ABSTRACT

Debra Windley. WE CHOOSE NOT TO “SHUT UP AND DRIBBLE”: LISTENING TO STUDENT VOICES IN AN ALTERNATIVE LEARNING SCHOOL (Under the direction of Dr. Matthew Militello). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2023.

The purpose of the PAR study was to use students' experiences in an alternative learning school to better understand and strengthen African American male student learning. Because the students had academic setbacks, failed classes, and lost credits necessary for high school graduation, they were “pushed out” of the traditional high school to the district’s alternative school where they are enrolled in an online credit recovery program. For students to succeed academically and graduate with a high school diploma, I used improvement science and community learning exchange processes to conduct a qualitative study to understand how we could better support students as they navigated the alternative setting. By listening to student experiences and ideas, we countered the perception that students in alternative education do not care about learning. Students wanted caring teachers who were highly trained to meet their academic needs and in-person learning with classes customized for small groups of students. As a result of the project and study, (1) students identified multiple benefits of the alternative setting and two major challenges -- online learning and instructional practices; (2) teachers were more strategic in meeting the needs of students; and (3) teachers changed how they thought about students as learners and selected instructional strategies identified by students to support them academically. As a result, the teachers and administrators were more effective. Incorporating student voice in decision-making is critical, particularly for students who are marginalized because they do not respond well to traditional school practices (O’Connor, 1997; Cook-Sather, 2002; 2018). The practices students identified belong in all schools; we need to respond to diverse learning styles to support students who find traditional methods challenging.

WE CHOOSE NOT TO "SHUT UP AND DRIBBLE": LISTENING TO STUDENT VOICES IN AN ALTERNATIVE LEARNING SCHOOL

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

By
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DEDICATION

To my husband Clyde, I dedicate this dissertation. He has been my supporter, my shoulder to cry on, my cook, my laundry guy, my alarm clock, my rock, and my love during this journey. I consider myself fortunate to have him by my side as I travel through life, and I am certain that I could not have completed this leg of the journey without him. His love and devotion have been unwavering throughout this three year process. I want to dedicate this dissertation to my sister-in-law and cousin, Doretha, and Sheila, as well as my children Bruce, Kieran, and Terrence. They never stopped supporting me, which gave me the bravery and conviction that I could reach this goal. I hope that they can look to my drive, perseverance, and hard work as an example. Additionally, this dissertation is dedicated to all the young Black boys who have struggled to fit in at their schools. I have seen firsthand how they suffer in traditional classrooms. As a result, I've made it my mission to make sure every child under my supervision obtains a quality education in a safe and caring learning environment, especially those who have historically been marginalized and "pushed out".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I want to start by expressing my gratitude to Monica Headen, my dissertation coach, for her perseverance in helping me through this process. She provided me with detailed guidance, encouragement, and inspiration during this research study. Monica, your high standards and expectations motivated me to keep working until I produced the final product. To Lynda Tredway, I would want to express my sincerest gratitude, appreciation, and thanks for your unwavering encouragement and assistance. You made the writing process of the dissertation a valuable one. Throughout the writing and evaluation of this dissertation, the members of my dissertation committee, Matthew Militello, Lawrence Hodgkins, and Lynda Tredway, kindly offered their time, support, advice, and goodwill. I value your expertise and insight.

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Jason excelled in middle school as an athlete, but he had not excelled as a student. Jason's teachers at a traditional high school viewed him as a discipline problem. In his first year of high school, he received multiple suspensions and earned only one of the required six credits for being a sophomore. During the first semester of the next school year, Jason continued his pattern of misbehavior, suspensions, and course failure. The principal recommended him for placement at an alternative learning school (ALS), and the superintendent approved the placement. At the ALS, Jason took online and face-to-face credit recovery courses. However, he was taking Math 1 and 2 at the same time, which added to his level of academic frustration. The challenge of keeping Jason motivated to complete assigned coursework was insurmountable, and he dropped out at age 16.

As an assistant principal of a traditional high school for four years, students were assigned to the district's alternative school because they had caused significant disruption(s) at the traditional school setting, received an administrative placement in lieu of expulsion, or needed graduation credits. In conversations with the students, I heard these comments such as: "I'm being kicked out of school," "these teachers just think I am bad," "they think I am stupid," "they do not like me", and "he/she just want to get me out of their class." At the time, the students were not acknowledging how they contributed to their situations. They rarely took responsibility for their actions nor viewed their actions as justification for the consequences received. I recall thinking to myself: "How can they not understand what is happening to them?" However, since that time, I realized that, to some degree, we have designed the system to do exactly what it does: Push out students of color, especially male students, to special education or to alternative settings because we are incapable of meeting their needs in the ways "we do"

school (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Emdin, 2013; Ferguson, 2000; Howard, 2019; Kunjufu, 1985; Kunjufu, 2006).

Over the course of this Participatory Action Research (PAR) project and study, I served as the principal of the alternative school and lead researcher. The 45 students in the alternative school faced the same challenges as Jason; they were placed at risk for academic failure in our system (Boykin & Noguera, 2011), and I wanted to understand, from the students' perspectives, what we could do differently so that they could be more successful. I know that high school students face a range of emotional, social, intellectual, and financial obstacles that are underlying contributing factors to the situation. Dropping out seemed to be the only viable option as students failed classes and fell behind their peers in terms of credits gained for graduation. Instead, I wanted students in alternative settings to fully engage in school and understand how the system might have failed them. I wanted them to tell us how we could better support them to be active agents in their own lives. To do that, I engaged the students in telling us their stories and setting up systems and structures to ensure that students in the alternative school were successful.
I used as a guide the project and study of Ramos (2021), who worked with students in an alternative school in California; he spent time deeply understanding the issues they faced; some of the processes that he used were helpful in this study of North Carolina teenagers in an alternative education setting. As the principal, I wanted to reorganize the alternative school system for credit recovery and ensure that they graduate, but, before we decided what to do and how to do it, we needed their voices in the process so that we could address their needs (Cook-Sather, 2002; Cook-Sather, 2018; Mitra & Gross, 2018; Oliver et al., 2009). The focus of practice for the participatory action research project and study was: Use the experiences of students in an alternative learning school setting to understand and strengthen the learning for

African American male students. As a result of our increased understanding, I, along with other staff, adjusted course implementation.

To frame this project and study, I discuss the rationale for investigating students' perceptions of their experiences with online credit recovery classes, the Focus of Practice (FoP) and Participatory Action Research (PAR), assets and challenges related to the project, the significance that the project might have to practice, policy, and research, and the PAR connection to equity. Throughout this study, I use these terms interchangeably: alternative learning, alternative school, Alternative Learning School (ALS), and alternative learning program.

Rationale

The students attending the Shaw County Alternative School, located in Shaw County, needed support and interventions to ensure their academic success and propel them toward high school graduation with the skills necessary for employment, college, or military. As the principal, I wanted to gain an understanding of the alternative learning program (strengths and challenges), from the students' perspectives. As the school leader, I could then utilize the information to recognize the benefits and challenges of the ALS and its credit recovery program. As a result, I worked with students and teachers to make changes that improve learning for the students, particularly African American male students. The students told their stories in their words, and we worked as a teaching team to incorporate their experiences in our adult understanding and actions. They gave the school leader and teachers insight into the reasons for their struggles with programs such as online credit recovery. Students provided an important viewpoint to the study since they were closest to the problem and were best positioned to suggest solutions and be important adjuncts to research (Cook-Sather, 2018; Guajardo et al., 2016).

Students' experiences, even if they were unpleasant, provided the perspectives we needed to make changes that would benefit them.

Through credit recovery, school administrators of alternative learning settings attempt to ensure the academic success of at-risk students and increase their chances of graduating from high school. However, credit recovery is not a panacea and has assets and challenges (Pettijohn & LaFrance, 2014). Oliver et al. (2008) explored the issues that affected credit recovery in North Carolina schools; while accelerated students were successful in gaining additional credit, the students who have not been successful in our traditional schools needed more support to be successful in credit recovery. In conducting this study, I wanted to gain an understanding of what challenges students experienced so that, as a school, we could provide support. We needed to hear students' thoughts on recovering credits for failed courses as many times they were taking courses out of the usual sequence and found the content requirements too difficult to understand. The implications could assist school districts in reducing the high school dropout rates.

Focus of Practice

The Focus of Practice (FoP) for this participatory action research study was: Use the experiences of students in an alternative learning school setting to understand and strengthen the learning for African American male students. In a collaborative approach, I worked with a group of students and staff to listen to their perspectives and used that information to coach teachers about the benefits and drawbacks of a credit recovery program with the goal of enhancing the program, particularly for students of color. As a school administrator tasked with increasing students' chances of graduating from high school through credit recovery, I wanted to develop a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties students face so that the teachers and I could support them in meeting their goals of graduating from high school as career and college ready.

Participants in this research included a group of six students and two teachers from the school. This process required meetings to build awareness and understanding of credit recovery from the students' viewpoint.

Analysis of Assets and Challenges

Next, I analyze the assets and challenges that impacted the FoP at the micro, meso, and macro levels. The overarching question is: How do the insights and experiences of students in an alternative learning program inform how teachers and leaders support students? The term micro refers to the classroom or school level; meso refers to the district level, particularly including district level programs; and the macro level refers to the state or national impact (see Figure 1 for the fishbone analysis of assets and challenges).

Micro Assets and Challenges

The school level assets included small class sizes, use of restorative practices, and a caring and supportive staff. The class size limit was fifteen, and the class size average for the 2020-2021 school year was 12. In the school, we replaced traditional punishments with some aspects of restorative practices to reduce out-of-school suspensions, including using morning meetings. However, despite fewer suspensions, academic achievement of students did not improve. Another school level asset was the care and support of the staff. The relationships between students and staff were respectful. Despite the assets, the school has challenges. A major school level challenge was the course sequencing. Often students took two-three classes in the same semester of different levels of the content – math 1, math 2, and math 3, for example. While the class size was reasonable, additional staff, particularly a math teacher, were necessary to reduce the number of students in the blended math classes.

Meso Assets and Challenges

At the meso level, the district funds behavioral consultants and social workers to provide support to students. However, while teachers had professional development and curriculum assistance at the school level, receiving follow-up and additional training for the special circumstance of alternative learning settings remained a challenge. Another key challenge is ongoing; the teaching salary is low and adds to the difficulty in hiring highly qualified teachers.

Macro Assets and Challenges

At the macro level, the assets included the Professional Development (PD) provided by the Friday Institute and state guidelines/training offered through NC Educator Effectiveness System (NCEES) portal. Teachers expressed gratitude in being able to attend quality, content-specific training remotely, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions, offered by the state. One of the major challenges discussed was funding. Teachers stated that, with additional funds through Title I, the school could benefit greatly from hiring additional staff, such as an on-site, daily instructional coach in math, additional math teacher, and credit recovery facilitator. However, since the school is not designated as a Title I school due to enrollment size, which limited state funding, we could not hire for these necessary positions (see Figure 1 for assets and challenges). In view of assets and challenges at the micro, meso, macro (school, district, and state, respectively) levels, the FoP was designed to create the opportunity for changes in teaching and learning at the school by listening to a vital resource, the students.

Significance

The findings of this study can potentially assist school administrators and teachers in analyzing and redesigning a credit recovery program that supports academic success among students that leads to high school graduation. The immediate significance to teachers, students,

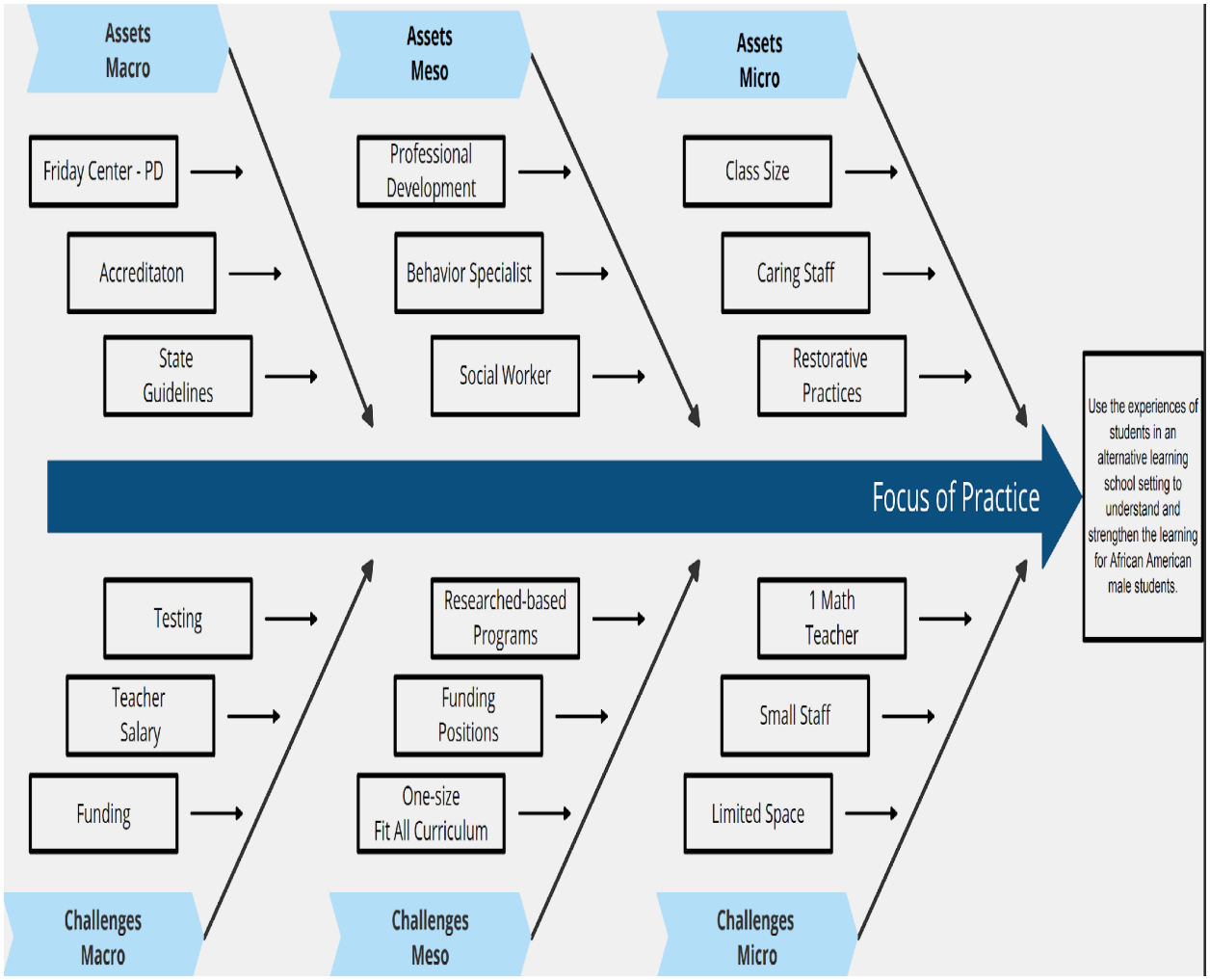


Figure 1. Analysis of assets and challenges of the FoP.

and the administrator at this school was that we incorporated the experiences of students in redesigning the credit recovery program. School districts can use the results of this research to evaluate whether their credit recovery programs are useful. Thus, the study has potential influence on practice, policy, and future research.

Practice

In terms of practice, the PAR was significant locally because we used the results to drive and support our high-needs student population needing to take credit recovery courses. The findings from the research strengthened the interests and effectiveness of our teachers and administrators at this site and became the norm for how we interacted with and supported our students to achieve academically. In addition, the success of the school can contribute to changes in the district; this process could be added to the professional development and learning opportunities that teachers receive throughout the county. School administrators can learn more about the success rates of traditional and online credit recovery courses to help students decide which type of credit recovery courses increase their success rates. Understanding the learning styles of students placed at risk for academic failure with whom the school leaders and teachers are interacting would help with implementation of an alternative program (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Gay, 2000). Students must be interested in their school; otherwise, they may decide to quit (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Policy

Although a part of the curriculum in most alternative schools, the credit recovery program was scrutinized as the schools may have higher graduation rates, but their students do not perform well on the state performance tests (Allensworth et al., 2018). School administrators have the responsibility to help students find solutions or methods to deal with the problems they

face that hinders their success in school. Students face the difficulty of failing to pass the required courses to graduate due to behavioral, social/emotional, and learning disabilities, which will require taking the credit recovery version of the course. School leaders should help students understand the consequences of not completing or passing the credit recovery course. A failed credit recovery course means the student will not be able to earn credit; as a result, the student will not be able to graduate.

Research

By providing opportunities for students' voices (listening to their perspectives), educators can positively impact a school's practice and policy as well as instructional content (Khalifa, 2018). He states: "This practice of giving space for students to speak directly about the ways they feel oppressed is crucial to culturally responsive school leadership" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 67). He discusses the use of "rap sessions" by the principal as a means of giving space for student voices in the school to help inform policy. We also see that incorporating and recognizing students' perspectives increases student engagement and achievement. This qualitative research study relates to research as it is focused on the use of the experiences of students in an alternative learning school setting to understand and strengthen the learning for African American male students. If we can help students make sense of their experiences in the alternative learning program, they can gain necessary skills to complete the program successfully and build positive relationships with staff members, setting up more equitable conditions for their success.

Connection to Equity

The Focus of Practice (FoP) related to the issues of equity as online credit recovery is currently a one-size fits all program, and I expected that we needed to engage students with an eye to differentiating how we met student needs. The premise behind the credit recovery program

is to provide a process for students to recover failed courses, stay in school and not drop out, and look forward to the opportunity to graduate from high school. Credit-recovery programs are designed as equity-focused programs to create a pathway to graduation for all students, eliminating observed inequalities in educational opportunities of marginalized students (Pollack & Zirkel, 2016). However, the design does not, as the students reported in this study, consider their differentiated needs for more teacher interaction to ensure their learning.

As a result, these programs usually create segregated environments, with Black and Brown students making up the majority (Dunbar, 1999; Dunning-Lozano, 2016), and students continue to encounter the same challenges that they did in traditional schools (Oliver et al., 2009). Instead of credit-recovery programs creating equitable spaces, racial disparities and inequity are prevalent. For example, Powell (2020) shows how a credit recovery program designed to bridge the racial gap between black and white students benefited white students and not black students, similar to the finding of Pettijohn and LaFrance (2014) in which accelerated students can use credit recovery to support their academic path, but students who have had difficulty in the past continue to experience challenges in credit recovery. Examining the psychological and political-economic frames related to this focus of practice help me understand how to reframe the approach.

Psychological Frame

Steele (2010) in his work on stereotype threat, which especially affects students of color, discusses the "underperformance phenomenon" (p. 24). He acknowledged that teachers may have unconscious biases from repeated exposure to mischaracterizations of African American males as being unmotivated, and teachers may relate to these students negatively based on the myth that African American families do not value education. Steele discusses psychological

issues in Black students, which may occur because of internalizing negative images; psychic deficiencies can cause low self-esteem and low expectations that may result in students underperforming. However, including students' cultural backgrounds, interests, and experiences can connect academic concepts to their everyday lives and makes the learning experiences more personal, thereby improving students' engagement and achievement. Byrd (2016) tells us, "By allowing students, especially minority students, to affirm their most valued sense of self, you can improve their grades, even for a long time" (p. 216). The aim of the PAR project and study is to change the interactions of African American males in classrooms through listening to their experiences and incorporating learning strategies and supports that address their needs; valuing their experiences and ideas can potentially increase their participation and chances of overall success.

Political-Economic Frame

The political-economic factors are applicable to the focus of practice and equitable outcomes for students. The school has predominantly Black students from economically disadvantaged homes, in which educational policies have historically contributed to the use of culturally biased standards that decrease opportunities for students of color (Gay, 2000). One such practice is the identification of students placed in advanced classes. Schools begin the process of identifying Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) students in fourth grade using state requirements that include the student's Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test score and performance on state tests in math and/or English. Generally, African American boys are the lowest performing subgroup on state tests in both math and reading. Hence, few African American boys are identified as AIG using the state criteria. Teachers need a stronger understanding of laws and policies that create inequitable educational practices such as minority

students being underrepresented in advanced courses. Gutiérrez (2013) tells us that "more knowledge is key to being able to creatively resist … and find loopholes in policies or interpret rules and/or procedures in ways that allow them to advocate for historically underserved and/or marginalized students" (p. 14). In the PAR project, we intend to promote a change in the instructional practices used by teachers that could benefit all students, but starting with African American male students, who are the largest demographic in alternative school placements.

In summary, the FoP is directly linked to issues with psychological and political and economic factors in equity. Removing barriers that hinder engagement should be a school priority. Nearly all the school's African American students are from economically disadvantaged homes; coupled with inequities in educational policies with culturally biased standards, our students face an unequal and inequitable playing field. Our teachers need a stronger understanding of how to address these inequities in our educational practices. In the PAR project, we intend to promote a change in our social-emotional and academic practices used by teachers that could benefit African American male students.

In discussing the Participatory Action Research (PAR) design. I outline the project and study activities, and I connect the work to key principles.

Participatory Action Research Design

The process I used to study the FoP included key features of participatory action and activist research. Herr and Anderson (2015) identify action research that includes youth as research in which the youth "have the opportunity to study firsthand issues of concern to them, and using the inquiry process, they then begin to craft actions to address these issues" (p. 29). hunter et al. (2013) define PAR as a social process that is participatory, practical, and collaborative. The intention of this PAR study is activist and emancipatory because the process

engages the people closest to the issue and listens to the perspectives of the students to make any change (Guajardo et al., 2016). I employed a cyclical approach to include the following steps: understanding and reflecting on the issue, devising a plan, carrying out the plan, performing, observing, and then reflecting to inform the iterative cycles of inquiry (hunter et al., 2013).

This type of action research (AR) differs from traditional dissertation research in a variety of ways. In action and activist research, the researcher engages participants in the context of the study, and the process is collaborative and reflective (Hale, 2017). In addition, Herr and Anderson (2015) state that the participants engage in the inquiry together and the lead researcher does the research with the participants not "to" them. As I reiterate the purpose of the project and detail the research questions, I outline the theory of action for the PAR change project approach. Then, I describe the activities that I undertook to address the FoP.

Purpose Statement, Research Questions, and Theory of Action

The purpose of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) project and study was to discover ways in which we, the teachers and I, could best support African American male students in the alternative learning school to successfully complete credit recovery courses. I worked with the students and teachers in three participatory action research cycles to explore how we could collaboratively understand and then implement practices that support the students' academic and personal growth. The overarching research question is: *How do the insights and experiences of students in an alternative learning program inform how teachers and leaders support students?* The sub-research questions guided the research:

1. How do students identify benefits or challenges in the alternative learning program?
2. To what extent do the student voices inform the revision of the curriculum and instruction online credit recovery program?

3. To what extent does teacher participation support their shifts in practice?
4. To what extent does this process support my growth and development as a school leader?

The theory of action is**:** If the teachers and I listen to student experiences, then we can shift academic and social-emotional practices to better support students as they navigate through credit recovery. At the same time, we are listening to students, I concurrently supported teachers in using practices that students have identified that work for them.

Project Activities

To conduct a successful research study, I worked with a team of people. We engaged in dialogue about the benefits and challenges of credit recovery (from the students' perspective) in an alternative learning school toward answering the overarching question for this study: *How do the insights and experiences of students in an alternative learning program inform how teachers and leaders support students*? I engaged in three cycles of inquiry from Fall 2021-Fall 2022 with six students and two teachers. In those cycles of inquiry, I collected and analyzed data to inform future actions. These activities guide the research process:

- Invite students and teachers to participate.
- Facilitate monthly meetings.
- Conduct individual and group conversations with the student participants.
- Conduct classroom observations and evidenced-based post observations conversations with teachers.
- Work with teachers to co-design support for students.

Study Considerations

In this research, the security of the collected data and the confidentiality of the participants was crucial. Except for the lead researcher, no one had access to any personally identifiable information collected. No documents include identifiable information, such as name, grade, and subjects taught. I identified participants as student participant 1, student participant 2, teacher participant 1, etc. I used pseudonyms for the district, the school, and the participants in the study. In addition, interview records and audio tapes, on-site records, and copies of collected documents were kept in a safe, locked location and, after three years, I will destroy these data Finally, any materials collected from personnel were not copied or disseminated in any way.

Two limitations in this qualitative research study are sample size and time. The small number of participants in this study and school size could reduce the study's feasibility for larger schools. As both principal and lead researcher, time is another limitation. School leaders balance school deadlines and research deadlines to ensure there is an adequate amount of time to examine the research problem and track changes over time. I am the administrator and thus have a position of authority with students and teachers. Thus, this relationship is a possible limitation in that relationship because I conducted interviews with all participants in the first cycle of inquiry to ensure that participants knew the purpose of the study was to collaborate, listen to student experiences, and use those experiences to improve their schooling experiences. I address a more complete discussion of limitations and the effect on validity in Chapter 3.

Summary

Our role as educators is to ensure that all students have equitable access and rigor in their academic pursuits; we are required to create and maintain the opportunity to learn (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). To do so, school districts must be willing to listen to students, make them feel

successful, and thereby help them to continue their studies (Heppen et al., 2017). Administrators and teachers both play a role in assisting students in feeling successful and must be knowledgeable of the options available to students, such as credit recovery. This research aimed to address how principals and teachers can work with students to improve the life chances of African American males in an alternative school setting.

In Chapter 1, I introduced credit recovery as an example of how students potentially could complete high school. In deciding on African American males in an alternative school setting as the participants, I focused on a subgroup of students who experience the greatest difficulties in our current system. I supported the focus of practice with equity frameworks: the psychological frame (Steele, 2010) and the political-economic frame (Gutiérrez, 2013).

In subsequent chapters, I present the extant literature on the subject (see Chapter 2) and the methodology for the qualitative study using participatory action research as the primary methodology (see Chapter 3). In Chapter 4, I detail the context of the study and the analysis of data from the Pre-Cycle of inquiry. In Chapters 5 and 6, I present the emergent themes from PAR Cycle One and the findings. To conclude this dissertation, I discuss the findings and implications for this research in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The goal of the project and study is: Use the experiences of students in an alternative learning school setting to understand and strengthen the learning for African American male students. I reviewed literature on these topics: student voices, culturally responsive practices, credit recovery, and African American male learners. I used the research to guide my interactions with students and teachers. This qualitative study provided me, as the school leader, and teachers with knowledge of the benefits and challenges of using an online credit recovery program in an Alternative Learning School (ALS), from the students' perspective. Those closest to the problem are more likely to offer useful information toward finding solutions **(**Guajardo et al., 2016). Throughout this chapter, I use the terms alternative learning school, alternative school, alternative learning program, and alternative learning setting interchangeably. In addition, I use the term African American (AA) or Black interchangeably, and I capitalize both. In the first section, I review literature on student voice. In the second section, I present a review of literature on the AA males in educational settings; I conclude by reviewing literature on credit recovery and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Student Voice

In this section of the literature review, I focus on student voice as a means of resolving misunderstandings and contributing to how adults support students in schools. I start with a review of the literature that defines student voice. Next, I present the literature on the value of the student voice and review how student voice increases equitable access and participation.

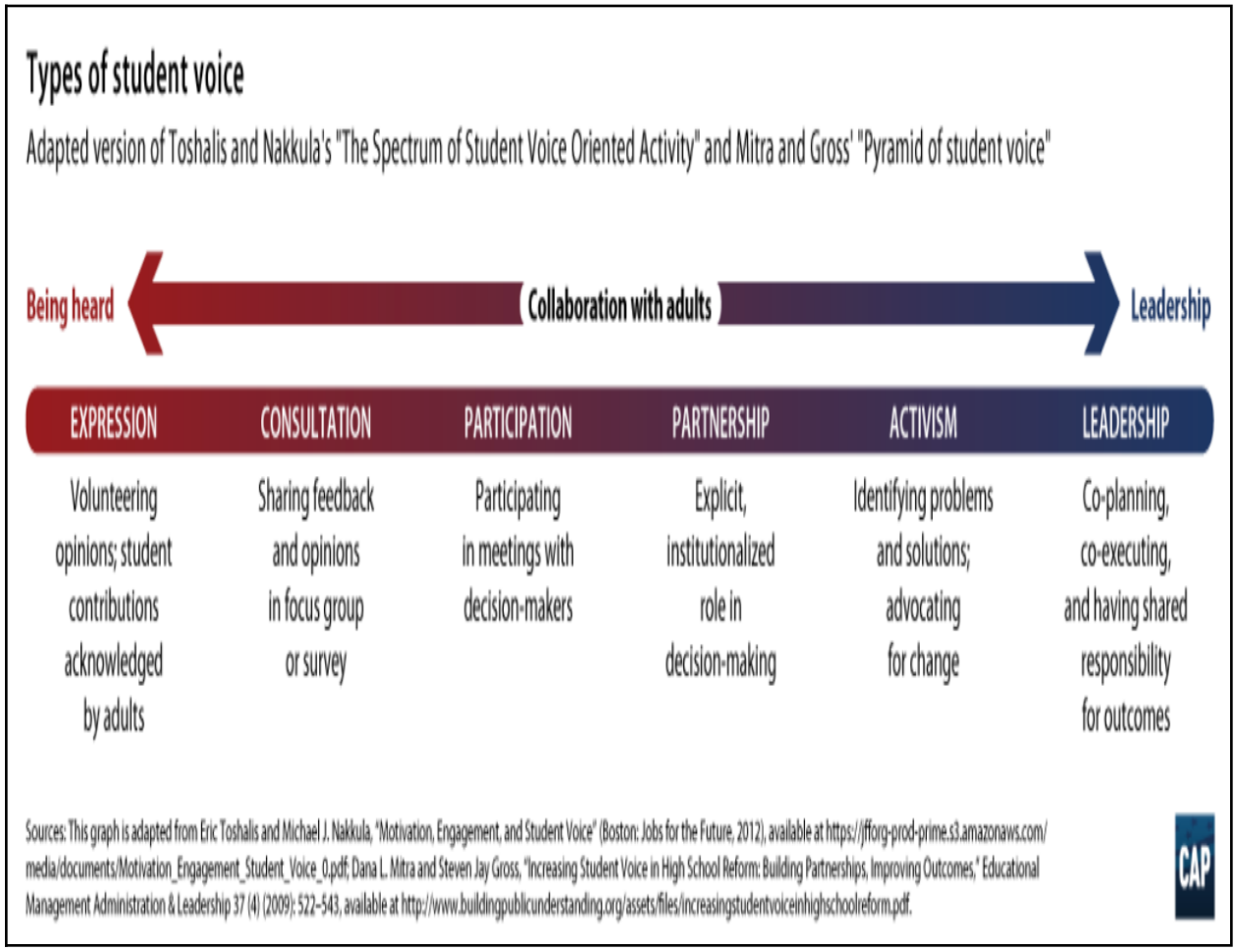
What is Student Voice?

Student voice in education refers to the sharing of the values, views, beliefs, and perspectives by individual and/or groups of students on educational procedures and programs

(Great Schools Partnership, n.d.). Benner et al. (2019) name student voice as student involvement in their education, which includes input on instruction, learning styles, and school programs. Another definition of student voice is "student participation and decision making in the structures and practices that shape their educational experiences" (Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2019, p. 3). This definition suggests that student voice goes beyond cultivating discourse in classrooms to hear equitably from all students. Rather, student voice is guaranteeing that students can express their opinions and ideas on educational reforms that directly affect their studies and lives (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011).

Students' roles in their education are vital, yet they have little to no influence on the content or process of their education (Benner et al., 2019). Students from historically disadvantaged groups -- Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and low-income communities, as well as students with disabilities -- have all benefited from the increase in student voice. "Given the assumption that student voice can increase student engagement, such efforts to give students more ownership of their education may be linked to improvements in student outcomes" (Benner et al., 2019, p. 1). Thus, student interviews, polls, and focus groups in their study emphasized the importance of student input in curriculum decisions, improving teaching methods, and increasing graduation rates.

Benner et al. (2019) adapted a student voice spectrum that ranges from being heard to collaborating with adults to leadership from Nakkula and Toshalis (2012) and Mitra and Gross (2009), depicted in Figure 2. The six types of student voice on the spectrum include: expression, consultation, participation, partnership, activism, and leadership. All types of student input or voice are valuable and may impact educational decisions or policies in schools. Each type has its advantages in specific situations dependent upon the specific goals.



Note. (Source: Benner et al., 2019, p. 4).

Figure 2. Types of student voice in collaborating with adults.

School leaders make decisions daily to support the learning of students; however, they neglect to listen to students or do not include students in the decision-making process when it comes to curriculum or policy changes, even though they are the ones who are most affected. Consequently, schools are not embracing student voice as a critical input in their decisions (Cook-Sather, 2002; 2012; 2018; Mitra & Gross, 2018).

