudes toward their students also inform the learning process. Teachers who possess positive views of their students, and also approach teaching and learning with a positive belief about all learners tend to cultivate feelings among their students of being respected and safe. Feeling respected and safe are key elements for learning to occur as defined by the two motivational theories and Culturally Responsive Teaching. Villegas and Lucas (2007) state that to be truly effective as Culturally Responsive Teachers, “teachers must possess two fundamental qualities: They must have sociocultural consciousness and hold affirming views toward diversity” (p. 3). Again, further research exploring Culturally Responsive Teaching must occur to help inform educational practice to ensure that students are more positively experiencing their education. It is important because when “all learners feel respected and safe, their contributions can go beyond expectations” (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 160). Research into using Culturally Responsive Teaching in creating a sense of community may allow members to feel valued, and achieve as Block (2009) suggests, “instead of surrendering our identity for the sake of belonging, we find in the small group a place that can value our uniqueness” (p. 31). To cultivate this sense of community, research must explore and focus on how to utilize the concepts of Culturally Responsive Teaching in programs serving students who struggle academically. Doing so will “humanize pedagogy that respects and uses the reality, history, and perspectives of students as an integral part of educational practice” (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 160).
Similar concepts are also central to current research focused on “being known” in high school as an aspect of fulfilling students’ basic need to belong. There are three main concepts explored in this research that go beyond the generalized sense of belonging in school and may inform the future development of learning communities (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). Chhuon and Wallace’s (2014) research specifically identified the importance for adolescents to experience meaningful relationships with teachers where teaching and learning are experienced as a two-way street and where students feel valued and appropriately supported. This aligned to some of the concepts of effective teacher qualities identified in the implementation of self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991). Additionally, it was noted by my participants and the participants in the author’s study that their relationships and feelings of being supported by their teachers in an educational program positively informed their educational experiences. Based on these findings, a future area of educational research and practice should, according to Chhuon and Wallace’s (2014), “focus on communication of care, expressed through personal interest in and knowledge about students’ lives” (p. 395) Exploring more deeply the role of communicating care from teachers and how it may inform how learners experience their education may contribute to increased student engagement and achievement. When it does not occur according to Chhuon and Wallace (2014) “such feelings and the academic disengagement that often follow can have devastating developmental consequences” (p. 389). The authors (2014) also noted “developmental needs met through improving relational practices in school can be a powerful and efficient way to increase positive youth development” (p. 397). Further research focused on the specific role of teacher and students’ relationships may
contribute to identifying methods of how to support students who struggle academically. As Chhuon and Wallace (2014) stated, “when teachers know the young people they work with, they’re more likely to focus on students’ growth and possibilities” (p. 396).

Another key concept tied to teacher-student relationships in Chhuon and Wallace’s (2014) study is the importance of “benefit-of-the-doubt” treatment by teachers. This finding is similar to what the graduates’ responses in this study noted. They shared they were more likely to engage in their learning if their individual life circumstances were accepted and teachers demonstrated flexibility and understanding. The authors (2014) stated that “further research contributing “to a ‘being known research agenda’” (p. 397) may in fact provide further insight into how to better meet students’ needs, specifically, for adolescents’ developmental needs.

In other research focused on the importance of relationships, Schall, Wallace, and Chhuon (2016) noted the important role students’ perceptions of their own locus of control played in school settings. It not only informed whether they perceived they belonged and fit in at school and with peers, but their locus of control informed their academic success: “adolescents who believe that they have little agency are less likely to engage in achievement behaviors” (p. 464). Their research appears to suggest that further work in classrooms and in schools to purposefully create community and foster relationships between students and their peers, and students and their teachers, may be an informative step in building students’ perceptions of their own locus of control. These ideas highlighted by Schall, Wallace, and Chhuon’s (2016) research were aligned to the central concepts of self-determination theory (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan 1991), specifically, the need for students to develop a sense
of belonging and autonomy in their learning environments. The findings from Schall, Wallace, and Chhuon (2016) research could be informative to educational researchers in their future study of peer and teacher relationships, and in the training of teachers in educational and professional development trainings on how to positively inform students’ perceptions of their own locus of control. Being generative in creating classrooms where students feel they belong and accepted by peers because of purposeful action taken to foster these relationships, also may result in an increased locus of control for students. Building this sense in students may also lead to stronger engagement and should be a consideration in the development of the social culture of classrooms, interventions, and schools (Schall et al., 2016, p. 473).