The Value of Student Voice

"Student voice is an effective method of promoting students' investment in their long-term success and advancing core democratic values like participation and leadership" (Benner et al., 2019, p. 3). In addition, by authorizing student voice in schooling, students develop confidence in critical thinking, creativity, communication, and cooperation skills – all skills necessary for college and/or career. Finally, student voice can help students realize that their educational decisions are connected to their daily lives (home-to-school connection), bridging the gap between their experiences inside and outside the school.

Bubb and Jones (2020) examined how students use their voices to help improve schools. They analyzed how the responses to student voices and school improvement requests are related to each other and emphasizes the difficulties that need to be resolved by collecting opinions and experiences from faculty, staff, and students. According to this study of three Norwegian schools from focus groups and interviews of teachers and students, students wanted to be heard, and teachers and school officials wanted to listen. However, barriers often prevented the voice of the students from being included in decisions. They found that key stakeholders' opinions of the type and amount of student involvement in practice differed and resulted in uneven student participation in any decisions, despite the high (90%) of persons who were interviewed who

agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should ask student opinions. Benner et al. (2019) concluded that:

> Ultimately, research indicates that if students have opportunities to actively shape their educational experiences, then: 1. Students will demonstrate increased engagement in their education; 2. Schools and districts will improve their cultural responsiveness by hearing, supporting, and validating student needs; and 3. Systems and communities will offer students a greater range of educational opportunities. (p. 5)

If students actively shape their educational experience, they will be more engaged in learning, schools become culturally responsive, and students have access to a range of educational opportunities.

Khalifa (2018) connects student voices to Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL). Khalifa puts the weight of initiating student voice on school leaders, who set the tone for how to use student experiences and opinions as a source of knowledge that may influence content, policies, and practices. He suggested schools must find ways to provide a safe space for students to express their feelings, which is essential for cultural response to school leadership. Student voice engages students and staff to critically self-reflect on their behaviors. Next, I review literature that addresses the relationship between student voice and equity.

Equity through Student Voice

Equitable student voice in schools starts in classrooms but should extend to other spaces in which students can voice their ideas and opinions**.** In classrooms, students, by and large, listen to teachers, and rarely have an opportunity to express their thoughts. Freire (2018) describes the relationship between teachers and students as oppressor and the oppressed when teachers have all the information and give it to students, and the students are merely the receivers of this

information. He terms this the banking model concept of education; the teacher “deposits” information into the mind of their students and students simply memorize and recall the information. "The teacher talks and the students [listen]-meekly...The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thoughts on them" (Freire, 2018, pp. 73, 77). Freire is critical of this model because it robs students of the ability to think critically.

In a constructivist theory of learning, students need to construct knowledge by talking to peers. Students need the opportunity to engage and make meaningful connections between prior knowledge and new information for them to think critically and understand or comprehend concepts. Freire proposes employing a “problem-posing model” that uses real-world examples relevant to students, supporting them to investigate how and why those problems exist. This method encourages dialogue as those involved in the verbal exchange answer questions of how and why. Freire (2018) explains that “this dialogue can't be reduced to the act of one person's “depositing” ideas into another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be “consumed” by the discussants” (p. 89). The necessary attributes for “true dialogue” are humility, faith, trust, hope, and critical thinking. If teachers lack humility, faith, and trust in what students know and view themselves as the sole possessors of knowledge, they discount the ideas or contributions of students, creating a class environment in which academic discourse between teachers and students or among students does not occur. Hence, dialogue becomes the central concept of authentic education, “without dialogue there isn't any communication, and without communication, there'll be no true education” (Freire, 2018, p. 92).

Benner et al. (2019) discuss how the voice of students may contribute to a more equitable and successful educational experience. To achieve equity, the exercise of voice must be open to various viewpoints, so that instead of listening and responding to a single voice, especially in

classrooms, school leaders hear from a diverse group of students, especially those from historically marginalized groups. Instead of asking historically oppressed students to describe how they may fit into the existing, mainstream system, an equitable discussion recognizes and values the cultures and experiences of all students. The authors suggest what many other researchers have confirmed: instead of asking historically oppressed students to describe how they have adapted to the traditional education system, teachers should have an equity-minded discussion that recognizes and values students' cultural differences (Delpit, 1995; Emdin, 2016; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Students could provide significant information about the strengths and challenges of a proposed initiative. They can provide useful feedback on changes and contribute to informing cultural responses that meet the needs of the school and the community.

African American Male Learner

Despite the many school reform efforts, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA), African American males continue to be the largest student group disproportionately affected by academic failure in U.S. schools (Howard, 2013). Districts and schools invest many dollars in programs, professional development for teachers, and initiatives towards closing the "achievement gap" between AA males and other groups of students. However, these efforts have largely been unsuccessful. In this section, I explore the literature on AA male learners. I discuss the perceptions that educators often have of male students of color as deficit, which produces recommendations that require the young men to change, not the systems that educate them. Then, I review specifically African American males in alternative settings.

Perception of AA Males

Howard (2013) examined political, social, and economic indicators to discover the ongoing challenges of and root causes of being a Black male in the US. He found that Black males from the onset of birth disproportionately face challenges that often have adverse effects: poverty, living in economically disadvantaged areas, and underfunded schools. These challenges continue to affect AA males into their adult lives in the form of what Duncan-Andrade (2009) terms “perpetual traumatic stress.” While some students flourish as “roses in concrete”, most do not. What Howard (2013) finds most perplexing, however, is that Black males are both loathed and celebrated, especially as athletes and artists. They are “frequently labeled as problems, prone to violence, invoking fear in many, and deemed as undesirable in certain circles” (Howard, 2013, p. 55). Howard (2008) expresses similar views as Ladson-Billings (2006) on this love them-hate them thinking about AA males.

> We see African American males as "problems" that our society must find ways to eradicate. We regularly determine them to be the root cause of most problems in school and society. We seem to hate their dress, their language, and their effect. We hate that they challenge authority and command so much social power. While society apparently loves them in narrow niches and specific slots—music, basketball, football, crack—we seem less comfortable with them than in places like the national Honor Society, the debate team, or the computer club. (Howard, 2013, p. 55)

From Rodney King's beating in 1992 to George Floyd's death in 2020, there have been countless examples of AA men being feared and hated. Black males, according to Howard (2008), face microaggressions at school because of their racial identification, including poor instruction that puts them at a disadvantage on standardized tests and taking college prep courses. Some teachers

have biases, beliefs, and negative views about Black male students. In younger black male students, these negative perceptions may even be unrecognizable to both students and their teachers. However, these microaggressions lead to AA male students receiving poor instruction, placement in remedial classes, and substantially more discipline referrals that contribute to the disengagement of AA males in schools.

Ferguson (2000), in her ethnographic research study in a racially diverse elementary school, noted that we "adultify" Black boys. She indicates that teachers impugn adult behavior to children who are considered to be misbehaving and then punish them more severely, often resulting in a pattern of suspensions and expulsions. Teachers use language to refer to children's actions as if they were adults making decisions instead of children learning about how to work in groups. In a study of 123 college students, Goff et al. (2014) asked participants to respond to a set of questions on what the researchers termed an "innocence scale" about children of different races in four different age groups, starting with infancy to young adulthood. The results indicated that in all age groups for all participants, Black children and young adults were rated less innocent than white children and young adults starting at age 10. These studies verify that we are misnaming, mistreating, and missing the opportunity to educate African American children and youth, resulting in an achievement gap.

African American Males and the Achievement Gap

The many challenges faced by Black males in schools has been well-documented (Carter & Welner, 2013; Schott Foundation, 2012). In most cases, the literature focuses on their underachievement and potential interventions to help improve the academic performance of Black males, often acting as if the students are the problem instead of the ways we approach teaching (Cleveland, 2011; Tatum, 2005). Schools across America spend money on interventions

and programs in efforts to raise the academic achievement of African American males. Despite efforts by schools, the failure rate of Black males is still much higher than that of other student groups according to Stinson (2006). Disciplinary infractions, course failures, and dropouts continue to increase.

Several researchers contend that African American students must adapt to the normative culture of school, often considered white normative dominant culture. For example, a book by Edelman et al. (2006) exemplifies the approach as fixing Black young men. Their approach to reconnecting disadvantaged young men is from a deficit perspective. None of the recommendations start from the assets that the young men may possess. Therefore, a plethora of suggestions indicate that the young men must adjust, not the systems that are oppressive or ineffective. For example, Bell (2010) concludes "that an important construct for effectively teaching African American males is being neglected: "socialization for learning" for African American males" (p. 4) as a reason for the continued academic decline of AA males. These students lack the ability to code-switch. Code-switching refers to the ability to switch between your cultural language or dialect to another usually dependent on your surroundings or environment. Bell listed five strategies necessary to positively impact the learning of AA males: (1) Develop initiatives to appropriately and productively channel potentially self-destructive emotions; (2) Focus on sharpening and broadening communication skills ("Obama" style); (3) Showcase examples of successful, living African American males; (4) Model appropriate social skills; and (5) Teach "code switching." (p. 7)

White and Ali-Khan (2012) present research-based solutions for educators to help students of color understand and prepare for academic talk and code-switching, but these recommendations place most of the responsibility for change on the students:

1. Know your students' processes for encoding (e.g., spelling) and decoding (e.g., reading). This includes understanding their linguistic practices.
2. Clarify and help students understand academic discourse. Create your rules and expectations for discussions with students to garner their buy-in, increasing the likelihood for participation.
3. Expose "hidden rules." Teach students implicit academic practices, those we "assume all students know such as reading academic text and use of text clues, effective note taking, and test taking strategies. Talk about the advantages of discourse and reflect on its purpose in the academic setting."
4. Model different language styles and code switching. Exposing students to different forms of English literature, such as Shakespearean or Ebonics, help both teacher and students to not view other linguistic patterns as deficits. Respect for different dialects and speech patterns is encouraged.
5. Create opportunities for practice and provide examples of successful exchanges or debates between students.

The authors contend that these practices help students of color feel comfortable with academic discourse and "learn that the nuance of a word is more important than the complexity of the word" (White & Ali-Khan, 2012, p. 14). However, code-switching is difficult for most AA males because the aegis of responsibility for adapting is placed on the students, and teachers are not adjusting to students' cultural needs.

Stinson (2006) examines the concept of "acting white", a theory presented and popularized by Fordham and Ogbu (1986). Their concept aims to explain how African American male students who are high performers but also underachievers deal with being thought of as

"acting white". According to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), few Black students have found ways of dealing with academic success and the accusation of "acting white", such as being able to code-switch. They found Black students would participate in sports, seen as Black activities, to direct focus away from their academic success or sometimes going as far as clowning in class. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggested educational policy and remediation efforts could reduce the effect of those theories.

Consequently, AA male learners do have low achievement, but the reasons may be deeper than those presented by these theorists. Instead, we might look to theories and practices that represent culturally relevant pedagogy, which I discuss in more detail in the third section of the literature review.

African American Males in Alternative Schools

Alternative schools are becoming more popular as an option for students who may not be able to graduate from traditional schools with their cohort. As the number of students needing alternative learning increases, the need for alternative schools to meet the needs of these high-risk students has become urgent. Hence, many states, and local school districts implement ALS to solve the problem of students failing to meet the requirements in the traditional education environment. In general, students are assigned for one of two reasons: academic failure - at least a year and a half behind on credits toward graduation or disciplinary infractions. Most of these students who are placed at risk for academic failure are young Black and Brown men with a high percentage of AA males. I describe what an ALS is and question our typical approach as not fully meeting the needs of African American male students.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) website states that Alternative Learning Programs and Schools (ALPS) should provide students with a learning

environment that is conducive to learning or safe and orderly. Schools also ensure that students receive rigorous and challenging instruction and are given opportunities that enhance their individual abilities. NCDPI states that ALPS is defined as:

> a school or program that serves students at any level, serves suspended or expelled students, serves students whose learning styles are better served in an alternative program... or provides individualized programs outside of a standard classroom setting in a caring atmosphere in which students learn the skills needed to redirect their lives. (p. 1)

The additional characteristics include: (a) instruction occurs outside the regular classroom; (b) students are enrolled for a specific period; (c) students receive course and graduation credit in core academic areas; and (d) students obtain the required credits needed for graduation.

Lehr et al. (2003) report on legislation from forty-eight states on ALS. The report found four common procedures for enrollment: (1) Students are admitted after long-term suspension or expulsion from school; (2) Students meet at-risk conditions such as potential dropout, truancy, social/emotional trauma, drug use and/or possession, homelessness, teen pregnancy, or incarceration; (3) In the general education setting, students have been disruptive; (4) Students who have struggled academically and would benefit from an alternative learning environment. These characteristics apply to students who are having difficulties in traditional school settings and are placed at risk for academic failure.

The school district in which I work defines alternative learning schools as:

> An alternative learning program or school that may serve as the site to: (1) deliver educational services required by G.S. 115C-390.9 or -390.10 to a student who is serving a long-term or 365-day suspension; (2) provide concentrated support for students at risk of academic failure; and/or (3) deliver educational and other services to students who are or

> may be disruptive to a safe and orderly learning environment in the regular educational setting. (Beaufort County Schools, n.d., p. 1)

Students attending one of the three traditional high schools in the district may be enrolled in ALS under any of the following conditions, voluntarily or involuntarily: (1) A student support team, including student and his/her parent, meet and agree that the student will benefit from placement in an alternative learning setting; (2). Long-term suspension or expulsion has been recommended; (3). A student is constantly disruptive to learning occurring in the classroom in his/her school; (4). A student is a potential drop-out; (5). Threatening behavior jeopardizes the safety of others; (6). A student is involved in a crime or charged with a felony. Hence, AA boys are more likely to meet at least one of these criteria. Consequently, AA males make up most students assigned to an ALS. Next, we want to look at online credit recovery programs used to help students recover lost credits in alternative learning and whether it is a benefit or a challenge for students, in general.

Is Credit Recovery an Asset or a Challenge?

Credit recovery programs, according to Oregon Gear Up (n.d.), aim to help schools graduate more students by allowing students who have fallen behind to "recover" credits using a variety of tactics, many of which are available online, but the jury is out on how successful these programs are for the students who need them most. Many high schools, including alternate schools, allow students to retake courses (classes) failed through an online credit recovery program as a means of helping students obtain credits needed for graduation, to prevent students from dropping out.

Allensworth et al. (2018) suggests more data are needed to determine whether online credit recovery programs are more effective than traditional face-to-face classes. “Despite the

belief that online courses can and have boosted graduation rates, there is limited evidence available to show whether online credit recovery is as effective, or even more effective, for improving students' long-term outcomes as traditional face-to-face credit recovery courses" (Allensworth et al., 2018, p. 482). Using data from Chicago schools on math credits earned and graduation rates, the authors concluded that even if there seems to be advantages from implementing an online credit recovery program, more is needed to get students who are placed at risk for academic failure back on the path toward graduation. For example, students who fail Math 1 are more likely to experience problems such as performing below grade level in reading and mathematics, frequent absences, and failing several courses.

Pettijohn and LaFrance (2014) discuss both benefits and challenges of online learning programs, such as credit recovery, from the perspectives of students and teachers. The benefits include multiple opportunities to receive credits to graduate on time; different ways to learn the content material and different ways of assessing; students of different ages, ability levels, and backgrounds can take courses, including introductory college courses, advanced placement courses, and credit recovery; and courses allow acceleration through materials through the use of pretests. General challenges include issues that students may have or experience. For example, many students using online learning platforms are typically not independent learners, self-motivated, and often lack time management, literacy, and technology skills. At times, the schools use the online option to push challenging students out of traditional high schools. Students need access to WIFI or the internet, which may be limited.

However, more interesting were the perspectives of students and teachers of the benefits of online credit recovery. Students listed benefits that included developing a positive change in attitude towards themselves and coursework, accepting personal responsibility for their success

or failure, encountering fewer distractions, and increasing skills in grammar, writing, and math concepts that could be applied in other courses. As a result, they felt more encouraged to graduate. Staff members' benefits, vastly different from students' list of benefits, centered around the establishment of positive relationships impacting students and motivating them to take ownership of their learning. Some students did not experience success "recovering" credit via an online program. Their challenges aligned with the general challenges stated by Pettijohn and LaFrance (2014).

In short, there are mixed opinions on the benefits and challenges of credit recovery. However, the principal, as an instructional leader, is responsible for creating a learning environment and implementing interventions. This includes assessing whether programs such as online credit recovery are effective for the students in a particular school, and removal of ineffective programs, especially since online learning that gives students access to college introductory courses and advanced courses have become a part of the high school curriculum. Principals can improve supplemental online learning offered for credit recovery by increasing their awareness of stakeholders' (students and staff) perspectives of the benefits and challenges of these programs, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of credit recovery, and helping to maximize the advantages and eliminate the barriers in the online learning platform.

Because some students face many obstacles, the focus should be on finding ways to address these problems as well as incorporating interventions to prevent students from dropping out with online credit recovery (Allensworth et al., 2018). In the next section I review literature that investigates culturally responsive practices (CRP) that help students have academic success. Incorporating practices that may be more equitable and encouraging for African American male learners is not discussed in the literature I consulted, and I believe that focusing on CRP as well

as listening to students' ideas about what might work are missing components in the alternative school setting.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Another important role of principals is establishing and maintaining a positive school culture in which there is an awareness and appreciation of how other ethnic, racial, and/or religious groups differ. Cultural appropriateness should be present inside and outside of the classrooms - a part of the school environment. The school has a student body that is over 85% African American, Hispanic, and Arabic with a teaching staff that is 50% white. Hence, it is imperative for the teachers to have an understanding and appreciation for diverse cultures outside as well as establish positive relationships with all students in their classroom and procedures that will enhance the academic performance of all students. According to Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011), the increase in the number of minority students in schools reveals a need for teachers to not only develop a relationship with all students in their class, but teachers also need to teach about diversity.

The overarching question of the dissertation involves investigating teachers' use of culturally responsive practices to engage African American boys in math talks. For this section of the literature review, we will use the term Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) interchangeably with culturally responsive practices, which was created by Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1994. However, culturally responsive pedagogy, Culturally and Linguistically Relevant Pedagogy (CLRP), and the many other terms that have derived from the original over the years, will appear in direct quotes and discussion of the framework. I begin with a review of research literature on the CLRP framework, an umbrella for CRP. Then I analyze the teacher's

perspectives of CRP. Lastly, I review research on classroom practices that are culturally responsive.

CLRP Framework

Currently, there is a plethora of research on the framework for culturally and linguistically relevant or responsive pedagogy (CRP) (Delpit, 1995, 2012; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; 2006; 2014). Khalifa et al. (2016), began their article with the statement "nearly two decades ago, culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995a) and culturally responsive pedagogies (Gay, 1994) entered and, arguably, would come to dominate discourses on education and reform" (p. 1,272). They found their work addressed the unique learning needs of marginalized students. Ladson-Billings (1994) suggested that culturally relevant teaching must meet three criteria: an ability to develop students' academics, willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and socio-political awareness. Her research represented a preliminary study of how teachers systematically incorporate student culture into the classroom as authorized or official knowledge, especially for African American students.

Aronson and Laughter (2016) reference the work of Gay and Ladson-Billings in their research of a framework for CLRP. Their research references a framework with six domains which are presented by Gay (2010):

> (1) Culturally responsive teachers are socially and academically empowering by setting high expectations for students with a commitment to every student's success; (2) Culturally responsive teachers are multidimensional because they engage cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and perspectives; (3) Culturally responsive teachers validate every student's culture, bridging gaps between school and home through diversified instructional strategies and multicultural curricula; (4) Culturally responsive

> teachers are socially, emotionally, and politically comprehensive as they seek to educate the whole child; (5) Culturally responsive teachers are transformative of schools and societies by using students' existing strengths to drive instruction, assessment, and curriculum design; (6) Culturally responsive teachers are emancipatory and liberating from oppressive educational practices and ideologies as they lift "the veil of presumed absolute authority from conceptions of scholarly truth typically taught in schools." (p. 38)

Next, Aronson and Laughter (2016) presented the framework from Ladson-Billings and discussed the similarities within both frameworks -- academic success of students, knowledge and understanding of students' cultures, and socio-political competence. Ladson-Billings' (1995a, 1995b) framework for culturally relevant pedagogy encompasses three components:

> (1) Culturally relevant pedagogues think in terms of long-term academic achievement and not merely end-of-year tests. After later adopters of culturally relevant pedagogy began to equate student achievement with standardized test scores or scripted curricula, Ladson-Billings (2006) clarified what more accurately described her intent: "'student learning'—what it is that students actually know and are able to do because of pedagogical interactions with skilled teachers" (p. 34).
>
> (2) Culturally relevant pedagogues focus on cultural competence, which "refers to helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have a chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 36). Culturally relevant pedagogues understand that students must learn to navigate between home and school, and teachers must find ways to

> equip students with the knowledge needed to succeed in a school system that oppresses them (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Urrieta, 2005).
>
> (3) Culturally relevant pedagogues seek to develop socio-political consciousness, which includes a teacher's obligation to find ways for students to recognize, understand, and critique current and social inequalities. Socio-political consciousness begins with teachers recognizing socio-political issues of race, class, and gender in themselves and understanding the causes before then incorporating these issues in their teaching. (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 476).

Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) provide an overview of the key points from Ladson-Billings' CLRP framework. However, the term *culturally relevant pedagogy,* coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1995 (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 67) is used in their literature instead of *culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy*. Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) tell us that culturally relevant pedagogy is a way for schools to "acknowledge the home-community culture of the students, and through sensitivity to cultural nuances integrate these cultural experiences, values, and understandings into the teaching and learning environment" (p. 160).

Teacher Perspectives on CRP

Next, I review research on how teachers perceive and use CRP, including resistance to CRP. Neri et al. (2019) indicate that teacher resistance is said to be the main reason for not adopting CRP. Resistance, first and foremost, is due to their beliefs and doubts combined with a lack of support in the implementation of CRP. Secondly, teachers often question if the implementation of CRP is their responsibility. Many believe that they are not racist, but they fail to see the reason for doing the work and feel that implementing changes into their class practices is unnecessary. Third, they cite "color blindness" - thought of not seeing a person's race and

thereby treating all students the same - as another reason for teacher resistance. The authors imply that this idea of color blindness results in "schools and organizations become increasingly race-conscious, people tend to draw on new understandings of racism that allow them to believe they are racially progressive and committed to eradicating structural inequities while maintaining, if not bolstering, their white privilege" (Neri et al., 2019, p. 207)

Hollie (2012) refers to teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and mindsets as deficits instead of resistance. He states the "underserved students are all too frequently seen as deficient, deviant, defiant, disruptive, and disrespectful. What they bring to the classroom culturally and linguistically is not seen as an asset, but a liability" (Hollie, 2012, p. 21). Hollie observed negative views from teachers of marginalized students: the students were the cause for test scores going down; school would be better if there were better students; and those kids are the only ones not doing well. Hence, for teachers to fully adopt CRP, they need to examine mindsets as well as pedagogical practices.

Classroom Practices for Culturally Responsive Instruction

The advice on changing instructional practices, supported by research, to support culturally responsive pedagogy is plentiful (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Boykin, 1983; Boykin, 2020; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Emdin, 2016; Hammond, 2015; Muhammad et al., 2021; Paris, 2012). Several researchers have concentrated on how to develop stronger math practices for CRP (Berry et al., 2020; Boaler, 2016; Moses & Cobb, 2002; Nasir et al., 2014; Ukpokodu, 2011). As Hammond (2015) says "A person's deep cultural roots is part of how the brain makes sense of the world and helps us function in our environment" (p. 23). Thus, teachers are responsible for understanding the cultural context of their students so that they can design instruction that is culturally consonant

because they do not want to compromise the integrity of the learner (Boykin, 2020), which is culturally based and expressed.

Allen and Boykin (1992) have long understood that the communication styles of African American learners are culturally developed and should be embedded in the instruction. For example, 'verve is the propensity for energetic, intense, stylistic body language and expression" (Boykin, 1983, p. 325). Verve as an expressive style of communication is more active than the quiet and order demanded in most classrooms. Black children had enhanced cognitive ability when the school environments and task requirements matched their sociocultural environments (Allen & Boykin, 1992). Yet, that is the opposite of the classroom environments we typically create and demand; when we ask students to consistently code-switch from vernacular language to the language systems we use in academic environments, we often lose the cultural dimension that could support learning. However, as Emdin (2016) reminds us:

> To validate the codes of young people in the classroom and then fail to arm them with the tools they need to be successful across social fields are irresponsible; students must use what emerges from the enactment of their culture in schools to help them navigate worlds beyond the classroom. (p. 176).

In designing and implementing culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers must adopt a both-and approach. Next, I discuss curriculum approaches and then instructional approaches for culturally responsive pedagogy, starting with the brain connection. Then I focus on mathematics and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Curricular Approaches

Muhammed et al. (2021) offers a curricular frame for culturally responsive pedagogy for literacy and mathematics that include examples of how to enact her principles: dismissing

traditional means of teaching reading and math by incorporating a students' cultural identity, intelligence, criticality, and joy into lesson preparation and content in lieu of focusing on the struggles, violence, and pain in the history of Black and Brown people. The authors implore us to act by having a discussion with students to learn about their cultural identities, include books/works that affirm those identities for your classroom, collaborate with other teachers to develop lessons that are culturally responsive, and schedule time for students to review the lessons created allowing students to have a voice and choice in their own learning (Muhammed et al., 2021, p. 80).

Paris (2012) states that curriculum and instruction should be more than responsive; they should provide cultural sustenance. In this article, Paris (2012) suggests a change in terminology as a start. He believes culturally sustaining pedagogy should be used instead of the term coined by Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant pedagogy. “That is, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). In other words, besides maintaining past and current research and practice, the term emphasizes the importance of our multiethnic schools doing more than responding to or relating to students' cultural experiences; in addition, education must assist students in maintaining their cultural and linguistic identities.

Emdin (2016) compares reality pedagogy to a Pentecostal Black church, where call-and-response and opportunity for reflection are part of the service on a regular basis. The author refers to this as "Pentecostal Pedagogy," and addresses other norms and traditions that are important for teaching and learning for students of color, which include the use of music and humor, storytelling, engagement strategies, such as call and response, connection, freedom of movement, and joy.

> Duncan-Andrade (2009) indicates that we should organize curriculum to include *Socratic hope* [which]requires both teachers and students to painfully examine our lives and actions within an unjust society and to share the sensibility that pain may pave the path to justice…. [Effective] educators teach Socratic hope by treating the righteous indignation in young people as a strength rather than something deserving of punishment. (p. 187)

As a teacher and researcher, he believes that if we really want to provide hope for children, we (teachers) must connect our teaching with the realities that students are facing in urban areas, to make the learning relevant. He opposes giving "false hope" to students and advocates for "critical hope." Teachers can mislead students by selling the "American dream," minimizing and/or denying the injustices and suffering experienced by students of color and refusing to accept responsibility for their bad teaching while blaming others. However, "critical hope demands a committed and active struggle "against the evidence in order to change the deadly tides of wealth inequality, group xenophobia, and personal despair"" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 185; West, 2004, pp. 296–297). Critical hope has three components that occur simultaneously: material, Socratic, and audacious. Next, I review literature on the brain connection.

The Brain Connection

The importance of including students' cultural aspects in learning is recognized as a key part of culturally responsive teaching (Hammond, 2015). She says that "when planning for culturally responsive teaching focusing on cultures isn't the only thing that needs to be considered, the socio-political context also shapes the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students" (p. 32). Hammond's view is that teachers should not only focus on learning the different cultures of their students, but instead focus on the collective cultural archetypes or the

patterns and aspects different cultures may have in common as well as the way the brain functions.

In discussing the effect culture has on the brain and knowledge of how the brain works can assist teachers with CRP, the brain is guided by the need to minimize threats and feel safe, culturally responsive teachers must create an environment that the brain perceives as safe and nurturing, so that it can relax and turn its attention to learning; therefore, we should not minimize the brain's need to feel safe and prevent it from going into fight, flight, or freeze mode. Hammond (2015) details culturally responsive "brain rules" in six core design principles to make it easier to remember and refer to culturally sensitive brain rules:

1. The brain seems to minimize social threats and maximize opportunity to make connections with others in the community.
2. Positive relationships keep our safety threat detection system in check.
3. Culture guides how we process information.
4. Attention drives learning.
5. All new information must be coupled with existing funds of knowledge to be learned.
6. The brain physically grows through challenging stretches, expanding its ability to do more complex thinking and learning. (pp. 47-49)

In relying on the physical and the cultural aspects of learning, key approaches to culturally relevant/responsive instructional practices guide how we need to enact our espoused values of recognizing students' cultural assets.

Pedagogical Approaches

All approaches to pedagogy depend on understanding how students learn. The

pedagogical approaches to teaching African American students balance the need to address students from a cultural perspective and ensure that they have the academic tools to succeed in all classrooms and contexts. Next, I present a review of literature on pedagogical frameworks from Tredway et al. (2020), Ladson-Billings (1995a), Gay (2000), and Hollie (2012).

"Equity-driven classrooms that demonstrate rigorous academic discourse, culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogy, universal design for learning, and inquiry teaching, and learning are necessary for improving student learning" (Tredway et al., 2020, p. 2). The framework's goal is to equip school leaders with a plan for increasing the quality of learning for students in their schools by providing professional learning and resources to help coach teachers in making improvements in their teaching practices. The purpose of this framework is to provide school leaders with a blueprint to improve the quality of student learning through professional development and resources, to guide teachers to make necessary changes in instructional practices. The framework's rubric for CLRP details the inclusiveness of culturally responsive practices and linguistically responsive practices in teachers' pedagogy from minimal, moderate, or fully.

Ladson-Billings' (1995a) pedagogical approach addresses the importance of teachers incorporating the culture of students into the classroom and instructional practices to address the learning needs of students in urban schools. She professes that this idea can be accomplished in part by assisting potential teachers in better understanding culture (their own and others) and how it affects education. We need to provide teachers with alternative pedagogical models and coaching to share model lessons and resources.

Gay's (2010) premise is that students perform better when teaching encompasses their cultural experiences, which includes the use of relevant, real-life stories. Gay is a proponent of

using culturally responsive practices to help underachieving students of color improve their school performance. The practice of maintaining a caring relationship between teachers and students, high expectations for students, cultural awareness beyond holidays and food, collaborative tasks, and opportunities for students to choose learning tasks are all key components of culturally responsive teaching.

For Hollie (2012), CRP is a way of thinking, not a prepackaged curriculum, on how to instruct students so that they feel validated and appreciated. The five pedagogical areas that are joined with CRP strategies and activities (see Table 1). These areas are: "responsive classroom management, responsive academic literacy, responsive academic vocabulary, responsive academic language, and responsive learning environment" (Hollie, 2012, p. 49).

If these categories are not an established part of classroom procedures, teachers will be ineffective in their delivery of instruction. The pedagogical approaches to teaching African American students balance the need to address students from a cultural perspective and ensure that they have the academic tools to succeed in all classrooms. The purpose of this framework is to provide school leaders with a blueprint to improve the quality of student learning through professional development and resources. Finally, I focus on literature from researchers on the intersection of teaching mathematics and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Mathematics and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Ukpokodu (2011) explored what it means to be a culturally responsive mathematics teacher. He explains why CRP is imperative in teaching mathematics. Given the critical role of mathematical literacy in today's knowledge-based and scientific-based society, urban and diverse students must be empowered to develop a strong mathematical identity and literacy if we as educators are to foster their critical citizenship and upward mobility. To achieve this goal

Table 1

Classroom Strategies for CRP

Classroom management	Academic Literacy	Academic Vocabulary	Academic Language	Learning Environment
● Use of attention signals ● Procedures for movement ● Ways for responding	● Read-aloud storytelling ● Process for selecting texts ● Strategies for interaction with texts	● Vocabulary strategies ● Focus on building students' vocabulary	● Role playing ● Code switching ● Translations	● Print rich ● Learning centers ● Class library

requires teachers to develop the habits and mind of culturally responsive practice (Ukpokodu, 2011, p. 54).

Ukpokodu (2011) presents the following culturally responsive practices needed for implementation in mathematics teaching: scaffolding and tapping into the knowledge of students, incorporating different perspectives from divergent thinking of students, "detract" or eliminate ability grouping and expose all students to rigorous, challenging math concepts, and lastly, integrating social justice issues in math discussions towards relating to real-life experiences in students' communities.

The Algebra Project (Moses & Cobb, 2002) forwards the same belief – the importance of mathematics as a key gatekeeper to other opportunities. They contend that math is a civil right. In the professional learning projects for teachers across the country, they offer multiple ways to think about mathematics instruction to fully engage learners, especially those who are typically disengaged. Berry et al. (2020) have designed a series of mathematics lessons to forward social justice in math classrooms.

Nasir et al. (2014) present a set of practices for successful practice in mathematics for secondary students: (1) group worthy tasks; (2) multiple representations; (3) big ideas; (4) justification; and (5) presentations. In other words, the teachers should organize instructional tasks that groups can work on together to develop multiple representations of the math problems. These tasks should be organized to represent concepts or big ideas that are critical for math. Students should be able to justify their mathematical thinking publicly by presenting. Evidence from the Boaler (2016) study of supporting rigorous math lessons in a summer school session described how a group of middle school boys blurted out responses and were generally disengaged. However, when the students were presented with a high cognitive demand task, the

three boys worked for 70 minutes to first draw individual responses and then confer and engage in discussing multiple representations; as they worked, they demonstrated “motivation, perseverance, and high-level mathematical conversations" (Boaler, 2016, p. 61). That is precisely what is often missing for students who do not fully engage or do not think they can do math – challenging tasks that cause them to think, justify their responses, and publicly present them to each other.

Martin (2012) investigates the why behind the well-known findings that African American students perform significantly worse than White students. His research focuses on the conditions faced by African American students such as systematic racism, educational tracking, and dehumanization. Despite this negative view of the performance of African American students, especially in mathematics, Martin suggests the focus should be on understanding the experiences of African American students. “I argue for even greater attention by researchers to understand and document what it means to *learn mathematics while Black*” (Martin, 2012, p. 49). In this research, the author presents areas that are overlooked when studying Black students and their performance in mathematics: student math experiences, students’ belief about their math abilities, motivation for doing math, and how students view mathematics in relation to social aspects. From this article, we find that multiple aspects of Black children need to be considered to garner a sufficient characterization and explanation of their mathematical development (Martin, 2012, p. 58).

In summary, Ukpokodu (2011) presents culturally responsive practices needed for implementation in mathematics teaching. These include scaffolding and tapping into the knowledge of students, incorporating different perspectives from divergent thinking of students and lastly, integrating social justice issues in math discussions. African American students

perform significantly worse than White students in mathematics. Martin argues for greater attention to understand what it means to learn mathematics while Black. He writes multiple aspects of Black children need to be considered to acquire sufficient characterization and explanation of their mathematical development.

Summary

In summary, in the literature review, I explored research on student voice in efforts to better support African American (AA) male students in an alternative learning school. By closely linked concepts of culturally responsive pedagogy to alternative learning settings, credit recovery, and the perspectives of AA male students, this study improved the learning experiences of students in an alternative setting. I defined student voice and presented literature that addresses the relationship between student voice and equity. Student voice is a key strategy in minimizing issues in the education of AA male students (Benner et al., 2019; Bubb & Jones, 2020; Cook-Sather, 2002; 2012; Freire, 1970; Ramos, 2021).

In addressing the African American male learner, I discussed the perceptions that educators often have of male students of color as deficit, which produces recommendations that require the young men to change, not the systems that educate them. Therefore, despite the many school reform efforts, such as the No Child Left Behind law and Every Student Succeed Act, African American males continue to be the largest student group disproportionately affected by academic failure in the US (Benner & Graham, 2013). Often African American males are seen as "problems" that our society must find ways to eradicate. These microaggressions foster the stereotype threat that so many young people feel and lead to AA male students receiving poor instruction, placement in remedial classes, and substantially more discipline referrals that contribute to the disengagement of AA males in schools (Steele, 2010). In most cases, the

literature focuses on the underachievement and potential interventions to help improve the academic performance of Black males, often acting as if the students are the problem instead of the ways we approach teaching.

Instead, the literature surrounding culturally responsive pedagogy provides a guiding light for understanding how the system needs to change to better respond to the assets and culture of AA young men (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; 2006; Muhammad et al., 2021; Paris, 2012). Classroom practices for culturally responsive curriculum and instruction that concentrate on merging the academic content with pedagogical approaches that support cultural strengths will guide my approach to engaging students in discussing how we could improve our approaches to their learning in the alternative setting.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

In this Participatory Action Research (PAR) study, I utilized the experiences of students in an Alternative Learning School (ALS) to strengthen the approaches we used for supporting African American (AA) males. The theory of action for this research was: If the teachers and I listened to student experiences, then we could shift academic and social-emotional practices to better support students as they navigated through credit recovery. As we listened to the students, I supported teachers in using the practices they said worked for them.

I conducted this PAR project in a rural ALS, housed within a traditional high school. The school enrolled students from the three high schools within the district. In addition, the school served middle school students who had severe emotional and/or disciplinary challenges. The enrollment for the 2021 school year was 45 students and 11 staff members. All enrolled students were considered learners who were at risk for completing their schooling. As the school year progressed, more students could be administratively placed at the alternative school; however, the number of staff members remained the same. Table 2 provides additional school demographics as well as information about the staff. As is obvious from the demographics, most students at the school were male (73%). A large percentage of the students, particularly male, were African American (44%). For this reason, this project and study focused on African American male students.

In this participatory action research project, I worked with a group of six male African American students and three teachers to answer the overarching question: How do the insights and experiences of students in an alternative learning program inform how teachers and leaders support students? In three cycles of action and research (Pre-Cycle, PAR Cycle One, and PAR Cycle Two), I gathered and evaluated data from each cycle, shared the findings with the

Table 2

School Demographics: Gender and Ethnicity of Students and Staff

Demographic	Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Students (n=45)			
Gender	Male	33	73
	Female	12	27
Ethnicity	AA Male	20	44
	AA Female	4	9
	Total AA	*24*	*53*
	White	10	22
	Multiracial	5	11
	Hispanic	6	13
Staff (n=11)			
Gender	Male	4	35
	Female	7	64
Ethnicity	AA	6	55
	White	5	45

teachers, and used the analysis to decide on actions. My premise was that if the three teachers and I worked with students, listened to them share their insights and experiences in the ALS, then we could better support students, help them to successfully navigate credit recovery, and graduate from high school career and college ready.

I served as lead researcher and the three teachers were Co-Practitioner Researchers (CPR). That meant they worked with me, examined the data I analyzed, helped to make decisions about next steps and were participants in the study. I investigated the perceptions held by students and teachers in an alternative school with the hope that teachers would better understand how students perceived their educational experiences and how listening to students' stories could provide a different perspective.

As a result, I decided to shift the way students received support in their credit recovery math courses. As participants, students gained a different perspective of their learning environment, recognized assets and challenges of the alternative learning setting, and became advocates for their learning. According to Freire (2018), "students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (p. 81). This research provided school leaders with a better understanding of how to address the academic and behavioral needs of students placed at risk by examining students' thoughts and opinions on what made them feel successful in an ALS.

In this chapter, I discuss the Participatory Action Research (PAR) design, describe the participants, and present the data collection and analysis processes. This chapter concludes with a discussion of limitations, trustworthiness, confidentiality and ethical considerations in relation to this PAR study.

Research Design

Participatory action research is a type of qualitative research that involves researchers and participants working together to understand a problem in their context and offer solutions (hunter et al., 2013). In each of the three iterative cycles of inquiry, I collected and analyzed qualitative evidence that included notes from meetings, observations, focus group protocols, and interviews. In addition, I wrote reflective memos and kept field notes. I coded and examined these data sources. Three teachers at ALS served as Co-Practitioner Researchers (CPR) and participants. The teachers and I used the evidence from each cycle to guide the next steps and make needed adjustments. Next, I discuss PAR and its supporting methods, improvement sciences, and community learning exchanges. I present the research questions and provide details about the action research cycles.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory action research assumes that people in a specific environment want to study themselves and their practices, with the goal of making changes that have a positive impact on their environment (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Thus, PAR centers on one of the key axioms from the community learning exchange approach (Guajardo et al., 2016): the people most affected by the problem should be the first to find a solution. PAR is different from other methods of research because the "research participants themselves either are in control of the research or are participants in the design and methodology of the research" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 1) which aligns with Guajardo et al.'s (2016) axiom. Other PAR characteristics include (1) an action cycle of plan, act, observe, and reflect; (2) collaboration; (3) the school leader learning with teachers to improve practice, and (4) use of a narrative style for reflection and findings. In addition to these tenets of action research, I approached this study from an activist research point of view.

Participatory activist research includes the involvement of community members and has an equity focus, aiming to provide reflection on problems of inequity. In activist action research the "researcher shifts from being a passive participant or observer to being an active instigator of change" (hunter et al., 2013, p. 21). The lead researcher, joined by others in the same context, sees an issue and is willing to challenge the status quo. Because this type of research supports an "open, dialogic and interactive approach that emphasizes reciprocity, trust and collective action, PAR breaks down the traditional barrier between the researcher and the researched" (hunter et al., 2013, p. 26). In other words, the intention is that PAR offers a process or a dynamic of working together with a common goal that establishes positive relationships among participants. Through this process of learning together and responding to local issues, the intended outcome is that obstacles that could get in the way such as mistrust, suspicion, economic status, and politics disappear. Thus, this qualitative research is both action and activist research and is supported by two processes: improvement science and community learning exchanges.

Improvement Science

I used Improvement Science (IS) processes: the revised fishbone analysis, the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle (Bryk et al., 2015), and some features of the networked improvement community. Using the revised fishbone diagram (see Figure 1 in Chapter 1), I provided a visual representation of assets and challenges at the school, district, and state levels (Rosenthal, 2019). I used the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PSDA) cycle. According to Bryk et al. (2015), "the PDSA cycle is a basic method of inquiry in improvement research and guides rapid learning. A PDSA cycle follows the logic of systematic experimentation, common in scientific endeavors, now applied to everyday practices" (p. 121). I used a Networked Improvement Community (NIC), a group of practitioners who work together on a common issue and use evidence to make decisions. In this

PAR study, I refer to this group as Co-Practitioner Researchers (CPR). The CPR group for this PAR study included three teacher participants from the school. As we engaged in the three action research cycles, explained in detail in Table 3, we made iterative decisions about next steps based on evidence, which is one of the key features of the NIC framing in improvement science. I used these IS processes and intersected them through the community learning exchange approach.

Community Learning Exchange

Guajardo et al. (2016) define the objective of the community learning exchange approach as an opportunity for members of a community to meet and engage in dialogue centered on an organizational issue or need. Together, the community members examine assets and challenges related to their organization and openly discuss successful strategies and resources that may help drive changes in their organizations (including schools), and their communities. In this research study, I facilitated two CLEs with a group of six student participants and two teachers. I used these five CLE axioms to guide the activities and discussions during the CLEs:

1. Participants share ideas and learn together.
2. Having conversations and listening are important to the success of this process.
3. Those who are closest to the issue are better suited to impact change towards finding solutions.
4. Crossing boundaries enriches the development and educational process.
5. Having meaningful conversations inspires trust and hope that positive changes will occur.

As a part of our cycles of inquiry, the CPR members participated with the students in each community learning exchange, which occurred at a specified time during the school day. Since the school's student population was mostly students who have been marginalized, it was

important for us to talk to students about their experiences before we developed plans to change school procedures. The CLE afforded the CPR group the opportunity to listen to student perceptions of their environment and experiences in ALS. We wanted teachers' awareness and positive view of cultural aspects of their students to increase engagement and positive perspective about their education to lead to improved academic performance. The CLE provided us with artifacts that I coded and analyzed.

Role of Praxis

Freire's (2018) concept on praxis (reflection and action) is most fitting in relation to PAR and plays an important role in the research. He stated: "but human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis [which] cannot be reduced to either verbalism or activism" (Freire, 2018, p. 125). In other words, to understand the context/environment/world, people do not meet to simply talk about issues. Instead, they must act as collaborators to critically reflect on their situation and be in a better position to create change. "Manipulation, sloganizing, depositing, regimentation, and prescription cannot be components of revolutionary praxis, precisely because they are components of the praxis of domination" (Freire, 2018, p. 126). This sentence is directly related to the PAR because I became more fully aware of how the CPR team should and should not operate. No one can be dominant, imposing their opinions/ideas on the group. On the contrary, we know that a well-organized CPR team will engage in authentic conversations, take actions, and conduct honest reflections during the research process. The CPR team must have a collaborative rather than an oppressive relationship, which allows everyone to have a conversation and value each other's actions and ideas. Participatory action research is based on reflection, data collection, and action that improves the researchers' context.

Research Questions

The overarching research question for the study was: How do the insights and experiences of students in an alternative learning program inform how teachers and leaders support students? The sub-questions for the research included:

1. How do students identify benefits or challenges in the alternative learning program?
2. To what extent do the student voices inform the revision of the curriculum and instruction in an online credit recovery program?
3. To what extent do teachers shift their teaching practices?
4. To what extent does this process support my growth and development as a school leader?

To better understand the students' individual and collective experiences in an alternative learning setting, the overarching research question and sub-questions guided the project and study. I gave students the opportunity to voice their opinions on specific issues within the ALS that hinder their academic success. My focus of practice was: Incorporating student voice and experiences in understanding the benefits and challenges of the credit recovery program for African American male students.

Action Research Cycles

In Table 3, I outline the research cycles which include the activities, timelines, and participants. The key participants remained the same throughout the three research cycles. In each cycle, I used a collaborative inquiry-action approach as described by Militello et al. (2009) and the CLE methodology (Guajardo et al., 2016) that entails collaborating with the community to make improvements in the school. The authors suggested that the following activities should be a part of the research cycle:

Table 3

Action Research Cycles

Research Cycle	Activities
PAR Pre-Cycle August – November 15, 2021	● Selected and interviewed participants ● Met with CPR group (teachers) ● Met with each student and student's parent or caregiver via phone ● Facilitated CLE with students and adults ● Conducted student group meetings ● CPR members wrote reflective memos ● Kept field notes
PAR Cycle One November 16, 2021 – April 15, 2022	● Facilitated CPR meetings ● Conducted individual and student group meetings ● Co-facilitated CLE ● CPR members wrote reflective memos ● Kept field notes
PAR Cycle Two April 16, 2022 – October 15, 2022	● Continued CPR meetings ● Conducted individual and student group meetings ● Observed classrooms ● Held evidenced-based conversations ● CPR members wrote reflective memos ● Kept field notes

- Figure out what you want to focus on - problem of practice;
- Accept responsibility for problem of practice;
- Keep in mind the desired outcomes - theory of action;
- Design inquiry questions that when answered will lead to the desired result;
- Evaluate through analysis of data;
- Reflect and start the next cycle.

The goal of each cycle was to engage Co-Practitioner Researchers (CPR) in the improvement science process as described by Bryk et al. (2015) to enact a theory of action and measure, monitor, reflect on, and revise action plans based on key findings.

In each action research cycle, I used a collaborative inquiry approach and the CLE methodology to make improvements in the school. The Pre-Cycle activities included the selection of the CPR team and student participants, a discussion of the project with the parents and the students so they were clear about their participation, conducting a CLE with student participants, and collecting data from the CLE and reflective memos. In PAR Cycle One, I continued meeting with the CPR team, held interviews, and conducted a second CLE with students and some staff members. The goal of each cycle was to understand what students were experiencing and thinking and then engage co-practitioner researchers in the improvement science process to enact a theory of action and measure, monitor, reflect on, and revise action plans based on key findings. I held CPR meetings during all three cycles as well as conducted student group meetings. Next, I discuss participants, data collection and analysis procedures.

Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to use the experiences of students in an alternative learning school setting to determine how to strengthen the process of learning for African American male

students. This study focused on giving students the opportunity to use their voices to enact changes in ALS that would direct the school leader and teachers in better supporting students. Next, I provide specific details on study participants, methods of data collection and data analysis.

Participants

Two types of participants in this study were students and teachers. The ALS included students from the three traditional high schools in the district. The students either chose to attend voluntarily, or they were assigned to attend by the district's superintendent. The ALS included some students who were assigned by the superintendent in lieu of receiving long-term suspension or expulsion. Other students assigned to ALS were at risk of dropping out or not meeting standards for promotion due to academic failure. In many cases, the student's parent(s) or guardian(s) and the principal agreed that enrollment in ALS was in the best interest of the student.

For student selection, Patton (1990) provides a variety of strategies for selecting participants, and purposeful sampling. I used the homogeneous sampling approach. This approach involves selecting a small homogeneous sample of 5 to 8 people of similar experiences and "focuses, reduces variation, simplifies analysis, facilitates group interviewing" (Patton, 1990, p. 8). Each of the African American males I selected for this PAR was recovering credits for three failed courses via online credit recovery program and had two face-to-face classes. In addition, these students had similar cultural backgrounds and experiences.

I selected six students to be a part of this study. Initially, I met with students individually, and parents joined by phone. I used a prepared script in the recruiting conversation, and parents had the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Students signed assent forms and were given

consent forms to take home for parent signatures. All students received an invitation to participate along with an assent form (see Appendix E) and parental consent form (see Appendix D). I use pseudonyms for student and teacher participants in this dissertation.

Following the procedures of Foulger (2010) and Patton (1990), I purposefully selected three teacher volunteers from the seven teachers at ALS to be a part of the CPR group. In addition, a teacher assistant participated. At the start of the school year, I provided teachers with an invitation to participate and a consent form (see Appendix C) that explained the purpose of this research. I used a prepared script to invite teachers to participate in this study. There were two main functions of the CPR group.

Data Collection

The collection of data is a key step in the research process. I examined and utilized this information to provide answers to the study's research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Establishing a strong framework for qualitative research and collecting information from a variety of sources is therefore essential to obtain and extract the prevailing themes and findings (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

I collected data from activities (see Table 4) involving teacher participants and AA male students enrolled at the alternative school with credit recovery classes and face-to-face classes. Data gathered from students and teachers provided information about the school's strengths and weaknesses. Data collection occurred through a one-on-one in-depth interview with two student participants and both teacher participants during the Pre-Cycle. I conducted all interviews for this study. Interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. I used pre-planned interview questions, and I probed the participants to clarify or elaborate on answers. To ensure accuracy, interviews were audio-recorded. Other means of collecting data included participants creating artifacts from

Table 4

Data Collection Process

Overarching Question: How do the insights and experiences of students in an alternative learning program inform how teachers and leaders support students?

Research Questions	Proposed Data Collection	Triangulation
How do students identify benefits or challenges in the alternative learning program?	• Interviews • CLE Artifacts • Documents (CPR meeting notes; field notes)	• Reflective memos • Member checks
To what extent do the student voices inform the revision of the curriculum and instruction online credit recovery program?	• CLE Artifacts • Documents (CPR meeting notes; field notes)	• Reflective memos • Member checks
To what extent does teacher participation support their shifts in practice?	• Observation Tools • Post-Observation Conversations	• Reflective Memos • Documents • Member Checks
To what extent does this process support my growth and development as a school leader?	• Reflective Memos	• Interviews • Member Checks

activities during CPR meetings, CLEs, and student group meetings. Some of the artifacts were journey lines, drawings, use of protocols, written reflective memos, class visits, evidenced-based conversations based on notes from class visits, and field notes.

Interviews

Interviews with student participants were one source of information gathered. I used an interview protocol, which I modified from a version provided by Project I^4 (see Appendix G – for students and Appendix H – for teachers). I conducted one-on-one interviews with two student participants. I used the information gathered during the interviews to assess how students identified benefits or challenges in the alternative learning program. I used Otter, an iPhone software to record and later transcribe the interviews. This app is password protected, keeping the interview data secure. I conducted interviews with teacher participants (doubling as members of the CPR team) as well. All data was transcribed and coded using Saldaña's (2016) descriptive or In vivo coding process.

CLE Artifacts

I hosted two CLE sessions to provide opportunities for students and the CPR team to have a dialogue focusing on credit recovery, student stories, and to look for impact in teacher and principal support of students (respectively). Guajardo et al.'s (2016) five CLE axioms guided the activities and discussions: collaborating and exchanging ideas; listening to others is an important part of the process; those who are closest to the problem have a better chance of influencing change and discovering solutions; breaking down barriers positively impacts education; and having meaningful interactions fosters trust and optimism for positive outcomes. CLE artifacts (see Appendix I) include visual data from posters and photos. The CLEs provided us with artifacts that I coded and analyzed to gain insight into the next steps of the investigation cycle.

Observation Protocols

I focused mainly on instructional practices used by teachers when performing classroom visits conducted during PAR Cycle Two. I was the sole member of the CPR team conducting observations. Following the class visits, I left notes detailing what I observed. I met one-to-one with one teacher and engaged in evidenced-based post-observation dialogue. This data was coded using Saldaña's (2016) coding processes.

Post-Observation Conversations

I had evidenced-based conversations with teachers, which followed Tredway et al.'s (2020) guide for effective conversations. The purpose of these conversations was to help the teacher examine the data from the observation, make decisions about what he or she wants to change relevant to instructional practices, and articulate a strategy to improve the integration of instructional practices identified by student participants that aided in understanding concepts (Tredway et al., 2020). I coded and analyzed the additional data resulting from the conversation. It was important for me to not impose my thoughts on what changes need to occur but to ask open-ended questions that allowed the teacher to make decisions about changes to their instructional practice. The guide provides a five-step process for having effective conversations following an observation. Appendix J contains the Post-observation Conversation Protocol.

Documents (CPR Meeting Notes; Field Notes)

I used other data collection methods during this qualitative research study. In each PAR cycle, CPR meetings were held regularly, producing documents such as: agendas/meeting minutes, reflective memos, and field notes. Next, I discuss data collection and the process I used to analyze the data.

Data Analysis

Analyzing data from multiple sources is a way to tease out common themes or help formulate a common conclusion from the data. I used member checking at the conclusion of each cycle of inquiry as a means of triangulating the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), member checking is useful for the research process to triangulate the data. The researcher gives participants an opportunity to check the accuracy of data results by sharing the data at key points with the participants and gauging whether they think the evidence is accurate. In this case, I shared the categories I analyzed with the CPR team at the conclusion of the Pre-Cycle, the emergent themes at the conclusion of PAR Cycle One, and the findings at the conclusion of PAR Cycle Two. The member checks added validity to the qualitative study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

After collecting data, I began the process of analysis. Data analysis entails gathering and organizing information so that the researcher can iteratively make decisions about categories, themes, and then findings (Saldaña, 2016).

Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend a strategic process to analyze data that is critical for reliable and valid qualitative research. Data collection and analysis occur iteratively throughout the study. I utilized the five-step data analysis process summarized in Figure 3. This process includes the following steps: (1) organize the data collected from interviews, meeting minutes, memos, and visual materials; (2) review your data, note your thoughts and ideas; (3) start coding the data; (4) create categories or themes for recurring codes; and (5) summarize your findings.

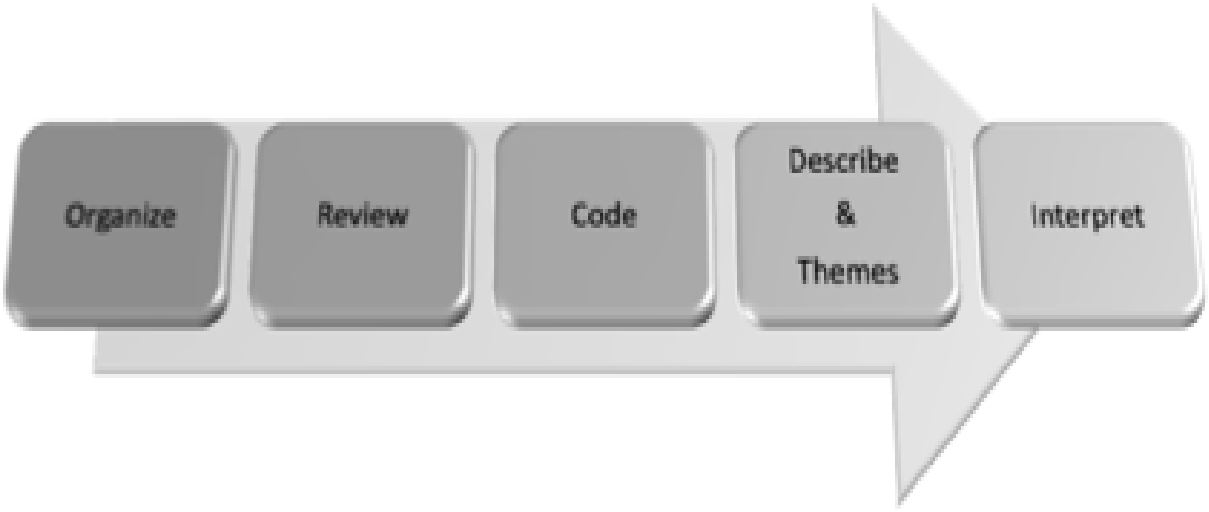
I used student and teacher interviews and other activities, which included memos, field notes, visual representations, and protocols, as the data collection sources for this qualitative

research study to examine the overarching research question: How can a group of students share their insights and experiences in an alternative learning program with credit recovery so that teachers and leaders can better support students? Data collection and analysis occurred iteratively throughout the study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend a strategic process to analyze data that is critical for reliable and valid qualitative research. I utilized their five-step data analysis process summarized in Figure 3. Following this process, I organized the data collected from activities, such as interviews, meeting minutes, memos, and visual materials. Next, I reviewed the data, noted trends, patterns, and ideas. I began coding the data and created categories or themes for recurring codes. Lastly, I summarized the findings.

I used this same process to analyze data from observations completed during PAR Cycle Two. One method for organizing and keeping up with questions and comments that arose during an observation was to write them in the margin of the notepad. I left a note with some of these comments on the teacher's desk. Later, during the school day, generally during the teacher's planning period, participants had the opportunity to reflect and comment on the notes. I coded the observation notes looking for categories and themes. By highlighting and color-coding the data, I could analyze the data for common elements. From those recurring commonalities, patterns and trends that emerged, I formulated an answer to the research question: To what extent do teachers shift their teaching practice? Using the Saldaña (2016) process, I examined data for categories prior to proceeding in new cycles of inquiry which helped me identify emergent themes and finally determine findings.

Study Considerations: Limitations, Validity, and Confidentiality and Ethics

In qualitative research and particularly activist research that involves students, I needed to be particularly cognizant of student participants. At the same time, "[t]he work of authorizing



Note. (Source: Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 193).

Figure 3. Process for data analysis.

student perspectives are essential because of the various ways that it can improve current educational practice, re-inform existing conversations about educational reform, and point to the discussions and reform efforts yet to be undertaken" (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3). In this section, I address study limitations as well as validity and confidentiality and ethics of the study.

Limitations

Limitations of a study are considerations in a research design that may have an impact on the research outcomes and conclusions. I describe the limitations of this qualitative research study and potential constraints affecting the study's validity. I am clear that "[t]o be open this way to young people as authorities and as interpreters constitutes a shift in ways of thinking and feeling about issues of knowledge, language, power, and self" (Cook-Sather, 2012, p. 358). This discussion includes ways that I reduced limitations and increased the study's validity.

Listening to the insights and experiences of participants is critical to finding ways to better support the students. The knowledge created is unique to those students, the school, and the researcher. Although each student's experiences are personal to them, there will be similar aspects to their stories that we, as the adults in the situation, could use to address areas needing interventions or changes. I understand that "qualitative research is not concerned with numerical representativity, but with the deepening of understanding a given problem" (Quierós et al., 2017, p. 370). However, a potential drawback of the study's lack of quantitative data was that its conclusions were drawn deductively, with an emphasis on testing a theory rather than on fact. Additional possible limitations are time, the lead researcher's and the teachers' biases, and difficulty in generalizing, because of the small number of study participants that resulted in small samples of data. The limitation with time is centered around my ability to conduct observations and have evidenced-based conversations with students and teachers. As principal, I had

additional duties and responsibilities that needed to be managed, but I still needed to ensure time was allotted for interviews, observations, and meetings. The researcher's bias was another limitation. For example, while I worked as the principal and lead researcher, I hoped I was open to students' voices; but there were a couple of instances when my biases influenced my decision not to involve students' opinions before making the procedure change. Likewise, taking part in student or teacher discussions could possibly change the meaning of student and teacher responses. Teacher biases that affected the study were centered around preconceived notions developed about instructional practices. It is natural for teachers to want to use practices with which they are familiar. The researcher and/or the teachers had perceptions or ideas about the alternative learning program from previous encounters with students assigned to an alternative learning setting and frequently hearing "that is the school for bad kids." Lastly, because of the small sample size, difficulties in generalizing about findings are a limitation. The study focused on one ALS, a group of six students, and three teachers. However, the processes of this study can be generalized to other contexts, much like I used some of the processes in a similar study to inform my process (Ramos, 2021).

Validity

I detail steps used to ensure research findings are accurate. I address internal and external validity. A key standard of internal validity for action research is the usefulness to participants (Hale, 2008). In other words, are the findings useful to participants? I continued to reflect on evidence from field notes, CLE artifacts, interviews, observations, and conversations to ensure data are accurate and non-judgmental. I triangulated data sources to eliminate threats to validity of findings. For example, I triangulated data by conducting member checks (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). "Member checking is a process in which the researcher asks one or more

participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account" (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018, p. 261). I verified or validated the evidence for fairness and authentic representation of trends and findings.

Upon the completion of interviews and observations, participants reviewed the findings and conclusions to ensure accuracy of and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When considering the trustworthiness of the study, it is important that participants have confidence in the researcher's interpretation of data. While qualitative research is telling a story, participants want their stories told accurately with honesty and integrity. If the researcher is not trusted, the credibility of the research suffers. Participants become cautious and are less likely to share their true experiences. The study participants who produce the data are more likely to offer more information of greater quality when they believe they have a direct role in the study process (Hale, 2017). In addition, I held discussions of research and findings with the CPR group to increase confidence and accuracy in analysis of the data. Lastly, I ensured confidentiality as well.

In examining external validity, I considered if findings or generalizations are applicable to other contexts. In other words, is this information useful, and if so, to whom? Because of the small sample size, difficulties in generalizing about findings are a limitation. The small amount of data generated from observations, post-observation conversations, and group meetings from a group of six students, and three teachers may not produce findings valid for ALS with a larger population of students and staff. However, the process of engaging student voice in the research may be useful as a process in other contexts, and other researchers or school districts may find the research methods of collecting and analyzing data helpful (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations

In any research study, the security of the collected data and the confidentiality of the participants are crucial. Except for the lead researcher, no one has access to any personally identifiable information collected. No documents include identifiable information, such as name, grade, and subjects taught. For example, participants are identified as Student Participant 1 or Teacher Participant 1. In this research, I use pseudonyms for the district and the school. In addition, notes from student group meetings, observation notes, post-conference notes, transcripts from recordings, reflective memos, and copies of collected documents have been kept in a secure location. Finally, I did not copy or disseminate any materials I collected. I will keep this data for three years and then I will destroy the data.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described the research method I used to respond to the research questions and the processes I used to engage participants. I included a discussion of the research process (PAR), based on a qualitative research design approach that involves the lead researcher working with participants to understand an issue in our specific context and then propose options for addressing the issue. Therefore, this chapter outlined the specific details of how to conduct the research.

CHAPTER 4: PAR PRE-CYCLE

Most school improvement goals include the phrase "meet the needs of all students". When discussing their educational philosophies, teachers, principals, directors, and superintendents frequently use this same phrase. Although they espouse an intent to meet the needs of all students, this is rarely the case for marginalized students. The purpose of this PAR study is to better understand and support African American male students by drawing on their experiences in an alternative learning setting. I want to understand the students' perspectives about what we can do differently so that their needs are met and thereby are successful in school. Specifically, I want to understand how we can better support students in alternative settings to be successful students. If we can help them understand how the system might have failed them, they can be active agents in their own lives (Ramos, 2021). The focus of practice for the participatory action research project and study is: Incorporating student voice and experiences in understanding the benefits and challenges of the credit recovery program for African American male students. If the teachers and I listen to student experiences, then we can shift academic and social-emotional practices to better support students as they navigate through the alternative setting, including managing credit recovery. At the same time, we are listening to students, I am concurrently supporting teachers in using practices that students have identified that work for them.

In this first cycle of inquiry, I analyzed the experiences of students in an alternative learning school to strengthen the strategies teachers implement to support African American (AA) male students. The overarching research question for this study: How do the insights and experiences of students in an alternative learning program inform how teachers and leaders support students? The four sub-questions for this study are:

1. How do students identify benefits or challenges in the alternative learning program?
2. To what extent do the student voices inform the revision of the curriculum and instruction for an online credit recovery program?
3. To what extent do teachers shift their teaching practices?
4. To what extent does this process support my growth and development as a school leader?

In the first cycle of inquiry, I concentrated on how students perceive the advantages and difficulties of attending an alternative school. Next, I inquired about students' thoughts and opinions on the effects (positive or negative) of independently navigating coursework via an online platform. We expect to use their input to revise the online credit recovery program's content and instruction.

In this chapter, there are four sections: description of the context, the Pre-Cycle process, emergent categories, and reflection and planning for PAR Cycle One. In the first section, I described the context and participants in the study. Next, I detailed the activities during the Pre-Cycle and then I analyzed the evidence to determine initial categories that emerged from coding artifacts. I concluded the chapter with reflections on the PAR Pre-Cycle and planning for the next action/research cycle, PAR Cycle One.