Finally, Schall, Wallace, and Chhuon (2016) research also suggests that positive relationships are valued and needed by both teachers and students. “Just as our participants sought more caring and developmentally productive relationships with their teachers, we believed that most teachers likewise seek positive interactions with their students (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014, p. 396). The research explored for this study, this study’s findings, and the findings of Chhuon and Wallace (2014), and Schall, Wallace, and Chhuon (2016) all affirm that future research which explores the importance of teacher-student and student-peer relationships may be the vehicle to truly address and increase student engagement and student achievement.

Research alone will not elicit change in how students’ positively experience their education and build their sense of community and belonging. Creating learning environments in schools and classrooms that nurture and promote relationships between teachers and students and students and their peers by prioritizing relationships in
instructional practices is an important step. Effective teacher practice focused on community building in education may be communicated in a variety of ways, but it may start with giving educators and school leaders permission to make it a priority. Next, providing practical instruction through professional development or speakers that model and integrate specific strategies focused on self-determination theory, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and being known into educational practice would assist teachers in building community in their classrooms. Doing so will also provide educators the tools to inform their practice and begin to effect change. Allocating time is also important. Allowing and providing time throughout the school year to practice and build their skills as educators would be a vital next step. This could take the form of PLC discussions, observations of peers within their school, and observations of others in settings who may be further in their mastery of these practices. For teachers like the students in their classrooms, “learning is much more meaningful and long-term when they work with it and mold it in themselves rather than just be told what is knowledge” (Langer, 1997, p. 124). Providing educators with the opportunity and the tangle strategies to implement the central concepts focused on the development of relationships may positively inform how students experience their education.

**Conclusion**

Senge (2006) suggests that to elicit change in an environment, we need to “shift the conversation from one of problems, fear, and retribution to one of possibility, generosity, and restoration” (p. 31). This is universal for all learners, but this conversational shift becomes most critical, when trying to engage students who have begun to underachieve. As Natalie shared:
I felt the gap getting bigger and bigger, between what I knew and what other kids knew. I didn’t know how to close it. It wasn’t until I was part of the program and had the support of the team of teachers, that I felt safe enough to even try.

There may be people who believe that to address the issue of underachievement in education, teachers just need to implement “best practice” into their instruction. Deblois and Place (2007) state that “educators still struggle to engage all students in serious learning and provide the mechanisms and supports that keep struggling students in school” (p. 38). Most strive to do so in their instruction, but doing so successfully involves managing many demands. Educators at times face challenges in their attempts to meet students’ basic needs, as they try to find the balance in their focus between creating and implementing curricula aligned to standards and achievement benchmarks, while also addressing students’ complex and varied needs. There is a demand for a new conversation and it must become an and conversation not an or conversation. Meaning, it needs to be a conversation focused on both high standards and building relationships and community.

Navigating the demands of a learning environment focused on high standards and relationships and community will require a significant amount of time, energy, and resources on the part of educators. Trust may be the key element to creating this type of learning environment. Empowering teachers to create learning communities focused on relationships and meeting students’ needs will require a significant amount of trust between leadership and educators. Trust may start with giving educators and schools permission to prioritize relationships and community as a critical part of the learning process. To implement these practices, concentrating on effective teacher qualities and
generative learning environments for relationships and communities to form is an imperative step. Additionally, developing programming and employing teaching practices organically may be more effective for educators and students than pre-determined programming models because curriculum and instruction can be truly aligned to the needs of the school and its learners while supporting and valuing teachers’ autonomy and insights. I wonder the following: “if educators build learning environment aligned to students’ needs, and impress upon them that all students are capable of achieving in school, would schools achieve what Maslow’s theory suggests: “the highest human need is to fulfill one’s true purpose by engaging in pursuits that utilize a person’s unique talents and passions” (Neukrug, 2015, p.1). To evoke this type of change, educators must listen to Block’s (2009) advice, “If we want a change in culture, for example, the work is to change the conversation- or, more precisely, to have a conversation that we have not had before, one that has the power to create something new in the world” (p. 15). The conversation about building community in schools must continue to occur.

Summary

As learning environments continue to change and evolve and the needs of learners become more complex, understanding both will be vital to improving the learning process and for the potential to improve student achievement. This chapter explored the findings of this study of four graduates’ and four educators’ experience in a former alternative education program at a suburban public high school. My goal was to better understand what specifically informed their educational and professional experiences. To do so, I explored the question: How do graduates and educators in a former alternative
education program describe their sense of community and how did it inform their experiences?