Participatory Action Research Context

In this section, I highlight where the research study is taking place and provide detailed descriptions of the participants. All names used in this study (school, towns, district, and participants) are pseudonyms. There are fourteen schools in Shaw County: three comprehensive high schools, an early college high school, an alternative school for grades six through twelve, two middle schools, three K-8 grade schools, and four elementary schools. I have worked in this

district for nearly 30 years at all levels of education (elementary, middle, and high). During this time, I have directly observed many challenges that educational books and journal articles confirm: African American males are suspended at a higher rate than other ethnic groups and African American males are more likely than other ethnic groups to be placed in alternative learning programs. Over these years, I have come to the realization that, to some degree, the system has been designed to do exactly what it does -- push out students of color, especially male students, to special education or to alternative settings because of the inability of schools to meet the needs of marginalized students in the ways "we do" school (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Emdin, 2013; Ferguson, 2000; Howard, 2019; Kunjufu, 1985; Kunjufu, 2006). Because I want to improve my growth as a school leader, address these difficulties, and reform the alternative learning program to better serve students, I chose Shaw County Alternative School (SCAS) for the site of the research study.

The Place

Shaw Jr. High School, formerly named Shaw Colored Public School, is a historically public high school for African American students in Shaw City, North Carolina. Shaw Colored Public School's first incarnation consisted of three separate structures that served students in primary, elementary, and high school. In 1968, Shaw City Schools joined Shaw County Schools, uniting as one school district serving all of Shaw County. In 1990, Shaw Jr. High School moved into the vacated building of Shaw High School and was renamed Shaw Middle School. A few years later, the district's alternative school, Shaw County Alternative School (SCAS), moved into the building vacated by Shaw Jr. High School.

In May 2019, a research team from North Carolina State University conducted a study and discovered that a continuous decline in student enrollment was expected throughout the

county. Members of the North Carolina State Operations Research and Education Lab used their findings to develop maps depicting how school closures might influence student assignments throughout the district. The scenarios included the closure of two high schools (Eastern and Western) as well as an elementary school. The plan included a recommendation to close the doors of SCAS and move it to a wing inside Eastern High School to make up for a $600,000 dollar budget imbalance and to address concerns about dwindling enrollment while balancing the budget. The recommendation was accepted by the Shaw County School Board by a 7-2 vote (Washington Daily News, May 14, 2019).

Shaw County Alternative School (SCAS) is now housed in the north wing of Eastern High School, one of the district's three traditional high schools. The school consists of nine classrooms, two of which are used as offices for the principal and counselor/bookkeeper. The school currently has 11 staff members: a principal, a counselor, a Multi-tiered Student Support (MTSS) facilitator/Teacher Assistant (TA), four subject area teachers (math, English, science, social studies), an exceptional children's teacher, a 6^{th}-8^{th} grade teacher, a credit recovery facilitator, and a bookkeeper/treasurer. The grade configuration for the school is sixth through twelfth. Students in grade six through eighth can be administratively placed at the school by the district superintendent due to significant discipline issues in the district's middle schools. Ninth through twelfth grade students who attend have either been accepted in the school's Pathway Program or administratively placed by the superintendent because of extreme discipline infractions. The Pathway Program permits students to graduate by meeting the state mandated 22 credits and waiving the district's additional six credits. Student participants in this study were accepted into the Pathways Program. Currently, Shaw County Alternative School (SCAS) has 55 students, with African American (AA) males constituting the largest subgroup. Males make up

64% of the school's population, and AA males, in particular, make up 36% of the school's population. There are no student clubs at the school. Students can compete in sports through a league made up of charter schools in the area, but few students participate in sports since they have jobs. Currently, only one African American male plays on the basketball team. Table 5, below, depicts the current demographics of the school as of November 2021. The demographics regularly change as a result of some students dropping out and administrative placements of others. The demographics of the staff have not changed, so staff demographics are not included in Table 5.

The Participants

In this project and study, two types of participants have committed: six students, two Teachers, and a Teacher Assistant (TA). SCAS includes students from the three traditional high schools in the district. Students attending the school have either chosen to attend voluntarily through enrollment in the Pathway Program, and/or they have been assigned to attend by the district's superintendent. These students are assigned in lieu of receiving long-term suspension or expulsion. Students in the Pathway Program are at risk of dropping out of school or not meeting standards for promotion due to academic failure. In these cases, the student's parent/guardian and the principal agree that enrollment in SCAS' Pathway Program is in the best interest of the student. Students in the Pathway Program need to complete the twenty-two graduation credits required by North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). The six additional credits required by the district are waived. As a result, for example, a student obtaining five credits at the traditional high school will still be classified as a freshman, but a student getting five credits in the SCAS will be classified as a sophomore. The six African American male students who are participants in the study were enrolled in the school's Pathway Program. I chose them because

Table 5

School Demographics: Gender and Ethnicity of Students

Students (n=55)	Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	35	64
	Female	20	36
Ethnicity	AA Male	20	36
	AA Female	11	20
	Total AA	*31*	*56*
	White	15	27
	Multiracial	1	2
	Hispanic	7	13
	American Indian	1	2

they participated in middle school athletics but struggled academically, failed many classes their freshman and/or sophomore year, and currently struggle with online math credit recovery courses. Because Shaw County Alternative School does not have athletics, none of the student participants were involved in sports, and all had after school jobs.

The three adult participants voluntarily agreed to participate in this study, and they served as part of the Co-Practitioner Research (CPR) group. The teachers and TA met with me to examine the data I analyzed and made plans for achieving the goals of the project and study. These adults, in general, had good relationships with the students, and they had a vested interest in seeing the students and the school make progress. They were open to shifting their practices in order to make that happen. The next sections briefly describe each participant.

Student Participants

The six African American males in this study attended two in person classes, and they had an opportunity to recover credit for previously failed courses via the online credit recovery program. Initially, I met with students as a group. We talked about the study's focus and purpose, theory of action, and the overarching question. Later, I met individually with each student, and their parents joined via phone. Using a prepared script for telephone recruitment, I provided details of the research. I read and discussed the assent form, Appendix F, with students while their parents listened via phone. Parents got the chance to ask clarification questions. Students signed assent forms and took parent consent forms, Appendix E, home to obtain parent signatures. Parents and children were informed that pseudonyms are used to identify participants. During the first cycle of inquiry in Fall 2021, several students were on track to graduate in May 2022.

Student Participant 1. Student participant 1 (SSP1) was a senior at the alternative

school. The student passed four out of eight classes during his freshman year of high school, earning only four of the six credits needed to qualify as a sophomore. He earned four additional credits the next school year, meeting the requirement to be classified as a sophomore. However, he was now a year behind and in jeopardy of not graduating in four years. He applied and was accepted into SCAS' Pathways Program for the 2020-2021 school year. He had taken online credit recovery classes to recover lost credits and was on track in this first cycle of inquiry in Fall 2021 to earn enough credits to be eligible to graduate from high school with his cohort in May 2022.

Student Participant 2. Student participant 2 (BSP2) was a senior at the alternative school. This student failed his junior year of high school, so he did not earn enough credits to be classified as a senior. He applied for and was accepted in the SCAS' Pathways Program for the 2021-2022 school year with a total of seventeen credits. Sixteen credits are needed to be classified as a senior at the alternative school. He had taken online credit recovery classes to recover lost credits and was on track to earn sufficient credits (22) to be eligible to graduate from high school in May 2022.

Student Participant 3. Student participant 3 (RSP3) was a senior at the alternative school. He passed three out of eight classes in his freshman year of high school, only earning three of the six credits needed to become a sophomore. The next school year he earned six credits, meeting the requirement to be classified as a sophomore. The student then failed again the following school year, which should have been his senior year of school. Now two years behind, he applied and was accepted in the SCAS' Pathways Program for the 2021-2022 school year. He had taken online credit recovery classes to recover lost credits and had earned enough credits to be eligible to graduate from high school in five years in May 2022.

Student Participant 4. Student participant 4 (SSP4) was a senior at the alternative school. This student passed five out of eight classes his freshman year of high school, only earning five of the six credits needed to become a sophomore. The next school year he earned four credits, meeting the requirement to be classified as a sophomore but then failed the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year and dropped out of school, which should have been his senior year. Now two years behind, he applied and was accepted in the SCAS' Pathway Program for the 2021-2022 school year with 16 credits. He has taken online credit recovery classes to recover lost credits and has earned enough credits to be eligible to graduate from high school in five years, May 2022. This student worked full time at night to help his mother with expenses.

Student Participant 5. Student participant 5 (ESP5) was a sophomore at the alternative school during the school year 2021-22. He passed four of his eight classes in his freshman year at the traditional high school, putting him in jeopardy of not graduating with his cohort. His mother was encouraged to enroll him into the Pathways Program at SCAS due to academic failure and truancy.

Student Participant 6. Student participant 6 (TSP4) was a junior at the alternative school in school year 2021-22. This student worked full-time at night to help his mother with expenses. As a freshman at the traditional high school, he only passed four out of his eight classes. He failed four of his eight classes in his junior year, but he was now on track to graduate with his cohort in May 2022.

See Table 6 for additional information on participants

Table 6

Additional Student Participant Information

Student	Age	Grade	Home	Extracurricular
SSP1	19 years, 6 months	12	Lives with grandparents; Recently, started working to help with bills and has been accumulating absences.	Involved in middle grade athletics.
BSP2	17 years, 10 months	12	Lives with mother and three siblings. Does not have a job.	Involved in high school JROTC.
RSP3	18 years, 2 months	12	Lives with mother and three younger siblings. Does not have a job.	Involved in middle grade athletics.
SSP4	18 years, 10 months	12	Lives with mother and six siblings. Has a part-time job.	No extracurricular activities.
ESP5	15 years, 5 months	10	Lives with grandparents.	Involved in middle grade athletics.
TSP6	18 years, 6 months	12	Lives with mother and two siblings. Was working a full time, night shift job but quit because grades were suffering.	Involved in middle grade athletics.

Adult (Teacher) Participants/CPR Team Members

At our first staff meeting, I shared that I would be conducting research to see how students' opinions and experiences in an alternative learning program could influence how instructors and leaders assist students. I explained that I would like to hear from students on the advantages and disadvantages of taking online credit recovery courses and that I would need two teachers to take part in the study and serve on the research team. After I briefly described participant and CPR team tasks, I shared a formal invitation, recruitment script as well as the adult consent form (see Appendix D) explaining the research goals. I received responses from three teachers and the TA. I selected these volunteers as teacher participants and co-practitioner researchers for this study.

Teacher Participant 1. Teacher Participant 1 (CTP1) is a white male with ten years of experience as a teacher. This individual was pursuing a master's degree in history and spent four years in the Marine Corps following high school graduation. He was the history teacher for some of the participants. This teacher expressed a desire to strengthen his relationship with AA male students.

Teacher Participant 2. Teacher Participant 2 (BlTP2) is a Hispanic/African American male. The school year 2021-22 was his first year as a teacher, and he taught all subjects to students in the 6-8 alternative learning program. He had seven students -- two AA girls and five AA boys, who were assigned to the program by the superintendent due to repeated discipline infractions at the traditional middle school. Even though he taught middle school students, he formed relationships with a large number of high school male students. He tutored some of the students at the school, and many of them sought him out for advice.

Teacher Participant 3. Teacher participant 3 (HTP3) is an African American female, and she is the school's TA assigned the following duties: MTSS coordinator/facilitator. She has a degree in social work, and this was her first time working in education. The participants' mother worked in education as an elementary school teacher for over 30 years. This family association and substitute teaching provided some knowledge about schools. She stated that she loves working with kids and decided to leave social work to seek a job in education after the death of her mother.

Lead Researcher. I have worked in education for 30 years as a teacher, assistant principal, and an elementary school principal. This is my first year as the principal of SCAS. Over these years, I have come to realize that many students are directed to an alternate learning setting after becoming stuck in a cycle of failure. I am deeply concerned about the students in this school who encounter a variety of emotional, social, intellectual, and financial challenges. These challenges, many times, become factors in students failing academically. When students fail classes and fall behind their peers in terms of credits earned for graduation, dropping out may appear to be the only logical alternative. Therefore, I am interested in learning how we can help students in alternative settings completely engage in school, how we can better support them, and how we can help them be active participants in their own lives. I focused the research on their perspectives and ideas in order to give the necessary context for changing instructional practices that further isolate and marginalize AA male students. By increasing their chances of academic success, we can lower high school dropout rates and enhance their chances of having successful careers.

PAR Pre-Cycle Process

"Just shut up and dribble," uttered by a news anchor responding to comments made by an AA male athlete. This phrase struck a chord with me because it highlighted how the thoughts of African American males are disregarded in schools and society. The focus of this project and study -- listening to students as they told us what they need to achieve academically, develop creativity, and succeed in schools – was central to our ability to support them to be successful; in other words: not just “shut up and dribble”, but the co-practitioner researchers and I view them as a critical asset to our understanding how best to ensure their success.

In the PAR project, I engaged in three iterative inquiry cycles (PAR Pre-Cycle, PAR Cycle One, and PAR Cycle Two). In each cycle, I focused on collaboration between school leaders and teachers, learning together to improve practice, and using a narrative approach for reflection and findings. In this section, I detail the activities I conducted with the Co-Practitioner Research (CPR) team and participants, including students and teachers, during the Pre-Cycle. I share the major events that transpired during the cycle, discuss the evidence I collected, and describe the coding process I used.

Pre-Cycle Activities

The school year 2021-22 was my first year as principal at SCAS. As the school year began, creating positive relationships with students and staff was a vital part of the process. I provided teachers with the focus of practice and theory of action for the PAR study. My effort to get the teachers interested in the study and acquainted with the research methods included having open discussions with teachers during meetings, lunch breaks, and other free moments. After selection of the CPR Team and student participants, I realized that I needed to create a safe environment in which everyone could talk freely and not be afraid to take risks. All meetings

with participants included personal narrative activities to create a safe space. I gathered, coded, and analyzed participant interviews, notes from CPR meetings, and CLE artifacts, these personal narrative activities to reveal patterns in the qualitative data. In the next section, I detail activities with participants.

Activities with Teacher Participants

After the selection of teacher participants, I held the first CPR Team meeting on a district optional workday. We chose this day in order to create a secure space for conversation with little to no interruptions. We examined the study's focus, overarching research questions and sub-questions, and theory of action. We reviewed their consent forms to ensure understanding of their dual role as both co-practitioner researchers and participants. As aforementioned, establishing relational trust with the members of the CPR team was critical. After dynamic mindfulness, I used the endowed object protocol (see Appendix M), and we listened to one another's stories. This protocol helped participants focus on the value of student voice and the positive impact that listening to others' experiences has on respecting and understanding other people's opinions. Next, participants wrote a reflective memo on what they hoped to accomplish as a member of the CPR team and participants in the study. The memos included reflections on benefits from participating in the study, personal goals, and what, if any, questions they had. We talked about the next steps, scheduled individual interviews, and scheduled the next group CPR meeting. I conducted individual interviews the following week. I recorded and transcribed the interviews. Appendix H contains the interview questions; however, I used probing and/or follow-up questions based on the responses of the participants to gain clarity.

Activities with Student Participants

Because students had only engaged with me as their principal since the beginning of the

school year, I actively greeted them in the mornings, chatted briefly during transitions, and interacted with them at lunch in order to foster positive relationships. I wanted to create a safe space for the students so that they would feel comfortable sharing their experiences and thoughts in group settings.

The activities with student participants during the Pre-Cycle included an opening group meeting to introduce the study, gauge their willingness to be interviewed, and understand what a CLE entails. During that initial group meeting, the students seemed reserved and responded mostly with nods. As noted in a reflective memo, they appeared uncertain about what was expected from them (Reflective Memo, December 9, 2021). None agreed to be a study participant. The group meeting ended quickly. I decided to meet individually with students and invited teacher participant BLTP2 to be present at those meetings after noticing his positive interactions with some of the student participants. Students were more attentive and asked questions and decided to participate in the study; two of them agreed to be interviewed. Next, I held individual meetings with the six student participants and parents (via phone) to obtain parental consent. I met with the two student participants (BSP2 and RSP3) who agreed to be interviewed later.

Next, I scheduled a CLE with students and teacher participants during the school day to ensure participation and attendance from all students. During the CLE, teachers engaged in dynamic mindfulness while the student participants observed. A student volunteered to read "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes; we had a brief discussion related to the phrase "boards torn up." Participants completed journey lines about pivotal moments in their education (preschool, elementary, middle, and high) in which they felt "boards were torn up." First, CPR team members shared with the whole group. Then students presented and discussed their journey

lines. Lastly, a word cloud was created from words students entered to describe how it felt to be listened to as a reflection activity. Table 7 depicts a timeline of all Pre-Cycle activities.

Coding Evidence

Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend a five-step data analysis process for reliable and valid qualitative research: (1) collect data from interviews, meeting minutes, reflective memos, and visual artifacts; (2) examine your data; (3) begin coding the data; (4) construct categories or themes for recurrent codes; and (5) summarize your results. I conducted data collection and analysis in a cyclical manner throughout the Pre-Cycle.

I collected data from interviews of students and teachers and artifacts from meetings with students and teachers. I used the Delve application to transcribe the data, highlighting terms and/or phrases in the text to summarize the content. Then, I re-coded the transcripts a second time. Next, I exported the codes and phrases into a comma-separated values (CVS) file and Word document (doc). I cut the word doc into strips and began moving them into columns in order to look for patterns and common trends. As a beginning researcher, I struggled to obtain an appropriate representation of the code or name because I had problems distinguishing between a code and a category. By the third and fourth cycles of coding, I was able to settle on a reasonable description or term for the codes. I then organized and tabulated the data in an Excel spreadsheet. Using a mix of open coding, in vivo coding, and descriptive coding resulted in fifty-eight codes. In vivo coding, known as verbatim coding, uses the participant's actual words as your code or phrase, followed by quotation marks (Saldaña, 2016). Descriptive coding requires reading the data and summarizing the topic with a single word or phrase (Saldaña, 2016). Each code created summarized the highlighted statements. Through this analysis and the assignment of projected categories, I was able to regroup and assign codes. Next, I entered these in a codebook, which

Table 7

Timeline of Pre-Cycle Activities

Activity	Wk 2 10/25-29	Wk 3 11/1-5	Wk 4 11/8-12	Wk 5 11/15-19	Wk 6 11/22-26	Wk 7 11/29-12/3	Wk 8 12/6-10	Wk 9 12/13-17	Wk 10 12/20-24	Wk 11 12/27-31	Wk 1 10/18-22
CPR Meetings			•		•			Observations	Winter Break	Winter Break	••
Teacher Interviews	•		•			•			Winter Break	Winter Break	
Mt w/ Student Participants	•				•			Observations	Winter Break	Winter Break	

contains the projected categories, codes, sample, description, frequency, and data set. Table 8 presents an excerpt from the code book.

Emergent Categories

The emergent categories -- culturally responsive pedagogy, strengths of the alternative setting, and preferred instructional strategies – surfaced as important to students and teachers. As discussed in Chapter 2, the students' willingness to share their stories not only gives voice to underrepresented students whose voices are rarely heard in classrooms but supports research that calls for African American students' voices to be heard (Creswell, 2014; Howard, 2001, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The term culturally relevant pedagogy, coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1994 and expanded by Gay (2010) defines a method of instruction that integrates the background and culture of all students in all aspects of learning. Viewing students' cultures, which may or may not be different from the teacher's culture, as assets is an important characteristic of being culturally responsive because the teacher can create learning experiences that are relevant to all students. Culturally responsive practices, according to Ladson-Billings (1994), must meet three criteria: the ability to develop students' academic skills, the willingness to nurture and encourage cultural competency, and socio-political awareness. Gay's (2010) premise is that students perform better when teaching encompasses their cultural experiences, which includes the use of relevant, real-life stories.

I queried teachers initially to understand how they conceptualized CRP. "How will you become more culturally responsive?" during their interview. Their replies suggested that teachers are aware of the value of CRP. For example, HTP3 responded "...getting to know the kid, the

Table 8

Partial Codebook: PAR Pre-Cycle Codes and Categories

Category	Code	Sample	Description	Frequency	Data Set
CRP	Relationship	"Share similar experiences of students"	Establishing a relationship or connection with a person.	5	Teacher Interview
CRP	Appreciate	"celebrate/appreciate student"	Expectation that students' accomplishments should be recognized.	2	Teacher Interview
CRP	Meet student needs	"gives time to do your work"	Instructional strategy identified to work best for students.	2	Student Interview
Preferred instructional strategy	Direct instruction	Face-to-face instruction	Instructional strategy identified to work best for students.	4	Student Interview
Preferred instructional strategy	"provide weekly breakdowns"	"provide weekly breakdowns"	Instructional strategy identified to work best for students.	2	Teacher Interview
Preferred instructional strategy	"use vocabulary techniques"	"breaking down vocabulary words"	Instructional strategy identified to work best for students.	2	Student Interview

student, each student individually, and recognizing that each student is different, and studying their culture versus mine versus the next student's culture and understanding that we're all different" (Interview, November 17, 2021). Participant BTP1 said, "...understanding where students come from culturally" (Interview, November 17, 2021). Teacher participant BTP2 said, "I would like to become better at understanding the lives and experiences of my minority male students, specifically African Americans, so that I can work to better implement practices in the classroom that would be more relatable for students.…" (Interview, November 30, 2021). Student participants identified culturally responsive practices although they were unfamiliar with the term. They were asked to "talk to me about the teacher instructional practices used that, as you say, make the work seem easier.." Student participant BSP2 said, "... review vocabulary or use a story…" (Interview, November 30, 2021). Other strategies mentioned by participants included breaking the instruction down, use of adaptive programs, and giving extra time.

I compared their responses to Hollie's (2012) culturally responsive practices domains: Classroom management, academic literacy, academic vocabulary, academic language, and learning environment are the five aspects. Hollie (2012) says "...all classrooms–regardless of grade level or content area–should have these subcategories in place effectively and efficiently" (p. 49). I cross-referenced the sample terms and phrases (noted in Table 9) that were categorized as CRP with Hollie's five areas of culturally responsive practices in Table 9. Cross-referencing the CRP codes with Hollie's subcategories provides support for teachers understanding and initially using culturally responsive practices to support the academic learning of AA male students. I will investigate, through classroom observations, whether these practices are minimally, moderately, or fully inclusive.

Table 9

Pre-Cycle Codes Cross-Referenced with Hollie's Subcategories for Cultural Responsiveness

Responsive Classroom Management	Responsive Academic Literacy	Responsive Academic Vocabulary	Responsive Academic Language	Responsive Learning Environment
"Respect everyone"	"use of relevant stories"	"every teacher break it down"	Incorporate "feedback from students"	"implement everything from multiple cultures"
"Everybody's culture is a part of the class"	"take notes"	"... review vocabulary"		"gives time to do your work"
"having same expectations for all"	"use IXL and Kahoots to practice"			"Share similar experiences of students"
				Celebrate and appreciate students
				"getting to know the kids"
				"learning their culture"

Strengths of the Alternative Setting

The objective of SCAS is to provide alternative learning services to students in grades 6 through 12 who do not fully fit into the academic settings and are often referred for what the district terms "violations of student code of conduct". Student participants described various past experiences involving "violation of student code of conduct" resulting in suspensions in comparison to experiences while attending SCAS. These coded statements address the first research question of this study: How do students identify benefits or challenges in the alternative learning program? Three key strengths of the alternative setting are small classes which allow for personalized instruction, a calm atmosphere, and caring teachers.

In the alternative learning program, personalized learning via small classes and a calm atmosphere provided an environment that was conducive to learning. Three participants described the school as a "small setting" and class sizes are much smaller than those of their home schools. Other participants described such school environment characteristics, "calm environment," "very calm," "less stressful and much more relaxed", as contributing to their personal ability to avoid inappropriate behavior. For instance, ESP5 stated, . . . "since it's like less students here and smaller classrooms, it's not a lot of drama... I used to get into a lot of fights" (CLE, December 8, 2021). TSP6 stated: "Here, there's no big distractions" (CLE, December 8, 2021). The school's small class size and a calm environment were two assets discussed in chapter one as being school level assets derived from the community learning exchange held in November 2020.

Secondly, the students described the teachers as caring. Three participants described relationships with faculty and staff as "teachers here care" and they are teachers who "actually teach to help us instead of just giving work" (RSP3, Interview, November 30, 2021). The

teachers' personalized instruction to help students master concepts. That means that "the school gives us a new chance and teachers we can talk to". In general, the overwhelming response of students was positive to what they experienced in this setting and what they wished other schools were like.

Student Preferred Instructional Practices

In the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers, Element Inc., teachers are supposed to use a variety of strategies that best fit the learning style of students as they try to improve achievement, such as information and communication technologies and differentiated education. Students are fully aware of the benefits of their teachers adopting a variety of instructional approaches, according to the coding and analysis of data acquired during this cycle of the research project.

The students confirmed that they are adept at knowing what kind of learning actually supports them as learners. First, face-to-face instruction is preferable to an online platform, such as Odysseyware, for credit recovery. Secondly, BSP2 attributes improvement in his academic performance in ELA to "the use of stories" (Interview, November 30, 2021). This student further stated that when his teacher gives "weekly breakdowns," of lessons, it helped him to know what to study (Interview, November 30, 2021). Another practice mentioned by both participants, RSP1 and BSP2 was assistance with understanding vocabulary, which was coded as use of vocabulary procedures. When asked what makes the learning better, these participants discuss "use of IXL and Kahoots to practice a lot" helps them, especially in math class. These students are taking a face-to-face and credit recovery math course. I coded this as the use of adaptive programs/reviews. These practices that students delineate are typical of recommended practices for student learning: scaffolding vocabulary and task analysis that includes clear directions.

Hollie (2012) lists use of relevant stories as a culturally responsive practice teachers should use in their classroom.

The Focus of Practice (FoP) for the PAR study is: Incorporating student voice and experiences in understanding the benefits and challenges of the credit recovery program for African American (AA) male students. As I investigated the perceptions of AA students in the alternative school of online credit recovery program, the students were quite clear about what supports their learning. According to the coding and analysis of the data gathered during this cycle of the research study, students are fully aware of the challenges of credit recovery and the advantages of face-to-face instruction in which their teachers use a variety of instructional styles. All six participants chose face-to-face training (coded as direct instruction) as opposed to an online platform like Odysseyware for credit recovery. They want relationships with teachers who care about them and scaffold their learning to meet their personal needs for learning, not teachers who simply "give them work."

Reflection and Planning

This participatory action research study supports my growth and development as a school leader. Reflecting on my leadership provides answers to the shifts in academic and social-emotional practices that need to be made to better support students as they navigate through SCAS' Pathways Program toward graduation from high school. In this section, I reflect on Pre-Cycle activities, discuss my role as lead researcher, and share plans for PAR Cycle One.

Reflections on Leadership

I used reflective memos to capture my thoughts, feelings, and progress during this process as the lead researcher. During this cycle, I transitioned from fear to frustration to confidence. In my first reflective memo, I expressed concern about being able to help and meet

the needs of the school's students who are placed at risk for academic failure. I had some dissatisfaction with district decisions and mandates about how students are marginalized and placed at the school, and that added to my skepticism about reaching the PAR goals. Slowly, my feelings began to oscillate between uncertainty and assurance as Pre-Cycle activities began to take shape, but one area in which I continue to struggle is time management. Managing my time between work-related duties and activities centered around the dissertation continues to be an area of focus. Time blocking and using an electronic calendar proved to be a big help. This demonstrates a beginning shift in my leadership. I am starting to draw on procedures used as a school principal to help manage my responsibilities as a lead researcher. I noticed my responsibility evolving more toward that of a listener with my third reflective memo (September 24, 2021) written in this cycle. As leaders, we frequently focus on telling others what we believe and how things should be done, but I have learned that I do not have to have all the solutions. Listening to and embracing other people's ideas – taking a more collaborative approach – is less stressful and creates buy-in for proposed solutions that everyone agrees on. At this point in the research study, this has been the biggest shift in my leadership.

An excerpt from a reflective memo (November 30, 2021), I wrote the following: *Even though my feelings about my role as praxis facilitator continue to fluctuate between discomfort and certainty, depending on the goals or focus on a specific time, I am a more efficient lead researcher. For example, initially my level of discomfort with coding was extremely high. Although I continue to have concerns in my coding ability, it is not at the high level of uncertainty I was experiencing initially. This depicts a growth or change in my mindset. I have noticed that I am more comfortable with the facilitation of the CPR Team and student meetings. I no longer have the need to provide all the answers. Recognizing that it is okay to just listen and*

ask questions periodically to keep the discussions flowing has made a difference in how I communicate and facilitate other school-related meetings outside of my PAR research.

Another area where I showed improvement is my ability to be an equity warrior. More of my efforts are geared toward providing students with the tools they need to succeed at SCAS. The willingness and confidence to ask the superintendent for additional face-to-face electives at the school (currently, we have one), I feel, is a direct result of the work I have done in this PAR research, and the student evidence is a good source of making the case for techniques.

Planning for PAR Cycle One

Based on the analysis of data acquired in the Pre-Cycle and emergent categories at this point in the project, I met the CPR team and conducted a third CLE with students., I continued my focus on these two questions: (2) To what extent do the student voices inform the revision of the curriculum and instruction in an online credit recovery program? (3) To what extent does teacher participation support their shifts in practices? I conducted evidence-based teacher observations followed by post-observation discussions to explore how teachers' behaviors or shifts are made in their practice in connection to culturally responsive practices and use of student preferred instructional practices.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began with a summary of the study participants' profiles and demographics, followed by a description of Pre-Cycle activities, coding process, and finally an analysis and interpretation of the data acquired from Pre-Cycle activities. In highlighting the location of the research project and information of the participants, I set the stage for the research. As I grew more confident as a principal researcher and practitioner, we collaboratively formulated responses to the study's overarching question: How do the insights and experiences

of students in an alternative learning program inform how teachers and leaders support students? Information I gathered and analyzed from Pre-Cycle activities helped chart the path for teachers and school leaders to listen to student experiences and shift academic and social-emotional practices to better support students as they navigate through credit recovery.

Three main categories surfaced during the data gathering, coding, and analysis process: culturally responsive pedagogy, strengths of the alternative setting, and student preferred instructional strategies. As I labored as a scholar to represent the data in codes, I realized the three emerging categories have something in common. The students were articulate in telling us what helped them. Not only will that reinforce what we do at SCAS and lead the way for more productive experiences for students while in the alternative setting but may have other implications as well.

Our students at SCAS already experience difficulties in their traditional comprehensive high schools that we seek to mitigate through teacher shifts in their practice and my leadership development. As I approached PAR Cycle One, I felt more confident as a leader, more experienced as a researcher, and ready to drill down on the pedagogical approaches that support these six students and all the students at SCAS. Collaborating with teachers and students is a process that helps the entire staff support students more effectively. In PAR Cycle One, I aim to learn more about the shift in the practices of teacher participants. The theory of action for this research study: If the teachers and I listen to student experiences, then we can shift academic and social-emotional practices to better support students as they navigate through credit recovery. At the same time, we are listening to students; I concurrently supported teachers in using practices that students have identified that work for them.

CHAPTER 5: PAR CYCLE ONE

I knew what I wanted to learn about the experiences of the student participants when I started the initial research study, but I was not entirely sure if I would be successful. At the outset, I had some general demographic information about students in the study. However, I was uncertain about how the students' personal experiences, outside of school hours, affected their progress in school and opinions on life. I was unclear about how their perspectives would inform the study's overarching research question: How do the insights and experiences of students in an alternative learning program inform how teachers and leaders support students? I knew the focus of practice for the study was incorporating student voice and experiences in understanding the benefits and challenges of the credit recovery program for African American male students. Thus, I wanted to uncover benefits and challenges of the alternative learning program by listening to the perspectives of the students based on their experiences.

I learned in the Pre-Cycle that students, by and large, appreciated the support they received in the alternative setting compared to what they received in the larger, comprehensive high school; they wanted in-person, not virtual, learning because they valued being in a calm environment with caring teachers. Students said that small classes are another benefit of the alternative learning program. A frequently stated challenge was virtual learning.

In this chapter, I detail the activities, data collection, and analysis from PAR Cycle One. The events that took place included meetings, CLEs, and one-to-one conversations with student participants. During the cycle, I emphasized these research questions: (1) To what extent do student voices influence the revision of the online credit recovery program's content and instruction? And (2) To what extent do teachers shift their teaching practices? I designed agendas and activities with these research questions and the theory of action in mind: If teachers and I

listen to student experiences, then we can shift academic and social-emotional practices to better support students as they navigate through a mix of online credit recovery courses and face-to-face instruction. While focusing on meeting the needs of students, I concurrently supported teachers in implementing strategies that students have identified as "work for them."

In this chapter, I derived emergent themes from the research conducted during PAR Cycle One. I coded data to highlight patterns and trends, and then I sorted and organized codes in a spreadsheet. After organizing and grouping the codes, I rearranged and sorted the codes to discover emergent themes. Then, I entered the themes that emerged from the results of the data analysis into a graphic organizer. Based on that analysis, I organized this chapter into three main sections: the process, emergent themes, and analysis of the themes. Finally, I examine how the PAR cycle affected my leadership and progress, as well as provide a brief synopsis of the next cycle of inquiry, PAR Cycle Two.

PAR Cycle One Process

Based on the analysis of data from the Pre-Cycle and coding results, the focus for PAR Cycle One shifted to instructional practices that enhanced African American males' academic performance in schools. We needed to find strategies that supported students in recovering academic credits using an online credit recovery platform, as well as in face-to-face classes, because traditional online credit recovery programs did not address how the students communicated the best ways for them to learn. Once I had a vision of those practices, I worked with teachers to help them make improvements in their classrooms through evidence-based conversations built on evidence from classroom observations. I focused on culturally responsive practices that would lead to more equitable access to learning and enhanced rigor.

To foster conversations, I needed to approach the investigation from an inquiry and a

coaching perspective. Next, I describe the actions I facilitated as the lead researcher with participants. I describe student group meetings, CPR meetings, the CLE, and teacher reflective memos that I collected and analyzed.

PAR Cycle One Activities

During PAR Cycle One, I conducted CPR meetings (n=3), one-to-one interviews with students (n=2 with each student), group meetings with students (n=3), and one CLE. I began each CPR meeting with a personal narrative activity. I gave the CPR team members instructions to read and reflect on seven student profiles at the first CPR meeting, which was conducted on February 14, 2022. Members selected a profile of interest based on past or current students taught, mentored, or experienced in some way. The CPR members were not aware that the profiles were based on actual students who attended the school. The purpose of the discussion was to gauge how well participants understood that students' experiences outside the classroom may affect how well they do in class. After that, each teacher participant separately thought about why they had selected a certain student's profile and recorded their thoughts in a google form. I facilitated the group in a discussion after the journaling exercise. Teachers spoke about why they chose a certain student. Teachers chose one of their students to write about even though they were not aware that the profiles were of actual students at the school; this shows that participants had some familiarity with the lives of the students (see Table 10).

Next, teacher participants completed a collaborative activity called Design Your School. Members had to imagine being on a school design team with the task of designing a school with students (selected during profile activity) in mind. The team had to consider what the school would look like and what would be needed in the school to engage this student in continuous culturally relevant, challenging, rigorous, and standards-based learning.

Table 10

Timeline of PAR Cycle One Activities, Spring 2022

Timeline	CPR Meetings	1-1 Student Meetings	Group Student Meetings	CLE
Wk. of 2/14 - 18	X			X
Wk. of 2/28 - 3/4			X	
Wk. of 3/7 - 11		X		
Wk. of 3/14 - 18	X			
Wk. of 3/21 - 25			X	
Wk. of 3/28 - 4/1	XX		X	
Wk. of 4/4 - 4/8		X		

Figure 4 displays the results of their collaborative efforts. Most of the time, each CPR member submitted a couple of suggestions without the other participants asking why they believed those should be incorporated into the school's design. Altogether, they identified nine key items: core curriculum, work study program, culturally diverse staff, mental emotional support, parent involvement, flex between virtual and face-to-face, student voice, highly qualified staff, and community support. As participants were adding pieces to the design, they discussed their reason for including those pieces.

All teacher participants agreed that students should be taught and learn course objectives. BlTP2 strongly felt a culturally diverse staff must be a vital part of the school and HTP3 suggested that the staff should reflect the student body, for example, if the student body consists of African American, White, and Hispanic students then there should also be African American, White, and Hispanic teachers on the staff (CPR Meeting, February 14, 2022). The difficulty teachers experienced during the pandemic season (resulting from school closures to in-person learning) with issues like student absenteeism and lack of support/guidance for teachers in lesson planning for virtual/remote teaching came up throughout the discussion. Therefore, as I listened to their conversation, I found it intriguing that teacher participants felt their school design should have a mix of online and in-person learning. Next participants began discussing parent involvement. The consensus among the group was that parents need to be involved in their child's education. Participant BTP1 talked about how his engagement in his daughter's school activities decreased when she transitioned from elementary to middle school (CPR Meeting, February 14, 2022). The other participants agreed that increasing parent involvement was needed at the high school level. Simon (2001, p. 9) states in her article, "there are often reports that family involvement drops off by the time teenagers are in high school…family and community

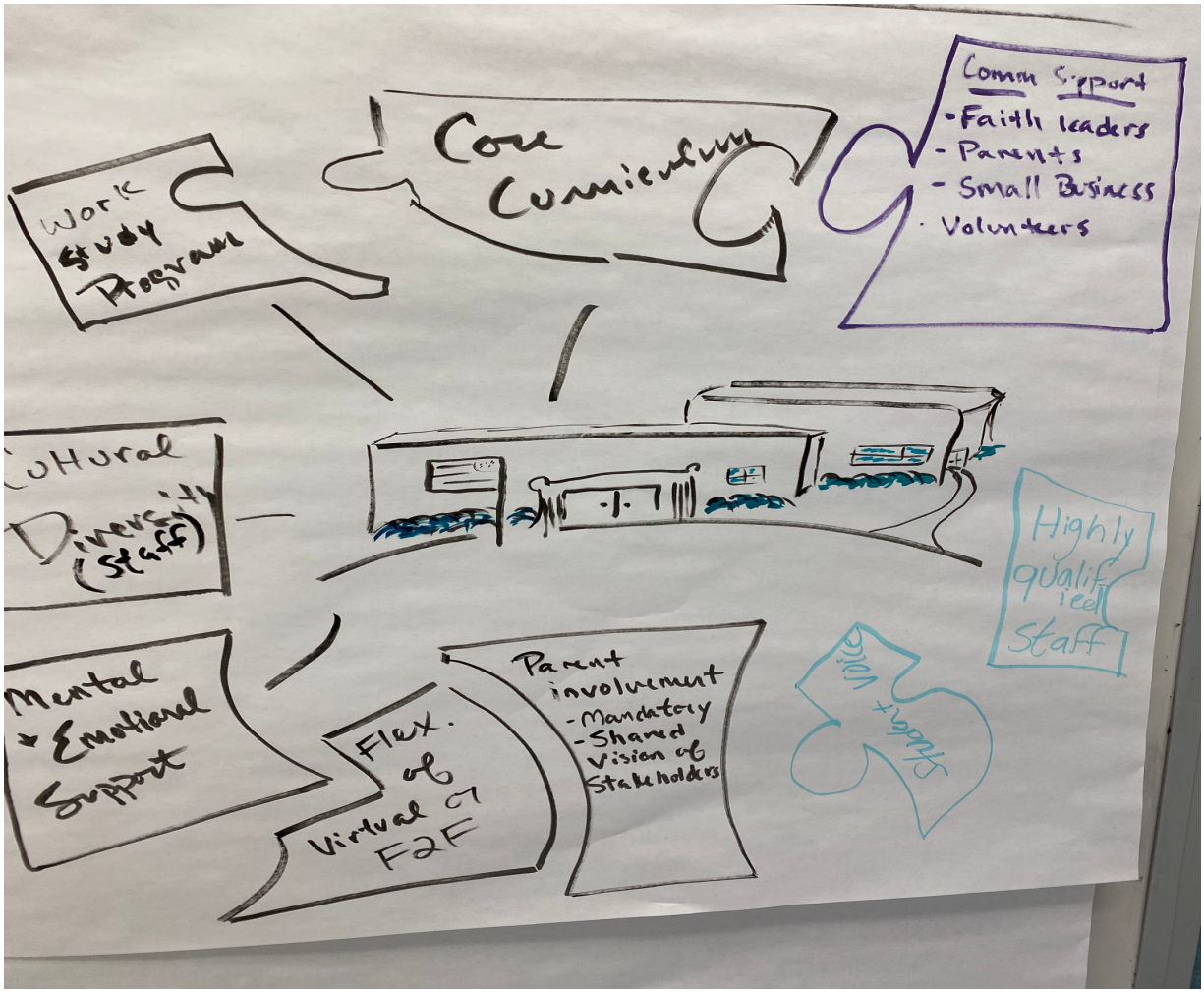


Figure 4. PAR Cycle One artifact: Design your school – CPR Team.

connections appear weak (Clark, 1983; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; George, 1995; Stevenson & Baker, 1987)". I have worked as an educator at all three K–12 levels. In high schools, I have observed a decline in parental and family participation (outside of athletics).

Next, participant HTP3 spoke about the need for a work study program. She expressed concern about students working late hours at after-school jobs, saying that this led to student absences or caused students who returned to school the next day to fall asleep in class (CPR Meeting, February 14, 2022). Since the meeting had to end so that participants could get to their classroom in time for the start of the next class period, they were unable to finish discussing all of the design's key components.

I made the decision to engage students in designing their ideal school after the discussion with teachers about their design. Comparing the components considered essential for a successful school that offers excellent teaching and learning from the viewpoints of teacher and student participants piqued my curiosity. But first, I'd like to talk about the student's design.

The students discussed renaming the school Alternative Academy. Students are aware of the perceptions of alternative schools as schools for "bad kids." Students vehemently disputed these preconceptions of alternative schools, insisting that their school would be safe and drug-free in contrast to the idea that alternative schools are dangerous. Although they may have been assigned to SCAS or voluntarily came, they wanted their experiences to be educational. They wanted their school to be recognized as a place where learning occurs and freely offered insightful suggestions for how their educational experiences should look. In contrast with the teachers' design, students' design focused on safety, procedures, and highly [effective] teachers. In addition to the four core subject areas, students had seven main areas of focus: (1) "Cafeteria like in mall, set up with caterers like Chick-fil-A, no McDonald's, vending machines," (2)

"Boxing ring in the gym to settle differences without consequences, get beef out," (3) "school will be an academy," (4) "no drama and no fighting," (5) "We got to have metal detectors; our school got to be safe," (6) "Drug-free zone," and (7) "We need a dress code 7.5" (Group Meeting, March 4, 2022). In Figure 5, the students represented these elements. I noticed that teacher participants focused on aspects that enhance teaching and learning, in contrast to students focusing on aspects of safety. These components are intertwined because the absence of a safe learning environment has a negative effect on learning. Lacoe (2020) found that children learn less consistently when they feel unsafe in the classroom and more effectively when they feel safe. A safe environment is a prerequisite for productive learning (Maslow, 1970; Piaget, 1936). "If students feel unsafe at school, they may be less likely to go to school at all or less able to focus on learning while at school" (Lacoe, 2020, p. 1,386).

Prior to the group meeting with students in which they completed the design of school activity, students composed and shared emulation poems at the CLE held in February. The emulation poem included three prompts: I come from a school…, I go to a school…, and I would like to attend a school…. Four of the six students in attendance said they would like to attend a school with a calm environment and no girl drama. Again, we see students focusing on school safety.

Next, I held a CPR meeting centered on the comparison of students' school design and teachers' school design. Teachers focused on the intricate pieces to school design necessary for teaching and learning of the curriculum. Students focused on establishing school safety and structural design. We also recognized that students genuinely care about their school and that we should take their opinions into account when making decisions about the school that impact

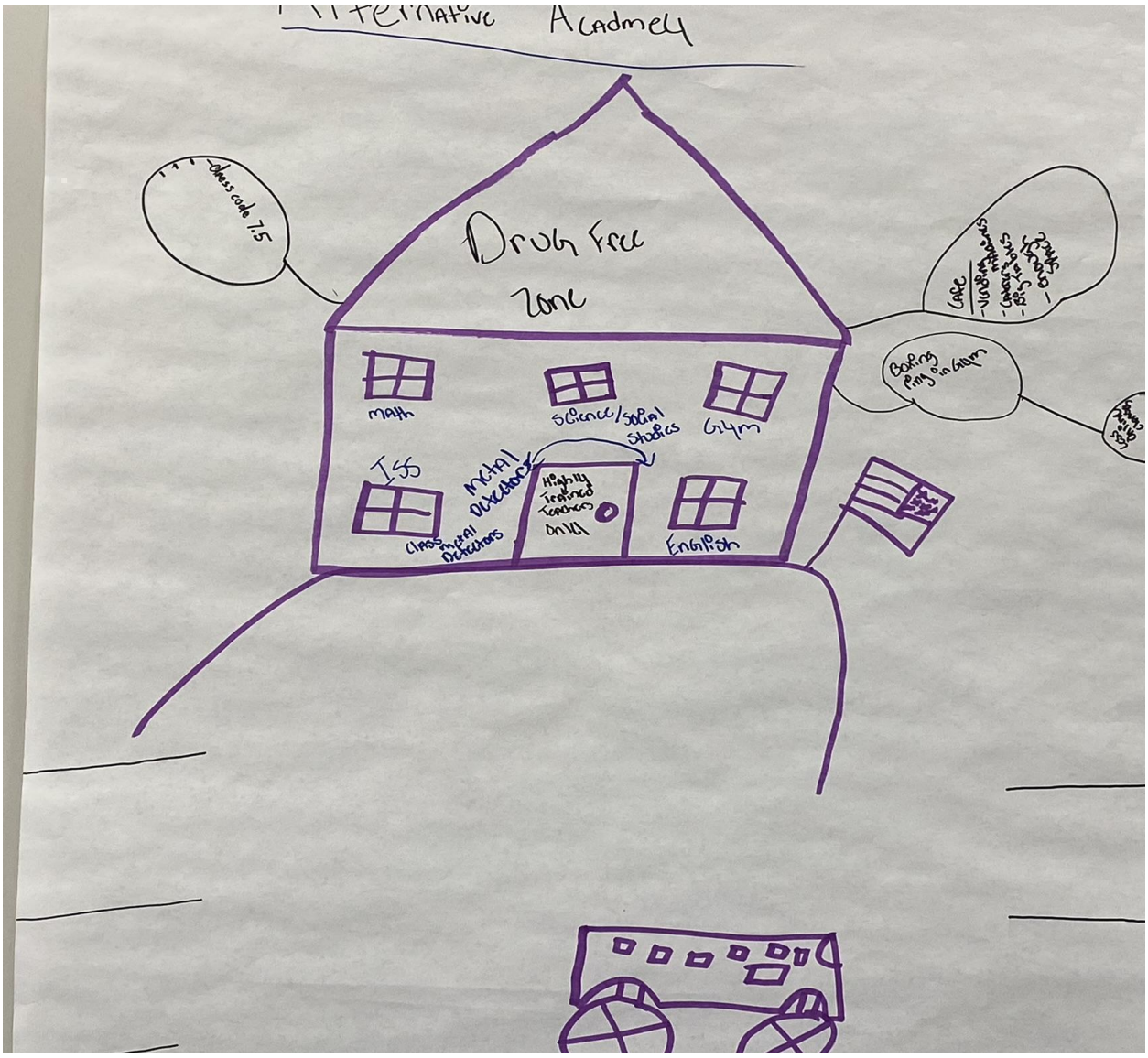


Figure 5. PAR Cycle One artifact: Design your School – Students designed their ideal school to include a new name, safety precautions, core subjects, highly [effective] teachers, amenities, and restorative practices.

them (Hemphill, 2020). Incorporating student voice relates to the study's Focus of Practice (FoP): Incorporating student voice and experiences in understanding the benefits and challenges of the alternative learning program for African American male students. I had one-on-one conferences with students to gain information that would help to inform decisions about instruction, resources, and school climate.

In these meetings, I asked students three questions (Hemphill, 2020): (1) How are you doing today? (2) What are you most proud of from the past nine weeks? (3) What challenges or concerns do you have about your classes or school? I noticed the positive demeanor and eagerness to share exhibited by students and that realization led to a change in my practice as the school's principal. Having more purposeful talks with students, in addition to the standard "good morning, how are you" greetings, enables the students to feel involved in decisions about their education. I arranged to have a private session with all students. In PAR Cycle Two, I intended to keep using this strategy to completely understand their perspectives. The responses provided by the study's student participants will be the only ones included in the data analysis.

The first cycle of inquiry ended with a group meeting with student participants focused on instructional practices. I invited the school's counselor, student services director, and MTSS facilitator to attend the meeting. I started the meeting with introductions. After that, I provided an overview of the study and summary of student activities that had occurred. I introduced an activity to support our collective understanding of instructional practices that could better support students. I asked students to rate ten instructional practices on a scale of 0 to 5, with zero indicating not favorable and five indicating highly favorable. I wrote the ten practices on individual posters and hung the posters around the room. The adults assisted with distributing

materials and monitoring as students moved around the room. The students then scored each practice by placing a colored dot on the scale creating a simple dot plot.

The following week, I held a CPR meeting. The meeting started with teacher participants rating whether they used the same practices rated by students at least once weekly or if they were not used at all. I revealed student responses once the task was completed. CPR members compared student and teacher responses. Some practices rated favorably by students were not being implemented by teachers, whereas practices rated unfavorably by students were used often by teachers, according to one member.

Data Analysis

Saldaña (2016) tells us that "coding is just one way…not the way" (p. 42). However, for this project and study, as I coded the responses, I gained insight into teacher and student similarities and differences. In addition, with the PAR research questions in mind, I focused on how the data corresponded to them. This made it easier to assign a code to summarize phrases or chunks of data. Table 11 depicts a section of the codebook highlighting the codes and categories assigned to PAR Cycle One artifacts. Following each collection of evidence, I began data analysis by codifying- the act of coding and re-coding qualitative data by evaluating the data, grouping, regrouping, identifying, and categorizing to aid in the identification of patterns (Saldaña, 2016). I identified codes, grouped codes to generate categories, and grouped categories to develop emergent themes as I worked through the artifacts, making sense of the data obtained during PAR Cycle One activities. In general, I used in vivo coding, the use of direct quotes from participants as codes for this cycle of inquiry. Next, I analyzed categories to use to uncover trends in the list of codes: I paraphrased the statements without losing their meaning to reflect

Table 11

Partial Codebook: PAR Cycle One Codes and Categories

Category	Code	Description	Statement or Phrase from Data	Frequency	Data Set
Teacher Characteristics	"help"	Student description of a highly [effective] teacher; what a teacher should do.	"help" to understand schoolwork	|||	Design Your School – Students
Teacher Characteristics	"highly [effective] teacher"	Highly [effective] teacher would know how to reach all students, so none of them would fail; therefore, would not need to take credit recovery to recover a credit.	"don't need credit recovery, everybody would pass"	|	Design Your School – Students
School Safety	conflict resolution	A way for students to resolve issues between them; handle their emotions.	"Boxing ring in the gym is to get your beef out...can settle differences without consequence"	||	Design Your School – Students
Learning Environment	"calm"	Description of school atmosphere in response to the prompt *I go to a school...*	"where it is calm"	||||	Emulation Poem
Learning Environment	“caring”	Teachers display concern for student academic and socio/emotional well-being.	“teachers are caring”	|||	Emulation Poem
Learning Environment	“f2f instruction ”	Preference for in person instruction.	students need “f2f instruction”	|||	Design Your School – Teachers

what was important. Two themes emerged: (1) Students have clear ideas about how teachers can better support students, and (2) Students want a safe and orderly environment.

Emergent Themes

The purpose of the activities conducted during PAR Cycle One was to gain insight into the following research questions: (1) To what extent do student voices influence the revision of the online credit recovery program's content and instruction? and (2) To what extent do teachers shift their teaching practices? Themes emerged from the interpretation of this data through the process of coding and devising categories. The emergent themes highlight the thoughts and beliefs of the student participants. In this section, I focus on the two themes that emerged: (1) Students have clear ideas about how teachers can support them; and (2) Students in the alternative school want their school to be safe. Figure 6 provides a representation that relates the overarching research question to the themes and categories.

Students' Input: How Teachers Can Better Support Students

The first theme to emerge from this cycle of inquiry: African American male students have clear ideas about how teachers can better support students. I derived this theme from the analysis and grouping of two main categories: characteristics of highly effective teachers and preferred instructional practices.

Characteristics of Highly Effective Teachers

The first trend or pattern to emerge from the analysis process was the students' thoughts on what constituted the characteristics of a highly effective teacher (students used the phrase "highly trained teacher"). Given that the students do not know much about teacher preparation, I do not believe they meant training, but what teachers are doing now to be effective teachers. Therefore, I have replaced the term training with effective. Highly effective means that they

knew the content and instructional practices as well as had the ability to relate to students. In particular, students had recommendations about how teachers should assist students in their classes and how teacher behaviors affect them. Student participant ESP5 in reporting on the actions of teachers said that teachers needed to be highly [effective].

First, the highly effective teacher should be aware of the best practices for instructing students so that students understand the concepts. Students spoke openly about what they believed were the responsibilities of teachers and what they expected from them. “Our school [has] to have the best teachers…[the] sign on the door will say highly effective teachers only.” A student said that teachers should know what they are doing; as one student remarked: “Please don’t use Google, like we do…teacher [should not need to] google how to work the problem and the answers” (Group Meeting, March 4, 2022). Student participants offered their perspectives as to the characteristics or behaviors that teachers should exhibit to guarantee the success of their students. They openly discussed what they needed from their teachers in the alternative setting. For example, student participant ESP5 said, "I like technology but the same thing all the time, you get tired of it" when discussing instructional practices favored (Group Meeting, March 29, 2022). MSP9 stated “[Highly effective teachers] know the correct way of teaching students so they understand” (Group Meeting, March 29, 2022).

Secondly, Student participant MSP9 expressed his view of the responsibilities of a highly effective teacher as someone who is kind and caring. Teachers should demonstrate qualities that support students, like patience and deep understanding of their circumstances. Because the teachers know that their students may have jobs, work long hours, and are overworked, students believe that they should understand that a student with his/her head down

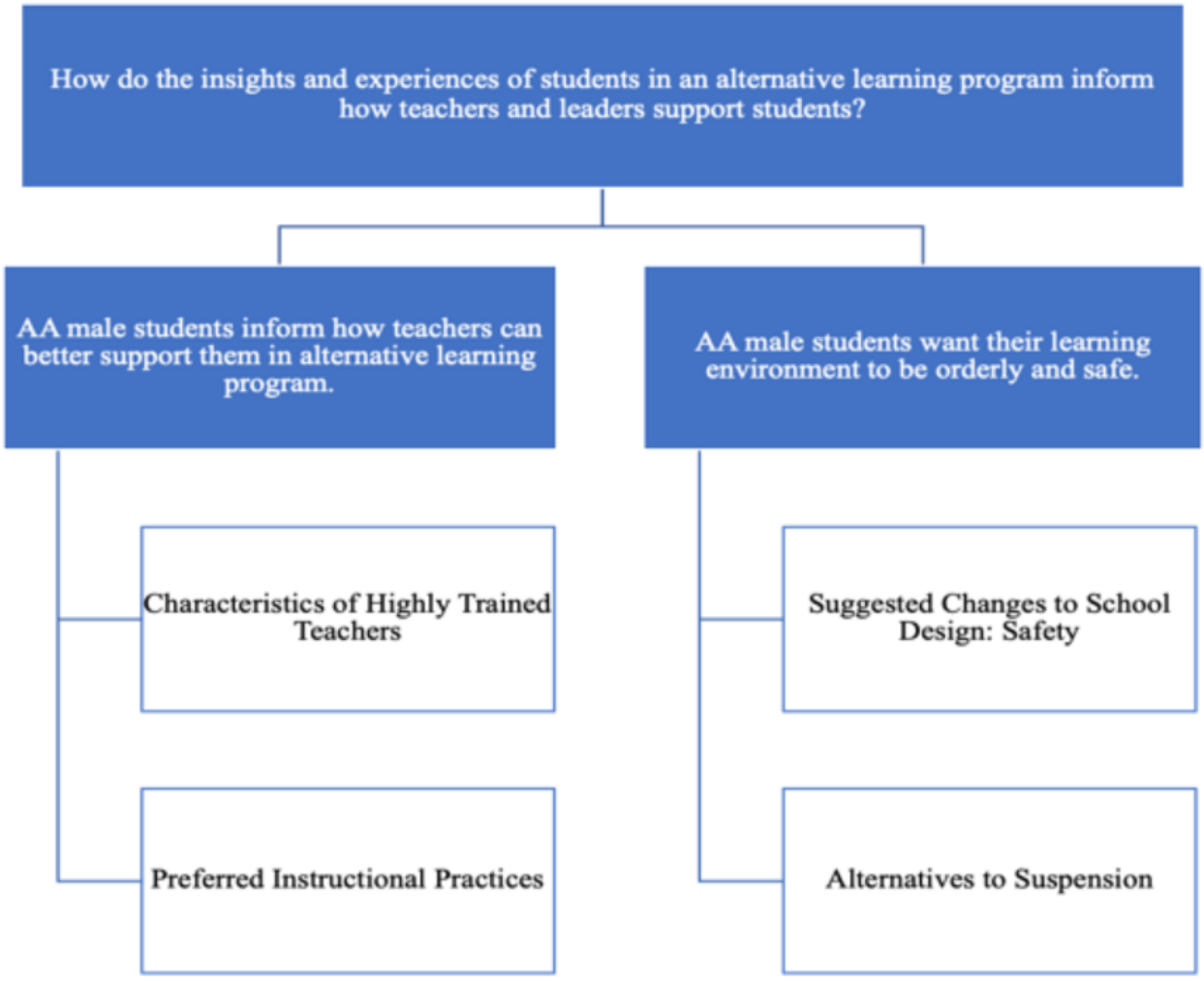


Figure 6. PAR Cycle One: Emergent categories and themes.

is fatigued and not just trying to avoid doing the work. They perhaps worked a late shift. Highly effective teachers communicate with students and do not jump to conclusions (Group meeting, March 4, 2022).

With respect to the options for supporting their graduation requirements, many students were involved in credit recovery, which they did not think was meeting their academic learning needs. A student said in the school design activity: "Highly [effective] teachers would know how to reach all students, so none of them would fail; therefore, would not need to take credit recovery to recover a credit" (Student RSP7, Group meeting, March 4, 2022). Student participant RSP8 added this statement to the discussion, when another student mentioned needing credit recovery, "That's what highly effective teachers are for, and if all teachers are face-to-face, don't need credit recovery, everybody will pass!" (Student RSP7, Group meeting, March 4, 2022)

The teacher participants often agreed with the student assessments. They wrote in reflective journals. BTP1, a teacher participant, wrote that having certain qualities will help [teachers] serve students more effectively.

> It holds a mirror up to you a little bit because as you talk it out and look at some of these things you relate to the students that we have, you can almost catch yourself and ask yourself am I doing the things that I say should be getting done? … put yourself in check and … see the importance of understanding student backgrounds. Think about students individually to meet their needs.
>
> (Reflective memo, March 31, 2022)

Teacher participant BlTP3 concurred with the student responses by saying that, as teachers, "We must see and hear the perspective of students…create safe space for students…gain student trust and show empathy" (Reflective memo, March 31, 2022). Teacher participant HTP2 said,

"...discussing the lives…of children we teach, I can reconsider how I strive to help students achieve specific goals" (Reflective memo, March 31, 2022). Student participant RSP8 exclaimed, "That's what highly skilled teachers are for, and if all teachers are face-to-face, we don't need credit recovery, everyone will pass" (Group meeting, March 29, 2022). Although in simpler terms, this student was expressing what years of research has revealed, students who have effective teachers in consecutive grades for numerous years make tremendous academic progress, compared to students who have ineffective teachers for two or more consecutive years have a negative effect on the academic progress of students (Sack, 1999).

Effective teachers have the greatest impact on student progress, regardless of student race or poverty (Rivers & Sanders, 2000). Students who are assigned to ineffective teachers achieve much less and make significantly less progress (Darling-Hammond, 2019). Many times, in schools the ineffective teachers are given the more challenging and lower achieving students. Student participants knew what they needed to succeed and were excited to share their thoughts. Judging by the eye contact, willingness to speak, and happy demeanor, students seemed glad that someone was listening to them.

Preferred Instructional Practices

In the second category, preferred instructional practices, the students identified precise practices that would help them. Over the course of this cycle of inquiry, student participants pointed to specific strategies utilized in their classes that helped them succeed. The student participants in this study completed an activity rating ten instructional practices from 0 to 5 on the favorability of a practice and then I had conversations with each student, asking for reasons for ratings given to the instructional practices (see Table 12).

Table 12

Student and Teacher Average Rating of Instructional Practices

Instructional Practice	Avg Student Rating (0 to 5)	Avg Teacher Rating (Yes or No)
Direct Instruction	4.4	Yes
I Do, We Do, You Do	4.4	Yes
Collaborative Grouping	4.2	No
Hands-on Activities	3.8	Yes
Think-Pair-Share	3.5	Yes
Graphic Organizers	3.2	No
Activating Prior Knowledge - Bell Ringer	3.2	Yes
Debate/Roleplay	3.0	No
Lecture	2.6	Yes
Use of Technology	2.6	Yes

The main change identified multiple times in student artifacts was to eliminate virtual classes (this included credit recovery math classes). Face-to-face instruction (used interchangeably with "not online," "less virtual," and "in-person") appeared in ten statements from student participants. This evidence suggests students strongly preferred face-to-face instruction over virtual or online classes. Direct instruction and "I do, We do, You do" received an average rating of 4.4. Four out of the five student participants answered yes when asked if direct instruction was preferred over the other strategies. This statement by a participant summarizes the reason for a high rating: "Because the teacher is teaching" (ESP5, CLE meeting, March 29, 2022). The "I do, We do, You do" strategy was rated the same as direct instruction. The students said that teachers need to actively teach and not just hand out work and expect the students to be able to complete it. Instead, they wanted more active systematic instruction from teachers. The students said, for example: "The teacher is teaching. I can learn better that way" (ESP5, CLE, March 29, 2022) and "Yeah, we need teachers to teach and not just use IXL [a virtual program]" (TSP7, CLE, March 29, 2022). The strategy with the third highest average rating was collaborative groups, 4.2. When students were asked why they gave a certain rating, they recognized what is known to be a need for 21st century learning and workplaces – people can work effectively together. The students said: "When you work together, it is easier to get it done" (ESP5, CLE, March 29, 2022); "Some people be struggling but when put in a group it is more like, they are more capable of doing the work" (MSP9, CLE, March 29, 2022); and "I put five because working with someone else helps me understand and we can get done faster" (TSP6, CLE, March 29, 2022).

The students do not read learning theory, but they can articulate what is critical in learning; students working in collaborative pairs or groupings have to paraphrase and discuss,

and that level of social interaction is a key for learning. That helps the working memory of the brain encode and store in long-term memory (Hammond, 2015). Other students like to work independently so we need to have choices and differentiate. One student rated this a two because he said: “I do not like to talk a lot. I just want to do my work, but I do it. [Some] people may work better independently, you know” (RSP8, CLE, March 29, 2022).

Based on reflections from nineteen years of experience as a teacher, I anticipated that hands-on learning would have received the top rating; however, the average rating was 3.8. Chatting with students revealed that they preferred direct instruction over hands-on education because they thought instruction should be given before the assignment. Student participant MSP9 stated, “You are doing stuff with [your] hands, and the teacher is teaching and helping you, giving you instruction” (MSP9, CLE, March 29, 2022), suggesting that hands-on activities with direct instruction was his preference. Think-pair-share (TPS) received an average rating of 3.5. The reasons for supporting TPS aligned with the preference of some students for collaborative work: (1) “When you work together, it is easier to get it done” (ESP5, CLE, March 29, 2022) and (2) “I don’t think I have done it a lot, but I think I would like it, because I like talking to people and I like to talk” (MSP9, CLE, March 29, 2022). Lecture and use of technology received the lowest average ratings (2.6). The students did not like to listen to teachers talking for long periods of time, and they did not like the individual instruction with technology. (1) “Oh, yeah, I don’t like that either. When teachers start doing a lot of talking, I get bored and sleepy. It starts to go in one ear and out the other” (ESP5, CLE, March 29, 2022), (2) “The notes from lectures help me because I can read over them later and sometimes teachers let us use our notes on tests. But I do get bored too with a lot of talking” (MSP9, CLE, March 29, 2022), (3) “Me too, I get sleepy. I don’t like lecture” (JSP6, CLE, March 29, 2022), and (4) “I

like technology but the same thing all the time, you get tired of it. Like we have been doing Kahoot since elementary… every teacher got a Google classroom. You go to class, get on Google then get your work, sometimes they have videos; you just sit there and stare at the chrome book and [in] the next class, it is the same thing" (ESP5, CLE, March 29, 2022). See Table 13 for average rating of all practices.