My purpose was to contribute to the discussion in the field of education about how to enhance the formation of future learning communities, to ensure that students’ basic needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness are met, as part of their overall educational experience. Understanding what appeared to be a universal feeling of empowerment created from a sense of community among both graduates and educators may be the transformation tool that may close the equity gaps among students labeled as underachieving. Throughout this chapter, I discussed the results of this study, and made connections between the literature review and the findings. I also addressed the limitations of the study and the implications for further research and practice, ultimately though, doing as Block (2009) suggests might be the most important step, “listening may be the single most powerful action the leader can take” (p. 88). As educators and leaders in schools and classrooms, teachers can effect change by listening to students, knowing who they are and what they need, by building relationships in community. These actions may be the most effective steps educators can take to truly meet students’ basic needs in education.
References


Appendix A: Visual of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

ABRAHAM MASLOW
HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Maslow, A. Motivation and Personality (2nd ed.)
Appendix B: Self-Determination Theory

Three Innate Psychological Needs Comprise The Self-Determination Theory of Student Motivation

# Appendix C: Pseudonyms for Participants and Their Role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Descriptors: Current role and teaching experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>An educator with a master’s degree in education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>A college student pursuing a degree in counseling. Also, a restaurant manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>An independent business owner running his own contracting business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>In a leadership position at the State Capitol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Teacher: Social Studies</td>
<td>Classroom teacher at a high school. 5-10 years’ experience when a member of the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Teacher: English</td>
<td>Assistant Principal at a high school. 1-5 years’ experience when a member of the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Teacher: English</td>
<td>Retired educator. Still active with extra-curricular activities. 20 or more years’ experience when a member of the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Counselor and Teacher: English</td>
<td>Retired educator. 20 or more years’ experience when a member of the program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: Individual Interview Questions for Graduates

1. Based on your personal experience, how would you describe the school-with-in-a-school program to someone?

2. Can you describe how you became a member of the swas program?

3. How would you describe yourself as a student before joining swas and how would you describe yourself as a student after being in swas?

4. At first, how did you feel about joining the program and in what ways did your feelings change after being in the program?

5. Can you describe your feelings about school before joining swas and then how you felt about school after joining swas?

6. When thinking about your relationship with teachers, how would you describe those relationships as a student in a swas classroom versus your non-swas classes?

7. When thinking about your relationship with classmates, how would you describe those relationships with other students in a swas classroom versus your non-swas classes?

8. When you look back, if there were parts of the program you valued or were impactful, what were they?

9. Please describe how important a role this community played or didn’t play in informing your school experience?

10. Is there anything you want to share about your experience you think is important for me to know, and you have not had the opportunity to discuss?
Appendix E: Individual Interview Question for Educators

1. How would you describe the school-with-in-a-school program to someone?

2. How would you describe a swas student to someone and in what ways were they different than other students you taught?

3. Please describe how the program helped students in ways that may have been different than their other non-swas classes?

4. You have been part of multiple groups as an educator and had multiple roles. When you look back, how did it feel to be a member of the swas team and how was it different than other experiences?

5. How do you think graduates will describe how it felt to be a swas student, and what do you think was beneficial for them about the program?

6. How would you describe the relationships between students in the program? Do you think they were different than in other non-swas classrooms in the school?

7. How would you describe the relationships between the staff in the program? Do you think they were different than in other departments or non-swas groups?

8. If you are still working as an educator, what elements from the program or educational practices still inform you practice as an educator?

9. If you were to create an intervention or an intervention program in education now, how would you structure it and what elements would you be sure to include and why?

10. Is there any additional information about the program or your experience that you would like to share?
## Appendix F: Interview Questions for Graduates Aligned to Motivational Theory:

### Basic Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions for Graduates</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Potential Individual Need Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-determination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>theory</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maslow’s Hierarchy of</td>
<td>Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on your personal experience, how would you describe the swas program to someone outside the community?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe how you became a member of the swas program?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you describe yourself as a student before joining swas? After being in swas?</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>At first, how did you feel about joining the program? In what ways did your feelings change after being in the program if at all?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can you describe your feelings about school before joining swas and then how you felt about school after joining swas?</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>When thinking about your relationships with teachers, how would you describe those relationships as a student in a swas classroom verses your non-swas classes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>When thinking about your relationship with your classmates, how would you describe those relationships with other students in a swas classroom versus your non-swas classes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>When you look back, if there were parts of the program you valued or thought were impactful, or could have been improved, what were they?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you describe how do you think the swas community influenced your school experience? In what ways was it for the better or for the worse?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there anything you want to share about your experience you think is important for me to know and that you have not had the opportunity to discuss?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix G: Interview Questions for Educators Aligned to Motivational Theory:

### Basic Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Self-determination need</th>
<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Relatedness</th>
<th>Safety</th>
<th>Esteem</th>
<th>Belonging &amp; Love</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe the swas program to someone outside of the community?</td>
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<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you describe a swas student to someone outside the community? In what ways were students in swas different than other students you have taught?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Please describe how the program, from your perspective helped students in ways that may have been different than their other non-swas classes?</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have been part of multiple groups as an educator and had multiple professional roles. When you look back, how did it feel to be a member of the swas team and how was it different and similar to other educational experiences as professional educator?</td>
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<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you think graduates will describe how it felt to be in swas? From what you know, what was beneficial for them about the program?</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you describe the relationships between students in the swas program? Do you think the students in swas were different than in other non-swas classrooms in the school; if so, how?</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you describe the relationships between the staff in the program? Do you think they were different and/or similar compared to other departments or non-swas groups?</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G Continued: Interview Questions for Educators Aligned to Motivational Theory Basic Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Potential Individual Need Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you are still working as an educator, what elements of from swas program or educational practices still inform your practice as an educator?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you were to create an intervention or an intervention-based program like swas in education now, how would you structure it? What elements would you be sure to include and why?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there any additional information about the program or your experience that you would like to share?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H: Hamline University Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

TO: ELIZABETH A. JANEGY FROM: HAMLINE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

RE: IRB APPROVAL 1/10/20) Your proposal entitled “Sense of Belonging in an Alternate Education Program” requires no further review or modification.

The proposal is approved.

Good Luck with the project.
Appendix I: Letter of Consent

March 4th, 2017

Dear ____________________,

I am a graduate student working on an education doctorate at Hamline University, St. Paul, Minnesota. I am currently working to complete my degree by completing my dissertation. One aspect of the dissertation is to conduct research. I have selected to do a qualitative interview study to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of graduates and educators as members of a small learning community. I will be conducting individual and focus group interviews over a month’s time period in early spring of 2017.

The purpose of this letter is to request your participation as my interviewee. The individual interview will be recorded and last about 60 minutes. I will transcribe and analyze it for my research. The interview questions will be provided ahead of time. I will summarize the findings in my dissertation, which my dissertation committee will assess. You may contact my dissertation advisor with any questions or concerns: Dr. Barbara Swanson: contact information

There is little to no risk if you choose to be interviewed.
1. All results will be confidential and anonymous. Pseudonyms will be used in the transcript for you and any people or places you mention. In all cases, your identity and participation in this study will be confidential.
2. Participation in the interview is voluntary. At any time, you may decline to be interviewed without negative consequences.
3. The interview will be conducted at a place and a time that is convenient for you.
4. The interview recording and transcript will be destroyed after completion of my dissertation.

If you agree to participate, keep this page. Please fill out the duplicate agreement to participate on the next page and return it to me in person or scan the next page with your signature and date, and attach it in an email. I would appreciate receiving the consent portion no later than the day of your interview. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth A. Janey

Contact Information

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview

I have received and read the letter about the class assignment for which you will be interviewing me about my experiences as a member of a small learning community. I understand that being interviewed poses little to no risk for me, that my identity will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the interview portion of the project at any time without negative consequences.

Signature________________________________________  Date____________

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview

Please sign and date this form and give it to Elizabeth Janey before the interview starts.

I have received and read the letter regarding your research for your dissertation, for which you will be interviewing me about my experiences as a member of a small learning community. I understand that being interviewed poses little to no risk for me, that my identity will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the interview portion of the project at any time without negative consequences.

Signature________________________________________  Date____________
Appendix J: Themes from Graduate and Educator Interviews

**Theme 1:** Before Becoming a Member of the Community, School was a Negative Experience for Graduates.

**Theme 2:** Experiencing Membership in a Learning Community Positively Informed Graduates’ Actions and Attitudes

**Theme 3:** How We Gather in Community Matters and Informs the Educational Experiences of Students to Enrich the Learning Process.

**Theme 4:** The Creation of Community Builds Capacity in Educators.

**Theme 5:** Relationships Profoundly Informed Graduates’ Educational Experience.

**Theme 6:** A Shared Vision Can Empower a Team of Educators to Create Transformational Learning Communities that Positively Inform the Students’ Futures.