During the discussion of instructional strategies at the CPR meeting, teacher participants primarily focused on teacher behaviors. When teachers looked at the choices made by student participants, they became aware that the instructional practices they were using did not always match the stated needs of the students but rather matched their comfort levels, which suggests that they understood the significance of taking student learning styles into account. Teacher participant BTP1 expressed, "Sometimes, when you find something that works, it's easy to keep doing it" (Reflective memo, March 31, 2022) while BlTP2 said, "If we are using stuff like Kahoot and PowerPoints constantly and in all their classes, students may want something different to keep them interested" (Reflective memo, March 31, 2022).

In summary, the first theme to emerge in this cycle of research is how AA male perspectives on teachers and preferred teaching practices informed how teachers could support students more effectively. Teachers may have understood the significance of taking student learning styles into account, but, as a result of listening to student perspectives, they realized that the teaching approaches they were utilizing did not always suit the needs of the students but rather matched their comfort levels. Next, I discuss the second theme in which students expressed their need for a safe and orderly environment that could better support their learning.

Safe and Orderly Learning Environment

Students in the alternative setting want a safe and orderly learning environment. Students'

need for safety is tied to the second level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, safety. Maslow (1970) believes that our needs are divided into five categories: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. These needs must be fulfilled in order, meaning a person must achieve the first level, physiological, before moving on to the second level, safety. According to Maslow (1970), another indication of the child's need for safety is "his preference for some kind of undisrupted routine or rhythm… perhaps one could express this more accurately by saying that the child needs an organized world rather than an unorganized or unstructured one" (p. 7). In combination with caring and supportive teachers, in the alternative setting, the students were concerned with school safety and alternatives to suspensions. This theme paints a picture of changes needed within the school structure to enhance student learning.

School Design: Safety

Student responses to the emulation poem activity indicated that they recognized the need for adjustments to the school's procedures about safety in some way. In their emulation poem, students were tasked with responding to three prompts: I come from a school…, I go to a school…, and I would like to attend a school…. Student responses to the second prompt mostly described positive aspects of the school climate. "I go to a school where it is calm," wrote student participants ESP5, JSP7, and RSP8 (CLE, February 17, 2022). "I go to a school where the teachers are cool," student TSP6 wrote, (CLE, February 17, 2022). "I go to a school where people are friendly," MSP9 wrote, (CLE, February 17, 2022).

When students spoke about the school when answering the third prompt "I would like to attend a school…" . They seemed satisfied with many factors in the school environment. They preferred being at a school that was calm, where students and teachers were friendly, and a place where they were accepted. One student response to the prompt was: "I would like to attend a

school that's no different than this one; this school is good enough for me…a more peaceful and better learning environment" (ESP5, CLE, February 17, 2022). Another said: This is a school "...where you can leave all the drama away and everyone is friendly" (JSP6, CLE, February 17, 2022), and others said that school was a place "…where you are accepted for being yourself and everybody doesn't want to be like someone else" (MSP9, CLE, February 17, 2022) and "…where our focus is graduation" (TSP7, CLE, February 17, 2022).

Yet, when students were asked to design their own school, students had some changes in mind. They immediately wanted to change the name of the school to not typecast the school as negative. MSP9 said, "Trying to think of a name for our school…we [going to] be an academy not just for bad kids…like the Alternative Academy." I noticed that the other students immediately agreed. Secondly, students were concerned about safety and wanted metal detectors and a sign stating drug-free zones in the school. "We got to have metal detectors; our school got to be safe;," (MSP9, Group Meeting, March 4, 2022). "We need a drug-free zone sign…" (ESP5, Group Meeting, March 4, 2022). Students also indicated that changes needed to occur in food selections for lunch.

Teacher participants completed the Design Your School activity. Participants designed a school with students in mind and what kinds of support needed to be in place to create a learning environment where all students can succeed. I use the words and phrases from their drawing as codes (see Figure 4). I categorize these codes as suggested improvements. Some of the suggested changes were work study programs, core curriculum, cultural diversity amongst staff, flex of virtual and face-to-face instruction, highly effective teachers, community support/participation, family involvement, and social/emotional support (CPR Meeting, February 14, 2022). Many of our students work long and arduous hours at night. The majority of these students arrive at

school the next day fatigued. Others arrive at school two to three hours late. Teacher participants explored how a work study program that allows students to earn money while working during the school day could eliminate this issue and help with attendance and class participation as some students attempt to sleep in class. See Figure 6 for a diagram of emergent themes and categories in relation to the overarching question for this study: How do the insights and experiences of students in an alternative learning program inform how teachers and leaders support students?

Alternatives to Suspension: Conflict Resolution

Further analysis of codes from the Design Your School activity revealed that students were interested in alternatives to suspension that involved conflict resolution. This category highlights the perspective of the student and suggests a strategy in lieu of suspension that offers a different way of dealing with student acts that traditionally would typically lead to out-of-school suspension (OSS). Students advocated for a space to settle differences that is unique and for restorative practices such as in-school suspension (ISS).

First, the students recommended a boxing ring for males to settle disputes. Student TSP7 said "...need [in-school suspension] ...instead of sending them to another school" (Design Your School, March 4, 2022). Student ESP5 said for example, "Boxing ring in the gym is to get your beef out and that way be done with it–it is over…but you got to sign a paper; can settle differences without consequences" (Group Meeting, March 4, 2022). This concept is similar to the procedure used by coaches of male sports in which their players are encouraged to settle disputes on the practice fields instead of during the school day thereby avoiding possible ISS or OSS. This method could provide the males a safe place to "get their beef out" and settle things. Since the purpose of this research study is to improve student support and academic achievement

by utilizing their perspectives, listening to their voices, and using a practice that is a student suggestion aligns with the goal of the study to better support students because we ultimately keep students in the learning environment. The discussions about how to set up the ground rules for the boxing ring could be an occasion for group problem-solving that might accrue additional benefits.

In addition, students suggested being allowed to resolve their conflicts using restorative practices. Most people think of restorative practices as ways to resolve conflicts between students. However, use of restorative practices can strengthen relationships between students and staff which inadvertently enhances academic performances. Sparks (2019) stated that strong teacher-student relationships were linked to improvements in many areas of schools, including higher student academic engagement, attendance, grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates.

In summary, I provide a detailed description of data used to derive the second emergent theme and its categories. This theme highlights the perspective of the students on school safety. In general, students in the alternative setting want a safe and orderly learning environment. In addition, students were interested in alternatives to suspension that involved conflict resolution. They suggested a strategy in lieu of suspension that offers a different way of dealing with student acts that typically lead to out of school suspension.

Reflections and Action Steps for PAR Cycle Two

Administrators and school leaders constantly reflect on a variety of things: test data, student, and parent survey data, North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (NCTWC) survey data, instructional programs, observation data, etc. However, taking the time to slow down and listen to students and reflecting on my leadership occurs less frequently. In all honesty, when I do

take the time to reflect on myself, although I can see the things I did well, I tend to dwell more on my shortcomings and what I could have done better. I easily discount what went well and spend much of my time concentrating on my weaknesses. Although we gain more knowledge from our failures than our achievements, one should always enjoy the victories. I encourage others to celebrate the wins but find it difficult to follow my own advice. I work to make sure that, as the school's leader, the decisions I make are in the best interests of these students who are about to drop out of high school and that I am the biggest supporter of the students and staff.

However, I have improved in reflecting on my leadership. As I consider my duties as an alternative school administrator and how to provide the best services to my students, reflection can lead to valuable insights and next steps. Reflection has assisted me in seeing that, while leading does not necessitate fundamentally altering who or what you are, it does necessitate learning, evolving, and shifting your practice as you acquire experience. In addition, you must allow yourself the time and space to learn, which you cannot do if you spend your days resolving the issues of others (Digital Story, June 22, 2022).

During this cycle of inquiry, my leadership has progressed from a high level of concern when leading meetings to taking more opportunities to participate as a facilitator in meetings. I used to believe that to ensure objectives were met, I needed to dominate and lead conversations during meetings. I recognized that, as a facilitator, I do not have to control the narrative; instead, I can listen to others' opinions, be more inclusive of other viewpoints, and still meet the goals. During one-to-one meetings with student participants, I pay attention to their ideas, worries, and inquiries because they help shape the conversation. I gather information to help decide on academic and emotional support needed for students. I listen without adding my thoughts and opinions, only asking questions to keep the conversation moving in a fact-finding direction.

Learning to listen and not dominate the conversations, whether talking with students or teachers is extremely important. Especially when having post observation conversations with teachers. Teachers are more apt to implement suggestions that align with their viewpoints. Listening and becoming more of a facilitator is a necessary skill that has improved through participation in Project I^4. I realized that I did not have to do all the talking (Reflective Memo, March 8, 2022). I facilitate staff meetings, shifting from providing one-directional information to now asking questions to be inclusive of everybody's thoughts. I want everyone to feel a part of the solutions. I have become more of a listener and facilitator rather than just the go-it-alone problem-solver in large part because of the protocols I acquired while on my leadership journey with Project I^4 and working on my study (Reflective Memo, June 9, 2022).

Other areas of growth are in data collection and analysis using the plan, do, study, act cycle of action research. I continue to work on scripting while listening and facilitating student group meetings and CPR Meetings. I was able to code artifacts in PAR Cycle One more quickly than during the Pre-Cycle. I wrote about the difficulty I was experiencing with coding. “Why is this so difficult? This is my third time attempting to code and analyze these interview scripts. I am going to cut the phrases into strips. Hopefully by manually rearranging them, common trends and patterns will emerge” (Reflective Memo, December 15, 2021). However, by the end of PAR Cycle One, I was approaching some level of competence in coding.

Regarding the next PAR research cycle, I continued talking to students in PAR Cycle Two and posed the same questions from Hemphill’s (2020) One Minute Meetings to the CPR team as well. This enabled me to compare students' thinking at the start and conclusion of the school year. I want to get a full picture of student perspectives and experiences. PAR Cycle Two

will include continuation with CPR meetings, conducting teacher observations and post conferences, and facilitating a Community Learning Exchange.

Conclusion

Through my research for this PAR study, I have had the opportunity to understand more about how African American male students at Shaw County Alternative School (SCAS) perceive what helps them achieve academic success in a non-traditional learning setting. The purpose of this PAR study was to use students' experiences in an alternative learning school setting to better understand and strengthen African American male student learning. I presented the process, emerging themes, and implications of PAR Cycle One's emergent themes in this chapter. I described the activities from Co-Practitioner Researcher (CPR) team meetings as well as facilitated the two Community Learning Exchanges (CLE). I used data from memos, CPR group meetings, CLE artifacts, and student meetings to investigate the themes that arose. The data and emerging themes have implications for each of the PAR research questions and assisted in the development of the plan for PAR Cycle Two. The process and conclusions from PAR Cycle Two are described in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6: PAR CYCLE TWO AND FINDINGS

The most important voices in the conversation about how to effectively increase student achievement are the voices of students. However, their voices are frequently absent from discussions on implementing new school procedures and learning initiatives. Students' roles in their education are vital, yet they have little to no influence on the content or process of their education (Benner et al., 2019). Khalifa (2018) takes the position that incorporating student voice is a substantial method for helping students feel connected to the school and a means for principals to build students' self-confidence and courage to advocate for themselves. In addition to sharing thoughts about their learning experiences, students can share their perceptions of benefits and challenges of programs or initiatives at the school level.

As a parent, educator, and a school administrator, I am concerned about the underachievement of and low expectations for AA male high school students that often lead to failing classes and losing credits necessary for graduating from high school. I undertook this study to listen to the insights and experiences of AA male students in an alternative learning program that informed how teachers and leaders could better support students. If the teachers and I listened to our students tell us about their experiences, then we could shift academic and social-emotional practices to meet students' needs as they navigated through credit recovery. Listening to the voices of students was the nucleus of this research as students provided guidance on how we could better support their academic needs; as persons closest to the issue (Guajardo, 2016), they provided valuable insights to us so that we could structure the alternative setting for their success. We expected some of those insights, while others were a surprise. I conducted the PAR project and study with this overarching question in mind: How can a group of students share

their insights and experiences about an alternative learning program so that teachers and leaders can better support students?

The research questions were:

1. How do students identify benefits or challenges in the alternative learning program?
2. To what extent do the student voices inform the revision of instruction in the alternative learning program?
3. To what extent do teachers shift their teaching practices?
4. To what extent does this process support my growth and development as a school leader?

In this chapter, I describe the PAR Cycle Two process. I used the evidence from artifacts I gathered and examined during PAR Cycle Two to further address the research questions. I examined themes that emerged from the data analysis and discuss claims derived from the three research cycles. As a result, I base the study findings on significant themes that persisted in three cycles of inquiry.

PAR Cycle Two Process

I facilitated PAR Cycle Two during the Fall 2022 (August-October). In this third and last cycle of inquiry, I collaborated with teachers as CPR team members and student participants. I collected data from artifacts created during meetings, field notes, reflective memos, observations, and post-observation conversations. I also gained additional insight into teachers' shifts in practices and students' perceptions of benefits and challenges of the alternative school. I wrote memos in which I reflected on conversations with participants and ideas for supporting teachers in meeting the needs of students. The CPR group gathered at the conclusion of this cycle to discuss the student artifacts, reflect on accomplishments, and co-design processes that would

continue to enhance learning for African American male students. In this section, I describe the activities, data collection, and analysis that took place during PAR Cycle Two.

PAR Cycle Two Activities

After completing PAR Cycle One and my first year as the administrator of the school, I concentrated in this PAR cycle on the third and fourth research questions (see Table 13). Two of the original CPR team members transferred to other schools, so I held an initial CPR meeting to present the research project to the new member of the team and confirm with the CPR team member from the previous year that she wished to continue participating in the research study. I shared data trends from previous cycles and possible next steps. Consequently, PAR Cycle Two consisted of two CPR members -- a teacher assistant (the Credit Recovery Facilitator) and one teacher. I continued to consult with student participants in group meetings and individual meetings.

Co-Practitioner Researcher Engagement

The CPR team met twice during PAR Cycle Two to revisit themes from PAR Cycle One and plan next steps for teacher observations. I observed teachers using instructional practices that students identified as useful to their learning and documented shifts in teachers' instructional practices as well as students' reactions and academic engagement with the practices. We used personal narratives and dynamic mindfulness in CPR meetings. We reviewed the focus of practice, theory of action, and research questions in addition to highlighting learning from PAR Cycle One: Students had preferred instructional practices, and they desired teachers who are "highly trained." During a gallery walk of student artifacts from PAR Cycle One, we used a protocol to learn from student responses to guide our thinking. CPR members wrote reflective

Table 13

Timeline of PAR Cycle Two Activities: Fall 2022

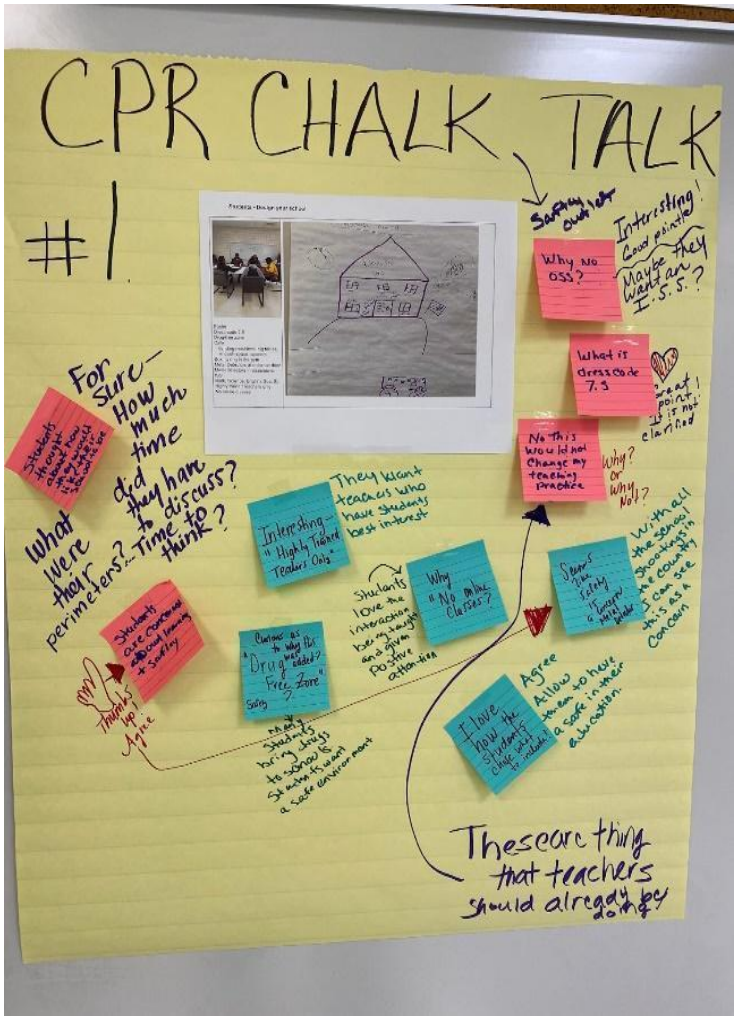
Timeline	CPR Meetings	One : one Student Meetings	Group Student Meetings	Classroom Observations	Post-Observation Conversations
Wk. of 9/12-16	X				
Wk. of 9/19-23		XXXXXXX			
Wk. of 9/26-30				XX	XX
Wk. of 10/3-7				XX	XX
Wk. of 10/10-14	X	XXXXXXXX			
Wk. of 10/17-21	X		X	XX	XX
Wk. of 10/24-28	X			XX	XX

memos to address this prompt: To what extent does participating in this research study support you in making changes to your teaching practices?

In the second meeting, during a personal narrative activity, CPR members selected one of four quotes that best represented their feelings and thoughts and discussed their reasons for selecting their particular quote. Next, CPR members participated in a chalk talk (see Figure 7; Appendix K) in which they reflected silently on thoughts and questions that emerged from viewing the student artifacts and observed and commented on participants' ideas and viewpoints. Finally, participants developed a shared understanding of what students believed was necessary to support their academic success. After the meeting, participants wrote reflective memos expressing their gratitude for the knowledge gained and understanding of the students' preferred method of learning (CPR meeting, October, 19, 2022).

Engagement with Student Participants

I facilitated individual and group student sessions throughout this cycle of the study. During the group session, students took seats around the table and, without being asked, started talking – in contrast to our first attempts, when I had to prod them to speak. They inquired about the new staff member's qualifications and made comments about how processes had changed from the previous academic year. These actions confirmed two observations I mentioned in PAR Cycle One: Students were less reluctant to participate and share their experiences and students are genuinely concerned whether teachers at the school have the necessary preparation to support their needs. I listened, refrained from giving my thoughts and gradually directed students' attention to the pile of pictures in the center of the table. Using the protocol for "A Picture is Worth 1000 Words" (see Appendix L), students discussed their reasons for selecting pictures as metaphors to represent their experiences at the alternative school.



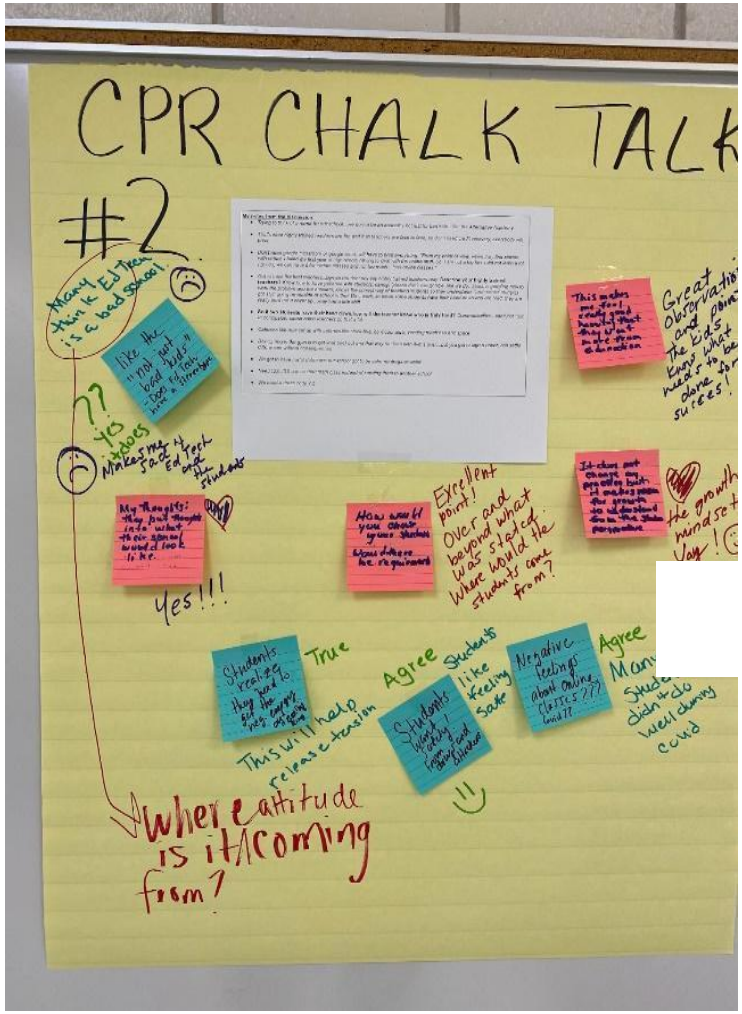


Figure 7. PAR Cycle Two artifact: Chalk Talk – CPR Team.

I engaged with student participants in individual, one-minute meetings (twice with five of the student participants and three times with one student participant), a process continued from PAR Cycle One. In these meetings, I asked students three questions: (1) How are you doing today? (2) What are you most proud of from the past nine weeks? (3) What challenges or concerns do you have about your classes or school? (Hemphill, 2020). After listening to their responses, I ended with this statement: Tell me how I can help. I then immediately offered academic, behavioral, and social/emotional support based on the students' comments. This process helped students feel more certain that I heard their collective and individual voices, and, if they needed assistance, I would act.

Classroom Observations

For this research cycle, I was primarily interested in how teachers' practices changed and how these changes better supported the AA male students. After the preliminary observations, I identified the methods teachers used and assessed how the students responded to them. Teachers were aware that these visits were informal and not intended to be evaluations. Between August 2022 and October 2022, I conducted eight 20-minute visits to classrooms. My goals were to assess the instructional practices teachers used at the beginning of PAR Cycle Two and then to determine whether teachers shifted their practices. During the initial observations, some of the instructional strategies that were used included modeling, demonstrations, use of online programs, and teacher delivery from the front of the classroom with minimal student engagement. Freire (2018) describes the latter type of learning as "banking concept of education" in which the teacher deposits the information to students who just sit and receive. In the post-observation conversations, I shared observation data that helped the teachers juxtapose their chosen instructional practices with what students said worked for them. The teachers gave their

initial thoughts and discussed ways they could incorporate the preferred activities, and I observed these changes when I conducted follow-up observations in the classrooms.

Data Collection and Analysis

Using a process of coding and recoding (Saldaña, 2016), I examined evidence from PAR Cycle Two activities. I used closed coding to analyze the artifacts which included CPR members' reflective memos, activities with both student and teacher groups, and post-observation conversations (Saldaña, 2016). After initial coding, I completed a second round of deductive coding and adjusted codes. Codes related to changes in teaching practice emerged; these data were from multiple data sets. Table 14 highlights a section of the codebook and details some of the codes that emerged in this research cycle.

The data suggested that teachers found value in participating as co-practitioner researchers learning together in this study as a means of better understanding AA male students and how to support their academic development. The members reported shifts in their thinking as a result of their involvement in gallery walks and chalk talks, in which they accepted and understood each other's points of view while feeling their opinions were respected. BHTP3 said "it has changed how I plan and prepare for my students, [how I select] activities, not lecture or talk for the entire class period, but change activities to keep students engaged… [incorporate] more hands-on, charts, note taking strategies, graphic organizers, and limit use of online programs" (CPR meeting, October 19, 2022). DCTP4 said "it makes me more aware of the benefit of including kinesthetic student activities and engagement in my classroom. I now know the importance of [focusing] on creating and using activities to meet student needs" (CPR meeting, October 20, 2022).

Table 14

Partial Codebook: PAR Cycle Two Codes and Categories

Category	Code	Description	Statement or Phrase from Data	*F*	Data Set
Teacher Behavior	Help	Generalization of what teachers should do to increase student engagement.	We can help students by [making] change[s] in teaching practices	6	CPR Meeting Chalk Talk
Instructional Practices	Preferred Instructional Strategy	Refers to information or practice for students to receive and experience – hand-on and direct instruction.	I particularly like the hands-on and direct learning approach	7	SGM - A Picture Is Worth A 1000 Words
Pedagogy	Teacher shift in thinking	Teacher reflects on changes in practices to ensure student learning.	I thought at one time students liked online learning vs learning in the classroom, face-to-face	10	CPR Meeting Reflective Memo
Pedagogy	Teacher shift in practice	Teacher reflects on changes in practices to ensure student learning.	Use different instructional practices used to increase student learning	12	SGM - A Picture Is Worth A 1000 Words
Micro	Safety	School level factor	Good for students to have a safe outlet or physical activity to release tension	3	SGM - A Picture Is Worth A 1000 Words
Teacher Responsibility to Students	Highly trained teacher	One responsibility of teachers is to care about their students.	[Students need] caring teachers that have their best interests	8	CPR Meeting Chalk Talk
Teacher Characteristics	highly [effective] teacher	Characteristics of a highly effective teacher.	[students need] caring teachers	4	CPR Meeting Chalk Talk

In addition, participants came away from the experience with a deeper understanding of the concerns and needs of AA male students when it comes to online learning. For example, “help” is an in vivo code; I utilized the exact wording from participants such as “teachers here do help you and work with you” (MSP9, Student Group Meeting, October 18, 2022) and “we can help students by changing our teaching practices" (BHTP3, CPR Meeting, October 20, 2022). “Student preferred practices" is a descriptive code used to code the student group discussion of instructional practices thought to enhance their learning such as “some people learn hands-on” (MSP11, Student Group Meeting, October 18, 2022) and “I can catch on [quickly] by doing it but just seeing it on the web, it is harder” (TSP7, student group meeting, October 18, 2022). See Figure 8 for all PAR Cycle Two codes. I deduced four main codes from PAR Cycle Two research data: in-person learning, kinesthetic activities, teacher behaviors, and pedagogical shifts. I classified these codes into two categories: preferred instructional practices and shifts in teaching practices. The theme emerging from the categories was informing instruction at the alternative school. Figure 9 illustrates graphically the progression of codes to categories that informed the PAR Cycle Two themes.

PAR Cycle Two Themes

In this section, I discuss two themes that emerged from the data analysis from this cycle of inquiry: preferred instructional strategies and pedagogical shifts. I support the themes with data I collected and analyzed from reflective memos from each CPR member, field notes, artifact from student group meetings, classroom observations, and post observation discussions.

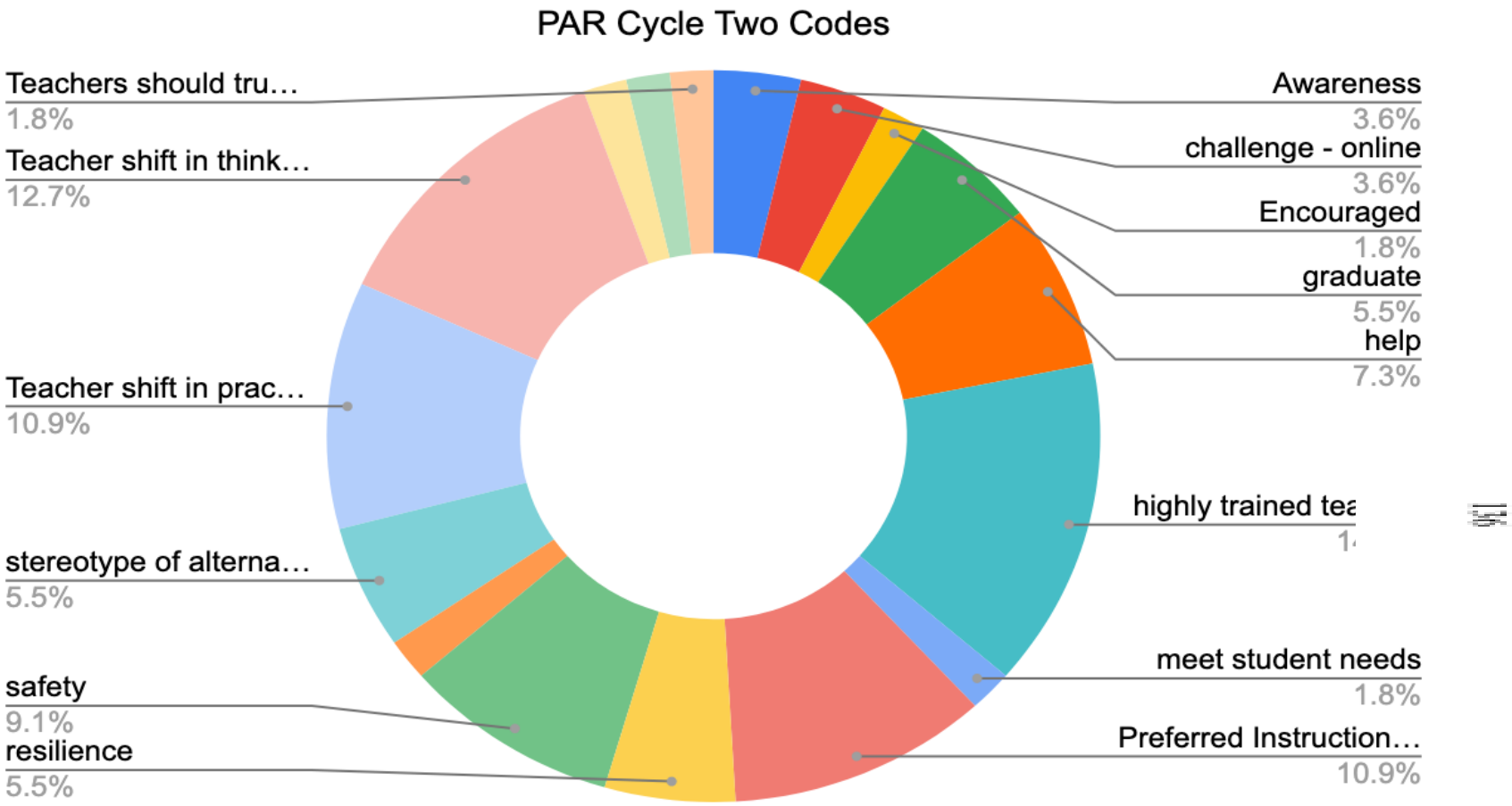


Figure 8. PAR Cycle Two codes and frequency (reported as percentages).

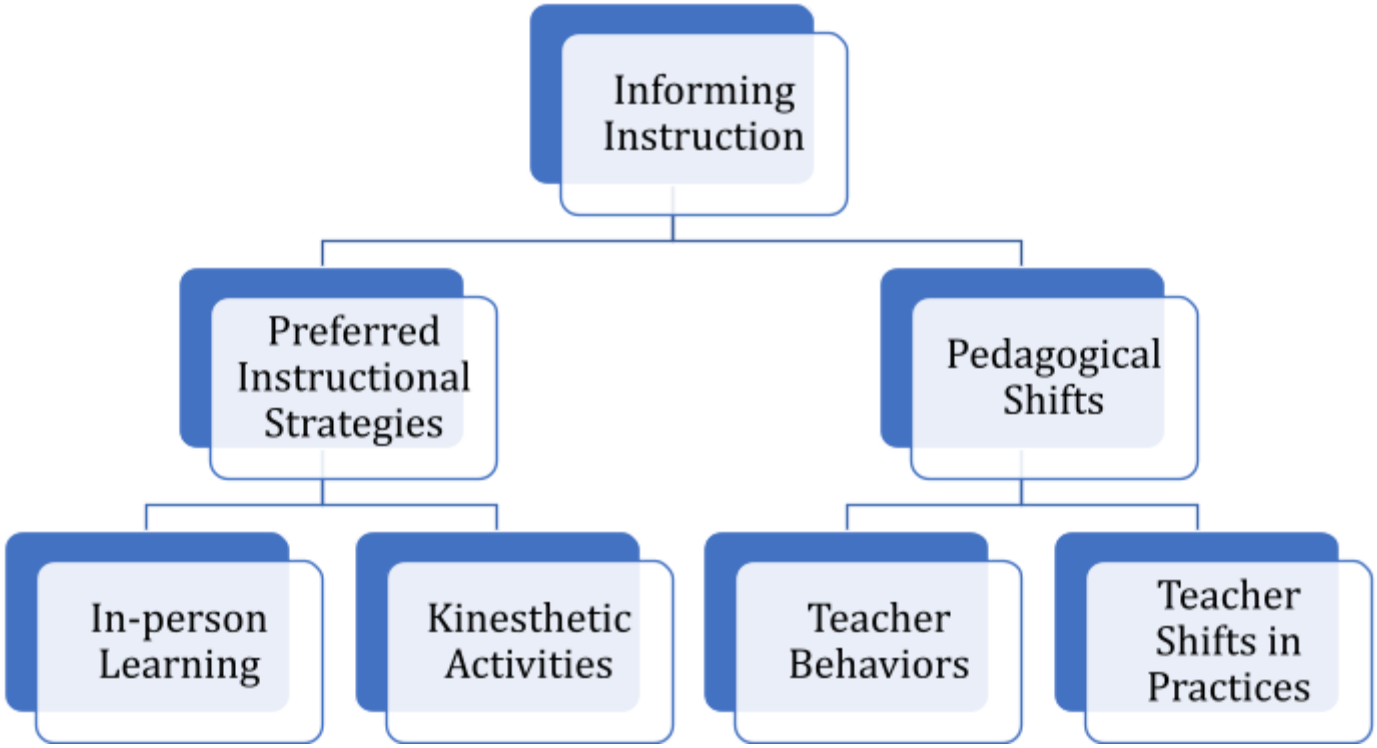


Figure 9. PAR Cycle Two codes to categories to theme – Inform instruction.

Preferred Instructional Strategies

When given an opportunity to voice their opinions about their learning, students were clear about which instructional approaches worked for them. Students preferred in-person learning and kinesthetic activities, a term used interchangeably with hands-on activities. Students thought these strategies helped them stay focused, which helped their performance in class.

In-person Learning

One of the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools is the increased use of online instruction to deliver lessons. However, student participants identified online learning as a challenge and unanimously identified in-person learning as their preferred way to receive instruction. Many credit recovery programs rely on online learning programs to deliver content, but TSP6 said, "I cannot learn that way, I need to be face-to-face" (Student group meeting, Oct. 20, 2022). Online learning also makes it difficult for some students to concentrate. Student participant MSP9, said, "I can focus better in the class with [the] teacher teaching" because the teacher could engage him in ways that the computer could not (Student group meeting, Oct. 20, 2022). These students viewed online learning as negatively impacting their academic performance at the alternative school, and when MSP11 said, "I want face-to-face classes" (Student group meeting, Oct. 20, 2022), I noted that the other student participants nodded in agreement. Online learning was identified as a challenge 80% of the time when compared to other challenges identified in the alternative learning setting, thus negatively impacting their academic performance at the alternative school, which implies that AA males prefer in-person learning. I will discuss this in more detail in the findings section.

Kinesthetic Activities

Learning through kinesthetic activities involves movement or incorporating hands-on

tasks that physically involve students in the learning process. Hollie (2012) suggests hands-on learning is an important aspect of engaging Black males in the curriculum, and the student participants in this PAR expressed that hands-on activities helped them grasp academic concepts. TSP6 stated several times, “I can catch on quick[ly] by doing it….” (One:one meeting, May 13, 2022). This sentiment was shared by other students in their one:one meetings, and I witnessed high levels of engagement from students during classroom activities in which they moved around the room solving problems and matching solutions. In sessions with teachers, they verified that using the strategies increased student engagement and academic discourse and students were more confident when they worked independently because they had a better grasp of the content.

Pedagogical Shifts

Pedagogical shifts refer to teachers listening to student voices and responding by shifting their behaviors and teaching practices. Teachers admitted that they often use instructional practices they are comfortable with; practices that appeal to their personal styles of teaching. Teacher BTP1 revealed that his choice of instructional approaches is centered on what “benefits [himself] rather than what the students needed in order to master concepts” (Reflective memo, March 31, 2022). Unfortunately, these practices may not be the ones that work best for students. After listening to students discuss their experiences and preferences, teachers became warm demanders (Delpit, 2012), and they incorporated student preferred practices, such as kinesthetic activities, into their instruction to meet the learners’ needs.

Teacher Behaviors

Student participants in this PAR study identified several teacher behaviors they felt were necessary to help them succeed academically. They wanted caring teachers who were genuinely concerned about them as people and as students, and they desired teachers who were willing to

help them succeed. They wanted teachers who were friendly and to whom they could ask questions. They also wanted teachers they considered, "highly trained." This is a phrase that educators often use to refer to teachers who are certified, but students used this phrase to refer to teachers who "know how to teach." The students wanted teachers who knew the content and strategies to help the students learn the content. Students reiterated what they had already expressed in PAR Cycle One, if they had better teachers, they would not need credit recovery in the first place (Student RSP8, Group meeting, March 4, 2022). Finally, they expressed a need for teachers who "know their students" and who understand their students' culture. Delpit (2012) describes some of these as characteristics for warm demanders and culturally responsive teachers. Students expressed that they would not fail courses if they had teachers with these characteristics.

Teacher Shifts in Practice

Teacher participants had the opportunity to analyze student artifacts and share their thoughts with each other. They wrote reflective memos about this experience. Teacher participant DTP4 wrote, "I thought at one time students liked online learning better than learning in the classroom, face-to-face … [I am] now seeing that students like the engagement piece and in-class learning," (Reflective memo, December 16, 2022). Other statements coded as teacher shifts were: "I need to use different instructional practices to increase student learning," "I also thought that students loved using other platforms like Kahoot (online), I see now that they do not," and "It has changed how I plan and prepare for my students, my selection of activities has changed." The teachers understood and accepted student opinions about practices students preferred, and they were willing to shift their practices to better meet the needs of students.

Findings

In this qualitative participatory action research study, I surfaced student experiences in an alternative learning school setting to understand and strengthen the learning for African American male students. The teachers shifted academic and social-emotional practices to better support students in response to the student input about their learning experiences. I deduced three significant findings (see Figure 10) from data collected across the three cycles of inquiry (see Figure 11 for percentages of evidence related to the findings).

1. Students identified multiple benefits of the alternative setting and one major challenge online learning.
2. Listening to student voices helped teachers be more strategic in meeting the needs of students.
3. Teachers changed how they think about students and their approaches to selecting instructional strategies to support students academically.

To discuss the key findings, I review codes and themes that emerged from analyzing the data across three cycles of inquiry. The findings underscore the importance of involving students in a collaborative process to ensure that their experiences are at the center of the conversation. Students are knowledgeable about their experiences and identified necessary changes (Guajardo et al., 2016). The study findings support the claims that student input is essential and that by taking it into account, we can better meet students' needs (Benner et al., 2019).

Benefits and Challenges

Alternative schools have become popular as an option for students who may not be successful in traditional schools. The purported aim is that they graduate with their age cohort. However, as the number of students who need alternative learning options increases because

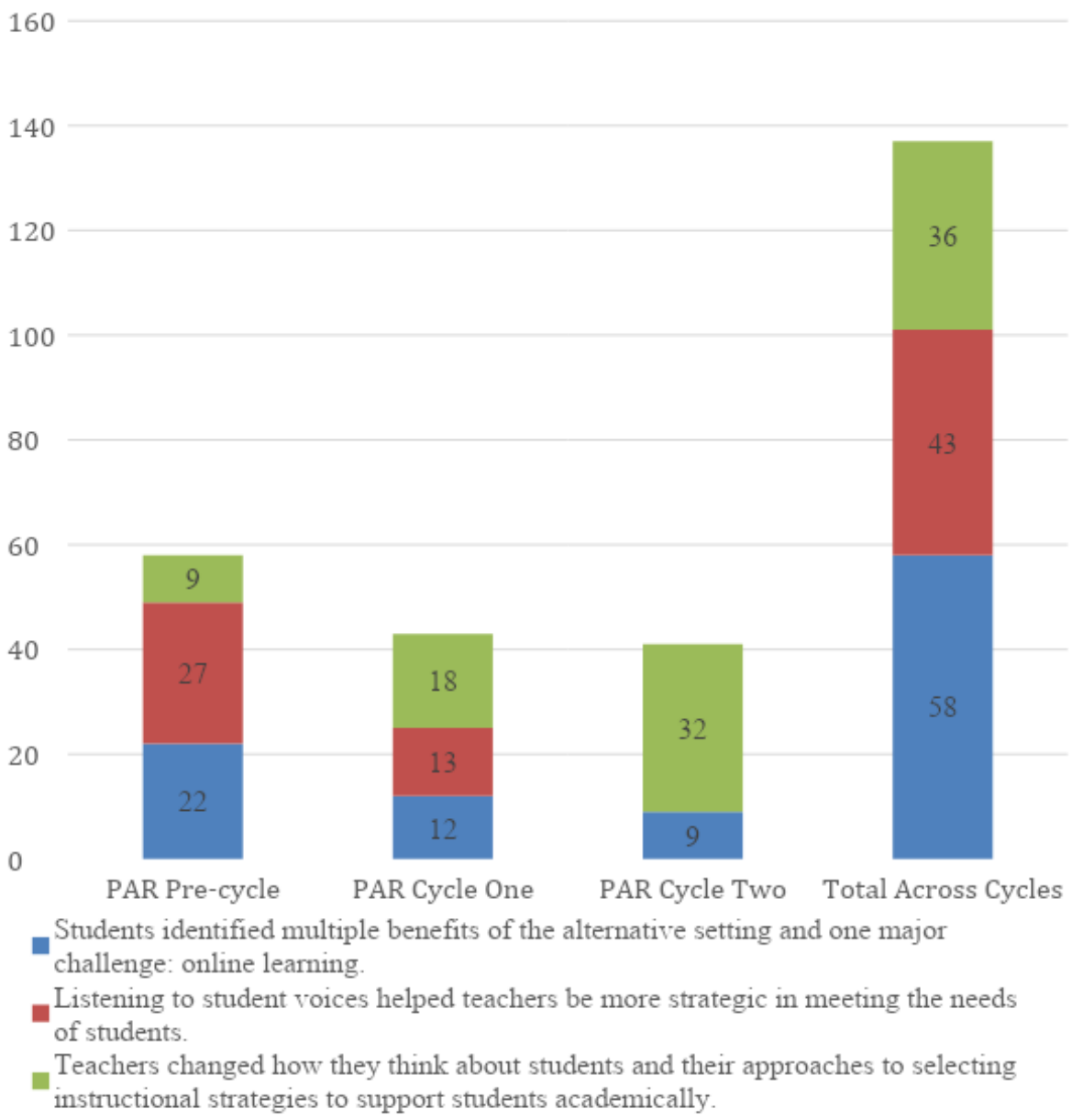


Figure 10. Findings across the PAR Cycles – Instances of occurrences in the PAR data.

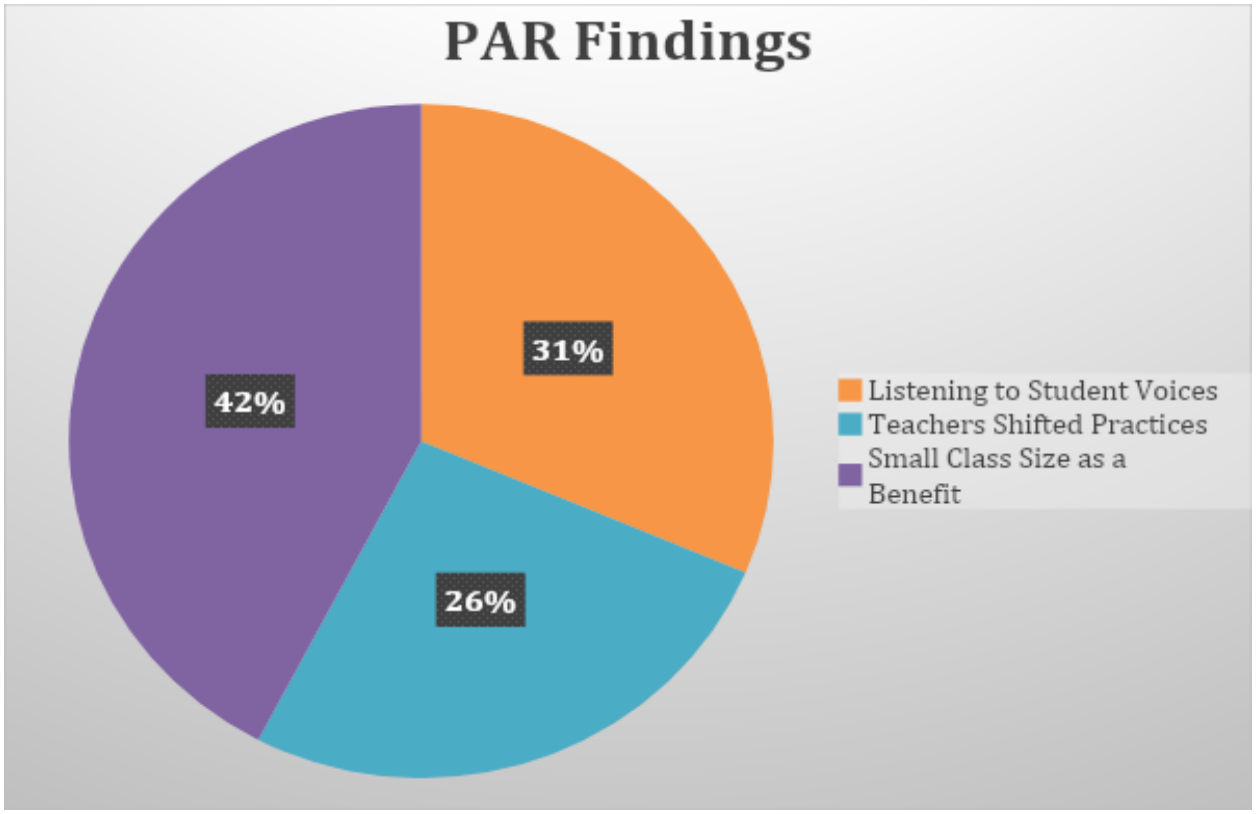


Figure 11. Percentages of evidence related to the three findings.

traditional schools do not fulfill the learning needs of many students, so has the need for alternative schools that provide a different learning experience for students. Some students choose to attend alternative learning schools for academic reasons; at other times, the choice is made for them due to behavioral reasons. Alternative schools often have negative connotations and in fact the students wanted to rename the school to an academy to invoke that they were serious about learning and school. Student participants in this study identified benefits as well as challenges of the alternative learning setting during activities conducted in each PAR Cycle. According to African American males in this study, the primary benefits of the alternative learning environment include personalized learning as a result of small classes, a calmer environment, and getting the help they need to graduate on time. They named online learning as a major challenge in all three cycles.

Benefits

A [smaller class] size, enabling personalized learning, was a primary benefit of the alternative learning environment. According to the students, smaller classes were critical to their learning because teaching was uninterrupted and because they received more attention from teachers. Teaching was tailored to meet their individual needs. The lesson content was not presented as "one size fit all" during the Pre-Cycle, the students identified this school level asset initially in the community learning exchange. Smaller class size with a smaller ratio of teacher to students continued to be a critical factor during PAR Cycle One and PAR Cycle Two. As in other data sets, the percentage of attention was high in the Pre-Cycle (33%) and PAR Cycle One (35%) and diminished in PAR Cycle Two (13%); I infer that they felt we had fulfilled a clear request by PAR Cycle Two. Students said having fewer students meant fewer distractions; as a result, they were better able to concentrate on their work (CLE, December, 9, 2021). ESP5 and TSP6 thought

small class sizes and fewer people prevented disruptions in class (CLE, December, 9, 2021), and BSP2 said, “there are less people … classes are small” (Interview, November 30, 2021) (see Figure 12 for benefits across three cycles of inquiry). They could identify other attendant benefits that supported their learning.

Attendant Benefits

As a result of lower-class sizes, students felt the environment was calmer; as we proceeded through the project and study, they identified a calm environment across all three cycles of inquiry (19% to 30% to 8%). The reduction in PAR Cycle Two may be due, in part, to the data collection method rather than the thoughts of students. Students built relationships with their teachers, and, by PAR Cycles One and Two, they felt accepted in the school by the administrator and teachers. They perceived the teachers were more caring – presumably more caring than at the traditional high school with large class sizes. Delpit (2012) would describe these teachers as being warm demanders, having high expectations for academic performance. Of note, by PAR Cycle Three, they could see the possibility of graduating; the data increased from Pre-Cycle (8%) to PAR Cycle One (4%) to PAR Cycle Two (37%). As indicated, they came to the Fall 2022 meetings and started talking immediately; the students felt and expressed the possibility of achieving the graduation goal, largely due to their insistence that the online learning was a challenge and less than useful to their learning.

Challenges of Credit Recovery

Students identified online learning as a significant barrier to their academic achievement, even when they had a facilitator in the room. Students who are already struggling to work independently could not make sense of the information on their own because the classroom

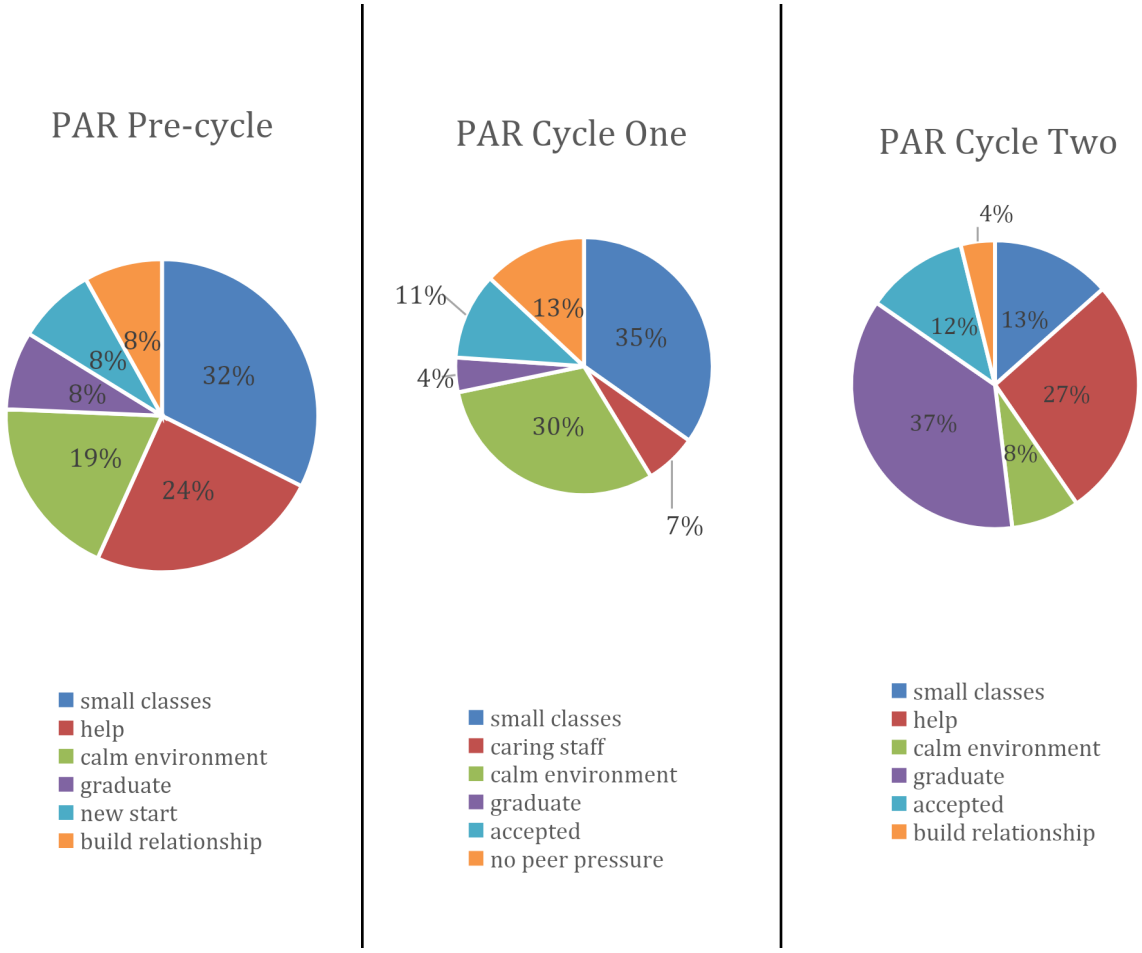


Figure 12. Percentages of codes identified as strengths in each PAR cycle.

facilitator was not skilled in the content area. The students reported that they needed to interact with a teacher; in online learning, they lose the ability to ask questions and be authentically engaged in the learning. During each cycle of inquiry, students at the alternative school reported online classes as the chief barrier to their learning. In Figure 13, I show a comparison of online learning to other negative factors mentioned by students, across the three cycles of inquiry, representing that overwhelmingly students think taking classes via a virtual platform negatively impacts their learning. Online learning was referenced 78% of the time out of all the challenges at ALS that were identified in the PAR Pre-Cycle. Online learning was referenced 63% of the time out of all the challenges at ALS that were identified in PAR Cycle One. Online learning was referenced 80% of the time out of all the challenges at ALS that were identified in PAR Cycle Two.

During the PAR Pre-Cycle interviews, students noted, “I prefer face-to-face classes,” and “I do better in face-to-face classes.” These students complained that they found it “difficult to focus on online courses.” They voiced similar challenges in PAR Cycle One student group meetings. One student said he did not like online classes because he “can’t learn that way.” Some of the students complained that it began when they were doing remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their frustrations continued once they came back into the building. Having been out of school for a significant amount of time, students said that they “need face-to-face instruction.” During the student group meeting in PAR Cycle Two, students commented that they did not “like Google classrooms and online assignments,” and TSP7 expressed his need for hands-on experience. He stated, “I can catch on quickly by doing it but just seeing it on the web, it is harder,” and “I need paper and pencil.”

Online credit recovery as a primary tool for supporting students to graduate was an

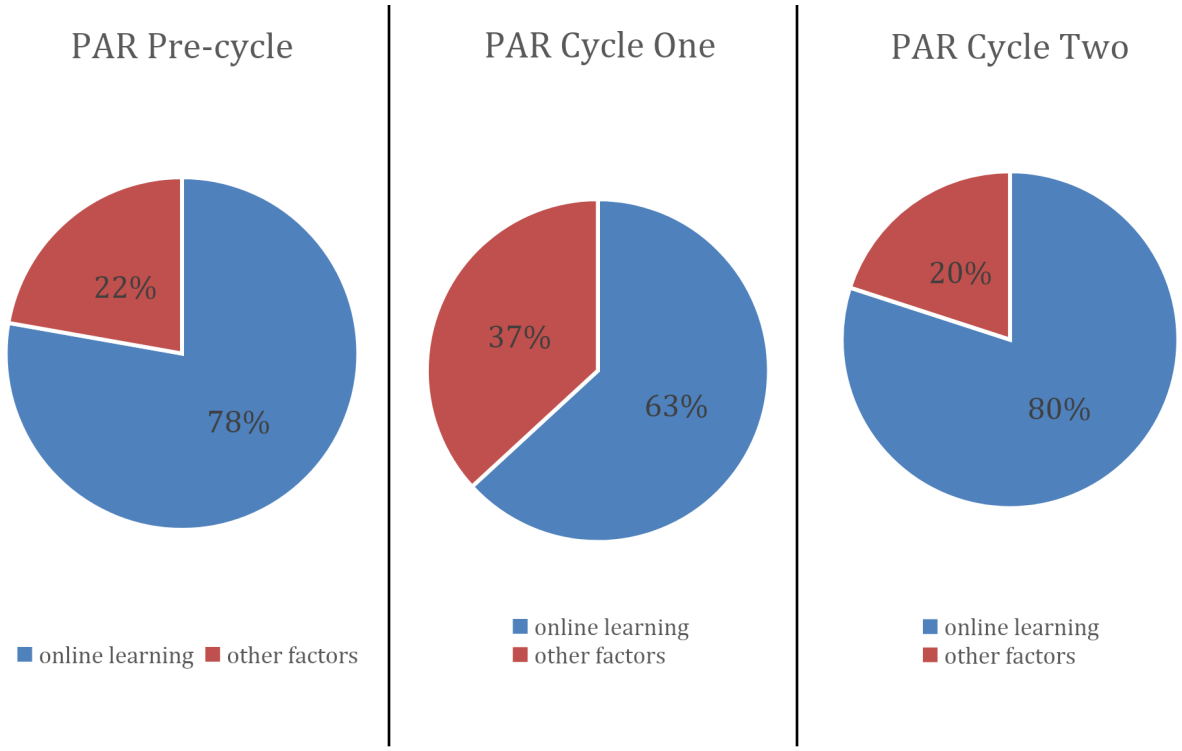


Figure 13. Comparison (percentages) of online learning to other negative codes.

unsuccessful strategy. The online environment afforded students none of the benefits they identified as necessary to their learning: a calm environment, the ability to build relationships, and support from teachers. The online environment was not calm because the online classes made students anxious; they could not ask questions and they did not have a "highly trained teacher" in the room with them. They knew they needed in-person teacher support to be successful and graduate. While they might pass the course, they knew they were not actually learning. Self-directed learning for students who have not been successful is a poor substitute for ensuring learning; students who are most successful at on-line learning are independent learners who are intrinsically motivated (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Students who have been designated at-risk do not typically possess these qualities: highly motivated, independent learners, strong literacy skills, and the ability to manage their time effectively. Rickles et al. (2018) found little evidence that online credit recovery is effective in improving outcomes. Although credit recovery courses give students the chance to complete failed courses and earn course credits, Rickles et al. (2018) also found that if the poor performance is due to factors such as, a lack of enthusiasm, suspensions, and chronic absenteeism, retaking a course via credit recovery may not be a solution.

Student voice is the way students influence or participate in educational decision-making (Mitra & Gross, 2018). Through this research, I examined what do the student voices inform the revision of the curriculum and instruction of the online credit recovery program? Ramos (2021) demonstrated, student voices in alternative schools supported students in navigating difficult circumstances and staying connected to school. Teen-age students, and especially students who are disaffected from regular schools, need to feel autonomy and a sense of belonging, In other words, once they could exercise self-determination, they were more willing to engage (Deci &

Ryan, 2012). As we demonstrated in this PAR project, once students trusted that we were listening and we would take their suggestions to heart, they were more willing to engage. In a study of students at 67 urban high schools, teacher care was at the center of the nexus of factors that supported students. Therefore, listening to their voices was connected to improving teacher care, which made students feel a sense of belonging and competence which resulted in affective and cognitive engagement (Conner et al., 2022). These factors were evident in the student-teacher relationships that resulted.

Students Inform Teacher Instruction

The second finding in this research study suggests that listening to student voices helped teachers be more strategic in meeting their needs because strengthening instructional practices can have a positive effect on student learning. The students reported from the outset of the study that they wanted "highly trained teachers." They were explicit about types of instruction that they found most useful; thus, they requested direct instruction practices so that the teacher was there to answer questions and guide their learning systematically. Data from assessments are frequently used as signs that instruction needs to change in order to improve student performance, but, based on this study, if educators can use street data – daily or weekly evidence from students – they can evaluate the need for a change in procedures using information from observations and interactions with students as well (Safir & Dugan, 2021).

The data from the Pre-Cycle and PAR Cycle One indicate that a key part of the Pre-Cycle is that teachers listened to students (46% of the data for that cycle) and PAR Cycle One (30%), but by PAR Cycle Two listening was part of their repertoire and they did not particularly comment on this factor in discussions. The teachers changed from listening to actually shifting practices. By PAR Cycles One and Two, teacher participants in this research study had

one-minute meetings with students. The teachers credit these discussions with prompting changes to instructional practices, particularly adapting lessons for kinesthetic learners. CTP4 wrote about a conversation in which the student talked about struggling with the course load. As a result of that conversation, she began breaking materials into smaller chunks (CPR meeting, December 16, 2022). HTP3 commented that she also adjusted practices as a result of conversations with students. She wrote, "I used metacognitive markers to help students understand reading passages' (CPR meeting, December 16, 2022).

Additionally, teachers strengthened their relationship with students by having these conversations. Strengthening relationships with students is an intangible component of culturally responsive practices (Hollie, 2012) and leads students to feel that teachers care. Students are more than just classifications; getting to know a student is necessary to perceive and comprehend all of their qualities. A teacher wrote, "Individual discussions with children afforded me the opportunity to listen to their history, struggles, and academic experiences, providing me a complete picture of the child. This aided in my ability to build a rapport of trust and care with the pupil" (CTP4, CPR meeting, December 16, 2022).

Teacher Behaviors

Through participation in this research study and listening to the insights and experiences of students, teachers changed their instructional practices to meet the needs of their students. Teachers were more reflective about their instructional practices and their approaches to selecting strategies that supported students academically. The shifts in practice comprise a key finding and increased across the three cycles of inquiry: Pre-Cycle (15% of the total evidence); PAR Cycle One (41%) and PAR Cycle Two (78%). By the conclusion of the study, teachers were highly focused on what they could do to support student learning.

Shifts in Teacher Practices

Teachers shifted their pedagogical practices and behaviors in the classroom to better support students. Pedagogical shifts signify modifications to the teaching strategies, the teachers' way of thinking, and teacher behavioral patterns. As a result of participating in this study and learning the perspectives of students, teachers made changes to the ways they taught lessons. I observed teachers using online platforms less, using more direct instruction, and incorporating hands-on activities (kinesthetic learning) – all student recommendations.

During an evidence-based post observation conversation, teacher participant DTP4 stated "students had the opportunity to use think-pair-share. I used direct instruction for the first 10 minutes after journal writing and activating prior knowledge. I used a graphic organizer and hands-on activity as well" (Post Conference, October 25, 2022). When we discussed next steps, the teacher stated "[I will] continue to implement these instructional practices into my lessons and monitor for student academic improvements and please continue to come and observe my class and have these types of conversations" (Post-Observation Conversation, October 25, 2022). Another teacher, BHTP3, shared that facilitating a credit recovery lesson and using top-down topic web helped her students organize their thinking and create notes they could use while taking the quizzes. She stated that printing out some of the math examples for students to use was received favorably by her credit recovery students (Post-Observation Conversation, October 18, 2022). Accordingly, teacher pedagogical modifications involved not only a change in demeanor but also a change in the instructional strategies utilized to promote the students' learning styles.

The findings indicate what we have long known – the people closest to the issue are best suited to find solutions to local concerns (Guajardo et al., 2016). In this case, students who share

their frustrations, learning styles, and ideas about change with teachers invest in their learning, and teachers change from these necessary relationships with students. As a result, they can become warm demanders – caring adults who hold students to high standards (Delpit, 2012; Ware, 2006). In return, students feel a sense of belonging, increase their belief in their competence as students, and exhibit stronger engagement. These factors are mutually reinforcing positive teacher-student relationships and changes in teacher pedagogy.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the activities and evidence collected and analyzed during PAR Cycle Two and presented the findings of the PAR project and study. Across the three PAR research cycles, students actively used their voices to advocate for what they needed to be successful; for them, as the data indicates in PAR Cycle Two, the identified success is graduating and receiving a high school diploma, two signs of success previously elusive for most of the students. Students consistently expressed the need for highly trained teachers, instructional practices that support their learning such as direct instruction, collaborative and hands-on activities, graphic organizers, and in-person learning. The teachers and students formed a caring community of support and respect during these three cycles of inquiry, and I, as the school leader who facilitated this process, changed how I thought about students and the necessity of student voice in all decisions.

As a CPR team, we built relational trust, reviewed trends from each cycle, and examined evidence. Teacher participants had meaningful conversations with student participants that deepened their understanding of each other's perspectives, offered connections with each other's experiences, and shifted in thinking about how to better support AA male students in learning. In addition, as student participants felt more at ease sharing their stories and highlighting the

benefits and challenges of the alternative school, they were adamant about which instructional strategies worked for them and enhanced their academic learning.

Despite popular opinion, students in the alternative learning program care about their school and learning. These students believed they could succeed academically if they had "highly trained" teachers. They defined highly trained as knowing the content and knowing how to teach and using different teaching strategies to help students understand the concepts. They wanted to be in a learning environment that was safe, free of "drama," and free of drugs. They wanted an academic home where they could succeed. As we cared more about them and their requests, they cared more about graduating from high school. By the end of the study, completing sufficient credits to graduate was within possibility for the six individuals.

The students' willingness to share their experiences not only offers voice to marginalized students whose views are rarely heard in classrooms but supports research that demands the perspectives of African American students be heard (Creswell, 2014; Howard, 2001, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The six AA male students in this study described feeling wonderful, powerful, intelligent, and successful when asked how they felt about knowing we, as educators, listened to their insights. Bean-Folkes and Ellison (2018) proposed that the ability to choose how they learn … benefits African American students. The PAR study gave students the opportunity to advocate for themselves, telling us how they learn and how to support them. Emdin (2016) asserts that teachers can use conversations with students to learn more about how students learn and how well they teach, allowing them to adapt instruction to meet students' needs. By doing this, teachers included students in the development of pedagogy that they signaled worked for them. By listening to their feedback, teachers created classrooms that were culturally responsive. The result aligns with the study's theory of action; educators can change academic and

social-emotional procedures to better support students if we listen to their insight and learn from their experiences. In the next chapter, I discuss the extant literature that supports the findings and highlights the importance of authentic conversations to enable change in an organization and outline a new framework for equitable and long-lasting transformation.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In the participatory action research (PAR) project and study, I examined how African American male students' insights and experiences at Shaw County Alternative School (SCAS) could change how teachers and leaders supported students. During my experience as an assistant principal of a traditional high school earlier in my career, I observed that African American male students were disproportionately suspended, expelled, and referred to alternative education in comparison to other student groups. The data on overrepresentation of African American students in alternative setting of behavior-focused school placement confirms this observation, which has persisted over many years (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013; Perzigian et al., 2017; Verdugo & Glenn, 2008); the disproportionality is correlated to racial bias by county (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). As the mother of two African American sons and an educator, ensuring equity in educational opportunities for students is personal and professional. However, I was unsure of how to address the inequities that I witnessed. Conducting this research study has provided direction. The CLE axiom -- the people closest to the issues are best suited to find solutions to the issues (Guajardo et al., 2016) -- provided an approach for the study. By incorporating student voices and experiences in understanding the benefits and challenges of the credit recovery program for African American male students, student responses informed adult shifts in thinking and action. I based the study design on this theory of action: If the teachers and I listened to student experiences, then we could shift academic and social-emotional practices to better support students as they navigated credit recovery. As we listened to the students, I supported teachers in changing their mindsets about the students and using the practices students recommended as useful (see Table 15 for PAR activities throughout the study).

Table 15

Data Sources from PAR Activities Throughout the Three PAR Cycles

Activities	PAR Pre-Cycle Fall 2021 Aug. - Nov. 2021 Artifacts	PAR Cycle One Spring 2022 Jan. – Apr. 2022 Artifacts	PAR Cycle Two Fall 2022 Aug. – Oct. 2022 Artifacts
Meeting with CPR members (n=120)	Reflective Memos	• Design Your School Protocol • Reflective Memos	• Reflective Memos • Chalk Talk Protocol
Student (group) meetings (n=6)	Reflective Memos	• Emulation Poem • Design Your School Protocol • Instructional Practices Activity	A Picture Is Worth 1000 Words Protocol
Community Learning Exchanges (n=2)	• Journey Line Activity • Word Cloud Activity	• Boards Torn Up Activity	
Interviews (n=5)	Interview Transcripts	Interview Transcripts	
Individual Student Meetings (n=15)		1-Minute Meetings	1-Minute Meetings
Observation (n=8)			Observation Data
Post-Observation Conversations (n=8)			• Field Notes • Evidence-based Conversations

The study location was Shaw County Alternative School, a school within a school located within one of the traditional high schools in the county. The number of students enrolled at the school fluctuated during the year as students placed by the superintendent or referred students from the high school during the school year are added to the alternative program, primarily for behavior-related issues. At the time the study concluded, the school had 58 students and 10 staff members. Participants in the study included six students and two staff members who served as members of the Co-Practitioner Researcher (CPR) group, which I facilitated as lead researcher. The CPR members included the English teacher and credit recovery facilitator. However, other teachers provided evidence for the analysis. The students included potential graduates for the 2022-2023 school year.

I facilitated twelve CPR meetings and six student group meetings over the span of 18 months. I orchestrated the key PAR activities and artifacts to address the study research questions. I collected data and coded artifacts from student group meetings, CPR meetings, CLEs, classroom observations, post-observation conversations, individual student meetings, reflective memos, and interviews (see Figure 14 for methodology, supporting data, and findings). The study findings revealed that student perceptions and recommendations guided adult thinking and actions:

1. Students identified multiple benefits of the alternative setting and helped to identify problems that affected their learning -- online learning and instructional strategies.
2. Listening to student voices helped teachers be more strategic in meeting the needs of students.
3. Teachers changed how they think about students and their approaches to selecting instructional strategies to support students academically.

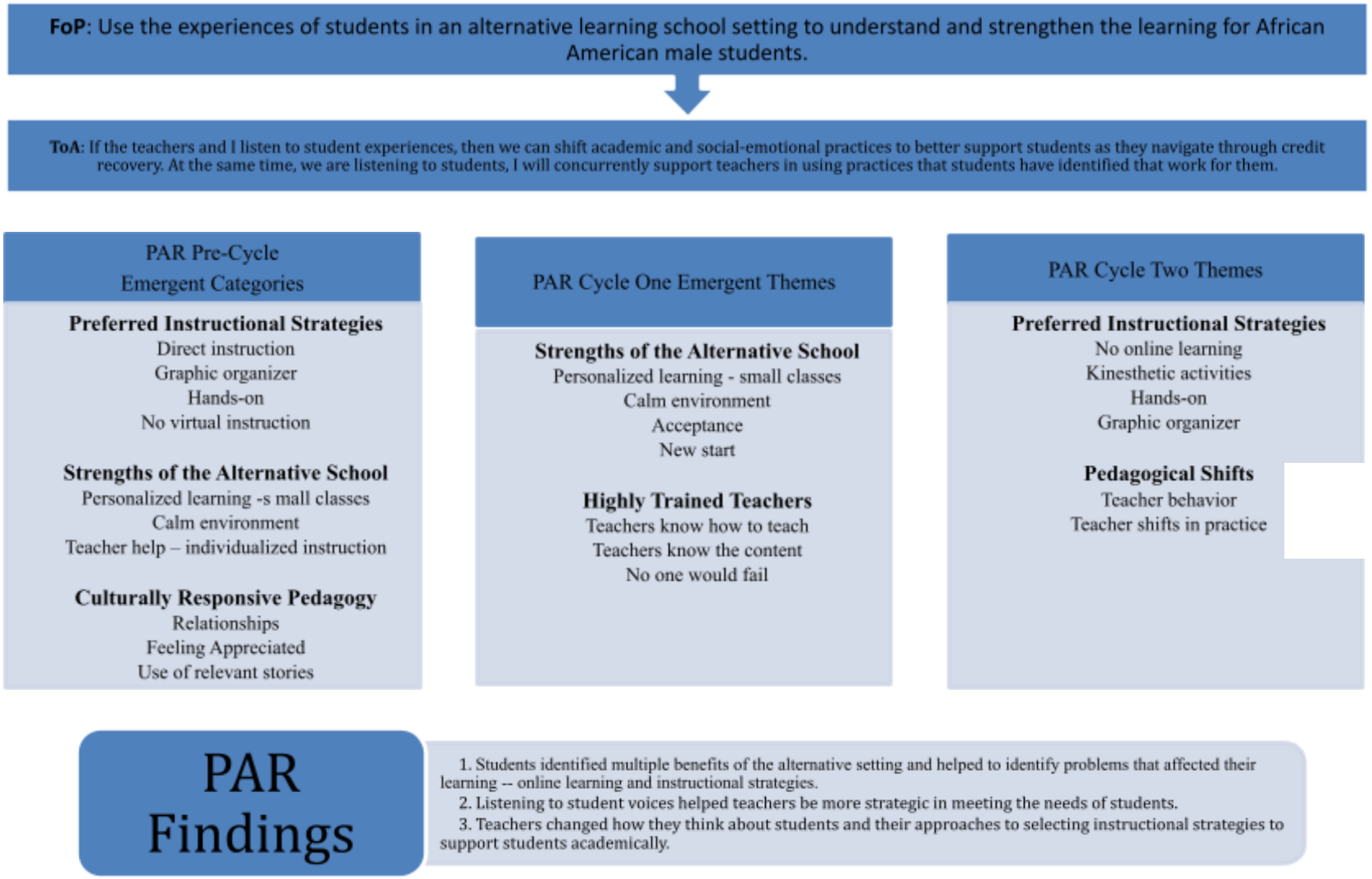


Figure 14. From FoP to theory of action to three cycles of inquiry with data to support findings.

These findings in their entirety are consistent with the focus of practice and the recommendation that educators can better serve students by learning from their experiences and insights. While we have known that students want close relationships with caring teachers and know how learning could be improved, we rarely engage students meaningfully in their learning and make decisions about their motivations and how to teach that would be more successful if we listened to them (Barker, 2018; Conner, 2021: Conner et al., 2022; Cook-Sather, 2002; O'Conner, 1997). The point of this project and study is that every school should engage the students' experiences and ideas in making decisions and supporting changes in teacher practice. Changes in thinking and practices happen when teachers have a deeper understanding of students' viewpoints. In this last chapter, I summarize the study by discussing the findings as they relate to the literature, I present a conceptual framework, and I review the research questions. I suggest implications for practice, policy, and research, share limitations of the study, and conclude with reflection on my development as a leader and as a research-practitioner.

Findings

Utilizing student voice is a powerful way for students to actively contribute to their learning through participation in decision-making about school procedures and initiatives (Benner et al., 2019; Bubb & Jones, 2020; Conner et al., 2022, Cook-Sather, 2002; Cook-Sather, 2018; Mitra, 2012; Oliver et al., 2009). By encouraging student voice, they took more control over their education (Cook-Sather, 2002). Benner et al. (2019) identified the benefits of student voice seen in research:

> Ultimately, research indicates that if students have opportunities to actively shape their educational experiences, then: (1) Students will demonstrate increased engagement in their education; (2) Schools and districts will improve their cultural responsiveness by

> hearing, supporting, and validating student needs; and (3) Systems and communities will offer students a greater range of educational opportunities. (p. 5)

We believed that if we listened to the student voices in our school, then we could shift our academic and social emotional practices to better support our students and, in particular, the African American male students who make up the largest portion of our students in an alternative setting. In this study, the students gradually opened up and shared their experiences and insights, offering their keen and useful perspectives on how to better meet their educational needs. In this section, I connect the extant literature to the study findings (see Figure 15).

According to Howard (2008), if those in positions of authority start paying attention to the viewpoints and opinions of African American males on their educational experiences, teachers would be more impartial and equity minded. That is what this research study concluded: by paying attention to the student voices, we could better support them. In this study, our findings concurred with a strong body of literature in which researchers had similar results: listening to student voices helped teachers be more strategic and more successful in meeting the needs of students (Conner et al., 2022; Cook-Sather, 2002; Cook-Sather, 2018; Corbett & Wilson, 1995; O'Conner, 1997). Students are capable "of providing rich, nuanced accounts of their experience that could potentially inform school improvement… [and identify] creative ways that pedagogy, the school environment, and relationships could be improved, changed or maintained to assist their wellbeing" (Simmons et al., 2014, p. 129). Although we did not measure student academic outcomes by test scores, we did ensure that students completed courses that they had previously failed. By PAR Cycle Two, the students, who had not previously mentioned graduation, were discussing graduation for the first time in the study; they said the alternative program gave them a new start and a path to graduation. "Given the

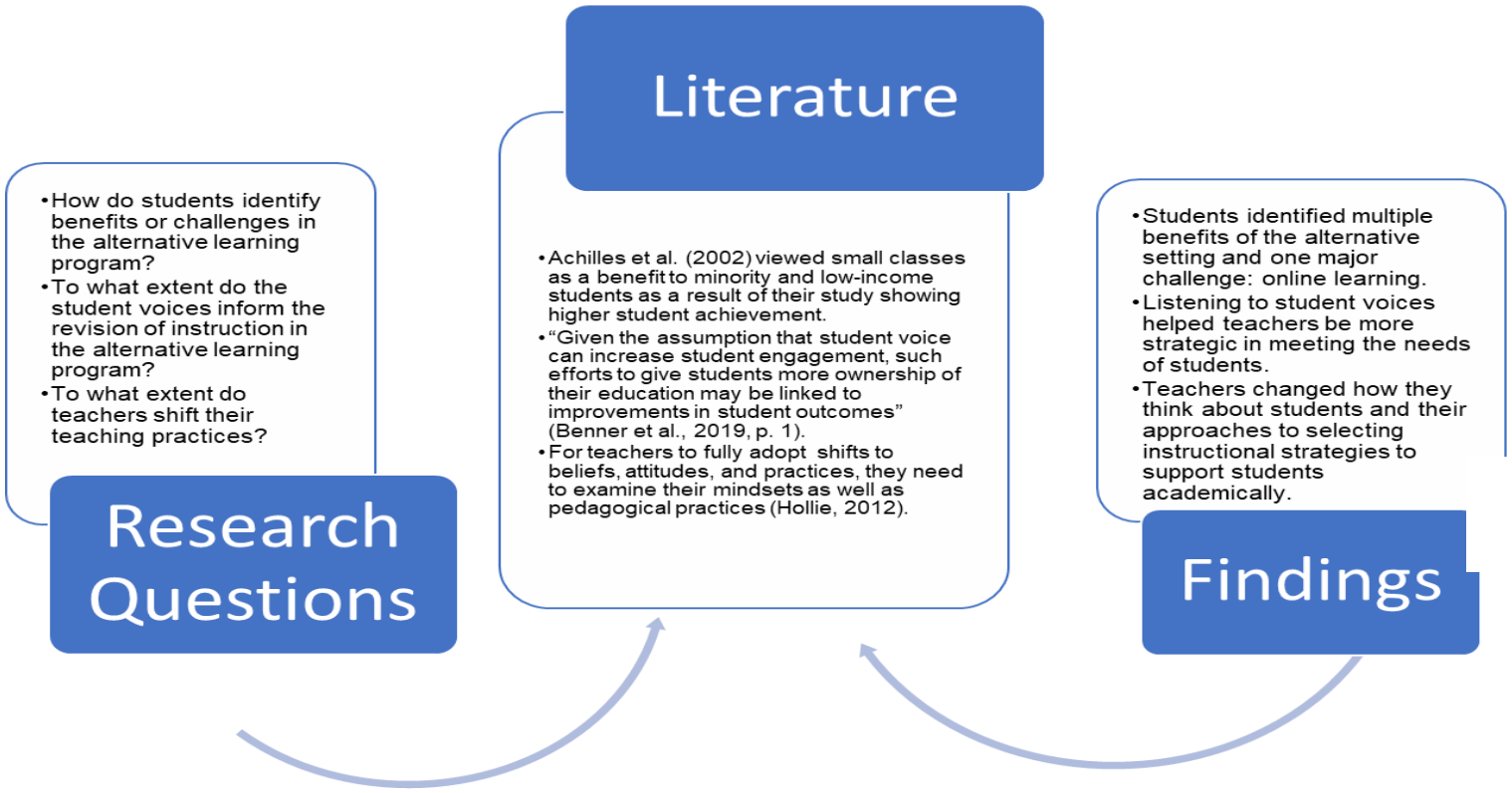


Figure 15. Graphic relating key extant literature sources to research questions and findings.

assumption that student voice can increase student engagement, such efforts to give students more ownership of their education may be linked to improvements in student outcomes" (Benner et al., 2019, p. 1). Through participating in CLEs, individual, and group meetings, students became more comfortable with expressing their thoughts and moved from barely speaking up to being heard to actively participating in meetings with decision makers (Benner et al., 2019; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2012). Students helped to identify problems that affected their learning: online learning and instructional strategies. Students identified the practices that worked best for them, and when teachers used them, they became more active learners. Observations confirmed that teachers made shifts in their thinking and practices to better support students.

The second finding in this study identified student recommendations, including the multiple benefits of the alternative setting – class size, a calm environment, and caring teachers. "When students explain to adults the connection between the issues they find important and their experiences as learners, they are engaging in the first goal of student voice" (Conner et al., 2022, p. 3). The second is recommending precisely what should change, and the third is that students actually feel empowered as advocates for their learning. When adults listen to them and change, they consider adults their allies (Holquist, 2019).

According to the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2010), African American males do worse academically than White males and graduate at a lower rate. Because educators struggle to teach them, African American male students are frequently viewed with a deficit perspective (Carey, 2020) and "pushed out" of traditional schools to alternative schools (Goff et al., 2014; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2008). Instead, schools and educators should receive professional development and knowledge of interventions successful at educating African

American males (Howard, 2013). One such intervention found in this study is personalized learning. Building a trusting relationship with students and eradicating the deficit mindset while focusing on students' strengths and what they uniquely can contribute to the classroom are essential components of personalized learning. (Stuart et al., 2018). Throughout this study, we engaged in conversations with students at the alternative school. We listened to their experiences and insights. They shared with us what worked for them: highly qualified instructors, in-person learning, and kinesthetic activities. As a result, we personalized learning for them. Researchers (Achilles and Finn, 2002) have identified trends in data indicating that personalized learning not only reduced achievement gaps, but significantly reduced grade retention and student discipline referrals. In relation to this study, participants have been successful in receiving more personalized instruction due to the small number of students in each class. During a student group meeting, students agreed that class distractions occurred less frequently, with a smaller number of students in classes, enabling them to focus on their academics. Although there is still disagreement among researchers regarding the advantages of small class sizes, under the right conditions, smaller class size can have a positive effect on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2004). These findings are consistent with ideas that the smaller environment of alternative programs and schools are generally non-threatening and supportive of the students (Caroleo, 2014). Across his career as an educator, Cuban (2021) identified a major issue of the ways schools are organized – age-graded instruction; by design, the alternative school setting provides grouping according to student need and instruction focused on attaining competence in content objectives. If the format the students recommend works for them in an alternative setting, changing traditional environments could be useful in reducing the number of students who have behavior issues that are a first step toward being referred to alternative settings.

Students identified what they considered major challenges – online learning and instructional practices. Online credit recovery programs have received mixed reviews (Allensworth et al., 2018). Some benefits included multiple opportunities to receive credits to graduate on time, different ways to learn the content material, and the courses allow acceleration through the content based on pretest results. However, the challenges focused on the students using online learning platforms who are typically not independent learners, self-motivated, and often lack time management, literacy, and technology skills (Pettijohn & LaFrance, 2014; Rickles et al., 2018). Our students said that they could not concentrate well when they used online learning programs; they benefited from being face-to-face with their teachers. Additionally, students desired teachers to use instructional strategies other than lecturing and using online platforms to post and submit assignments. The students who participated in this study will now graduate on time, in part because teachers built relationships with them and used strategies they recommended.

To help African American males succeed in school, educators should make sure that students have positive school experiences, build relationships with students, and understand each student's cultural background (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Trotter, 1981; Wiggan, 2007; Williams et al., 2002). Teacher participants in the study shifted instructional practices to align with practices students said worked for them. They changed how they thought about students and their approaches to selecting instructional strategies to support students academically. Hollie (2012) proposes that for teachers to fully change their practices for the benefit of students, they need to examine their mindsets as well as their pedagogical practices. These teachers realized that they had inaccurate perceptions of the students based on factors such as culture and lifestyle. This study provides evidence that the stereotype we have of students who are in alternative schools

not caring about school and not caring about learning is wrong; these students cared about school, they just thought that schools did not care about them Through this study, teachers saw the students for themselves; they learned about them as people, which helped them better understand the students' needs and helped the students better grasp the content (Ferguson, 2001). Hammond (2015) says teachers are responsible for understanding their students so they can design instructions that support students' learning needs. As evidenced by class visits, students were more engaged in the learning and content with teacher use of kinesthetic activities, metacognitive markers, and collaborative activities. Based on the results of this study and the literature, student voice is an effective strategy for motivating students to engage in their learning and to develop their communication and critical thinking skills (Benner et al., 2019).

Alternative Learning in the Alternative Setting

In the study, I found that when students share their insights and experiences with school leaders and teachers who value those insights, then teachers and leaders shift their practices to better support students. Figure 16 depicts the framework resulting from the PAR study: teachers build relational trust with students by listening to and valuing their experiences. The graphic is a set of gears that are interconnected, and energy from the central gear propels other gears to move. Once the essential gear of the framework was in motion – relational trust -- the other gears began moving. As we observed, students first had to trust us; then they opened up and revealed their experiences and recommended alternatives. When all parts were in motion, the interaction of these factors sustained a culture that effectively supported the learning of its students. The largest force in the study was student voice; by deciding to do this study and focus on student voice, I, as a leader of equity, was the driving force for listening to students. As a result, students actively participated in activities and collaborated with me, then with teachers and other students.

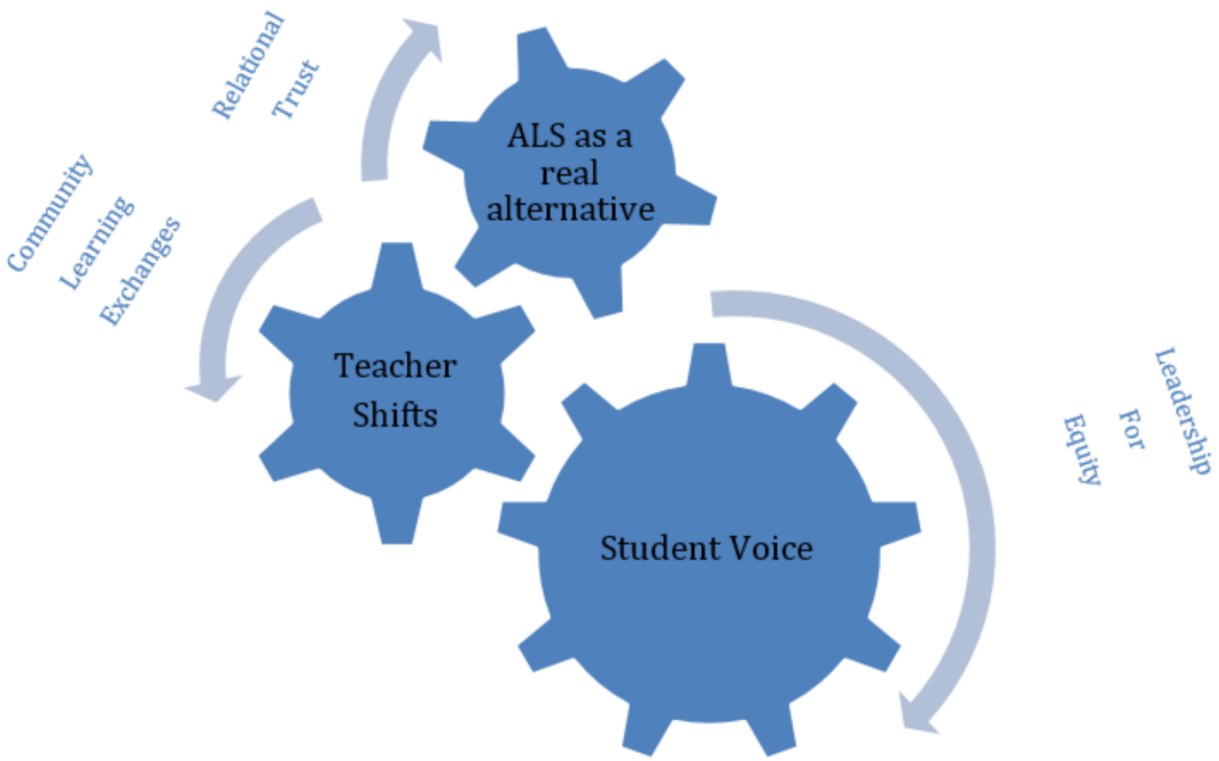


Figure 16. Expanded theory and framework resulting from PAR study.

Our collaborative decision-making was equity-focused, and everyone's voice in the school was valued. As a result, we identified and addressed issues of inequity by deeply listening to students. Once student voice is in motion, teacher shifts begin happening, and alternative learning schools can become a pathway for students to achieve success. In constructing this expanded framework, I relied on the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms (Guajardo et al., 2016). In particular, we articulated and embodied the axiom that honors the voices of the people closest to the issues to find the solutions to local issues. I used CLE processes to foster meaningful interactions among students, teachers, and the principal. The set of gears as a whole represents school change; the students were the central gear to transmit power and increase our speed of reform. Therefore, students need to be a part of the conversation when looking for how to better support them academically. CLEs, which incorporate gracious space, community problem solving, learning in public, and sharing of experiences is a central methodology for ensuring student voice in their learning.

Establishing the first two gears inside the school community led to action of the third gear, an Alternative Learning School (ALS), as a useful alternative for students. In PAR Cycle One, I asked students to design their ideal school. They wanted the school to be viewed as an academy and by changing the name others might change the perception of the alternative setting as “a school for bad kids.” They wanted their school to be safe, and students indicated that the school should only employ "highly trained" teachers, who they described as “knowing the content and knowing how to teach.” But perhaps most importantly, they desired teachers who would connect with them, listen to them, and understand their circumstances. By centering student voices, supported by adult allies who listened and changed, we found collective power to change the life trajectories for our students from hopeless to hopeful.

Review of Research Questions

The overarching research question guiding this study was: How do the insights and experiences of students in an alternative learning program inform how teachers and leaders support students? The sub-questions were:

1. How do students identify benefits or challenges in the alternative learning program?
2. To what extent do the student voices inform the revision of instruction in the alternative learning program?
3. To what extent do teachers shift their teaching practices?
4. To what extent does this process support my growth and development as a school leader?

In the first research question of this study, students identified benefits and challenges to the alternative setting. These perceptions surfaced as a result of conversations with students, CLE processes and reflection activities. The students highlighted the support and care of SCAS teachers and the calm environment. As a result, the students felt SCAS was a place where staff and teachers believed in them and where they felt like they could be successful.

African American male student participants identified online learning as a major challenge. Students overwhelmingly disapproved of online learning and preferred face-to-face instruction. Generally, students who succeed on online platforms exhibit characteristics of self-directed learners who take personal responsibility for their learning. These are typically qualities that students in an alternative learning program do not possess at the outset of their experience in an alternative setting.

Student voices informed the revision of instruction in the alternative learning program, and teachers responded. During CPR meetings and CLEs, the team had the opportunity to review

student artifacts as well as listen to their thoughts on the type of teacher students need to support their learning, instructional practices that work for them, and challenges at SCAS. The school has already implemented some changes as a result of what we learned; the counselor assigned students face-to-face math classes, and, because we could not accommodate all students, we hired a facilitator to assist students as they completed online math courses. The student views informed the school's selection of its professional learning cycle for this school year to include literacy with a focus on comprehension and developing metacognition of students. All teachers implemented these strategies in their content areas. The students helped teachers be more strategic in meeting their needs through engagement in conversations.

Finally, as a result, teachers changed instructional strategies. As the principal and lead researcher, I helped build teacher capacity by talking with them about the practices, observing those practices in action, and then engaging with them in post-observation conversations. Teachers shared their thoughts about the new strategies as well as what they noticed about student engagement. At the beginning of this study, teachers expressed wanting to help their students but not knowing how to do so. They expressed having a basic awareness of cultural differences, but not considering how cultural differences impacted the strategies they used or how they approached students. Through this PAR, the teachers and I knew our students on a deeper level, and those relationships paved the way for better teaching and learning.

Implications

"…centering student voice involves educators' using student experiences and epistemologies as a source of valuable knowledge that impacts content, policy, and practice."
(Khalifa, 2018, p. 65)

As we listened to the students in this study discuss their educational journey and experiences, I understood the significance of an alternative program. Many students' hopes of

earning a high school diploma would be unattainable without an alternative educational path. In addition, I more fully understood how traditional high schools push students out and do not fully accommodate the needs of diverse learners, particularly students of color, and, in our case, particularly, African American male students. I discuss implications for practice in the current context and practice community, and I discuss implications for policies and research. I make recommendations for future research and discuss limitations of this study.

School Practice

Student-centered strategies work well for students placed at-risk for academic failure (Alfassi, 2004; Allen & Boykin, 1992; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Farrell, 2004; McCombs & Quait, 2002). While enrolled at SCAS, the participants in this study received individualized instruction tailored to their needs and based on strategies that they identified as having worked for them. School educators assisted the students in taking ownership of their education by asking their opinions and listening to the answers. As a result, students who had previously thought they could not learn were able to establish a rapport with helpful, caring educators, and successfully complete courses. All schools could better serve their students if they implemented student-centered strategies. This approach to classroom instruction would emphasize the necessity for teachers to be culturally responsive in implementing instructional strategies that address students' needs. Since personalized instruction and the integration of technology are a focus of educational reform (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, 2010), traditional and alternative schools should consider taking a more personalized approach to determine instructional needs by including student voice in decision-making.

The study's PAR findings had a significant impact on the school as they set the standard for how we engaged with and helped our students succeed academically, which in turn improved

the effectiveness of the school's teachers and principal. We now had insight and information from students about what they wanted and it was the opposite of what we thought and believed about students in an alternative school. We countered the perception that students in alternative education do not care about learning; as school staff members built relationships with students and fostered caring relationships with students, the students felt supported, respected, and valued. I purposefully limited class sizes to eight students and suggested that teachers hold one-minute meetings with their students at least once monthly. I met with students to give them an opportunity to share their experiences and needs.

As a result, students began having spontaneous conversations with me in the hallways, on the way to the cafeteria, and in other unstructured environments. This has implications for all schools. A caring school staff can design ways that support students to ensure personalized and individualized instruction; while smaller class sizes are unlikely given school budgets, the strategies we used would increase student agency and motivation and decrease student failure and dropout rates. Students are better supported because teachers and school leaders listened and took more interest in their learning.

Local Policy, State and National Policy

State, district, and local administrators are under pressure to enhance their educational systems. School systems must achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) each academic year based on standards outlined by the NCLB Legislature. Schools that consistently fall short of yearly standards are in danger of stakeholders viewing the school as ineffective and unable to provide sufficient teaching needed for students to achieve academic growth. Consequently, school systems must give administrators the resources and guidance they need to put plans in place that guarantee students' academic success. What we learned in a small setting with a small

number of students is applicable for local school policy and practice.

The North Carolina General Statute Policy for Establishing Alternative Learning or Alternative Schools recommendations are evidenced in the PAR: (1) schools identify strategies that will be used to improve student achievement and behavior; (2) set goals of improving the academic achievement and behavior of students assigned to alternative learning school; (3) staff the program or school with teachers who have at least four years' teaching experience, have received an overall rating of at least above standard on a formal evaluation, and are certified in the areas and grade levels being taught; (4) provide optimal learning environments, resources, and materials by maintaining safe and orderly learning environments. By actualizing these policies in one setting, our practices and processes could be transferred to other contexts.

School districts should examine policies that determine how students are assigned to alternative schools, what courses are offered, and what strategies or programs are used to help students recover credits. School districts and state agencies should consider offering additional pay for staff members willing to work in alternative schools to help attract, support, and retain teachers who possess characteristics that students identified in this study. When school districts face budgeting decisions, alternative schools and staff members who work in them are often seen as expendable; however, these students still have needs that must be met.

As a result of this study, the state and districts should rethink their use of credit recovery for the students who have not been successful in traditional schools and are dependent learners. The students who come to alternative settings are typically dependent learners who depend on their teachers for support; however, they are expected to independently master course content. In essence, alternative schools are often unwittingly set up for continuous student failure because they require students to become independent learners before they are ready to do so. Students in

this study indicated what kind of learning environment and teaching they need because they know how they struggle to meet the demands of online, self-directed classes. The students who have never been self-directed or had experiences that would have helped them acquire the necessary skills to be independent learners cannot be forced into using self-directed online credit recovery models. They need teachers who care about them, and are knowledgeable about the content; as they have made clear. When they receive this support, they can learn and succeed as is evidenced by 11 students who had sufficient credits for graduation by December 2022, a new record for the alternative school.

Implications for Research

Based on the findings of this PAR research, I recommend that leaders in education provide continuous and relevant professional development for school staff members based on vetted research on centering student voice in decision-making and its particular relevance and importance to educating African American males.

When making decisions about ways to improve school conditions, schools and districts should incorporate the voices of students. CLEs provide a set of operating principles and a process for every voice to be valued and hear and create a gracious space for conversations to take place and for reflections to occur. Personal narratives helped build a bridge for members of the community to better understand and learn with one another. Combined with activist research, CLEs can create a space for real change to happen. “Learning and leadership are dynamic social processes” (Guajardo et al., 2016, p. 4), and activist research exemplifies that axiom. As I learned with the participants in this study, we were able to put strategies in place, reflect on those strategies, and adjust as necessary to meet the needs of students. Academic researchers could study school and community-based projects that incorporate student voice at all levels of

schooling. In addition youth-led participatory action research is a good instructional strategy and a good source of evidence for academic researchers (Anyon et al., 2018; McKoy et al., 2022).

Building relational trust between teachers and students was significant in helping teachers shift their mindsets. Future research could examine the relationship between teachers and principals as well as how the relationship between principals and students impact student success. Based on the findings in this study, future research could examine how the methods used in this study could benefit or support students in a traditional setting. This kind of research could shed light on the significance of self-motivation and mindsets in African American male students. According to the webpage for United Negro College Fund (2022), teachers who were not African American had lower expectations for AA students than did African American teachers – demonstrating a systemic bias in teachers' expectations for African American students. Future research could investigate this bias.

Limitations

General limitations were time, the lead researcher's and the teachers' biases, and difficulty in generalizing, based on the small number of study participants. As principal, I had additional duties and responsibilities that needed to be managed to ensure time was allotted for interviews, observations, and meetings. In addition, COVID-19 impacted our time constraints and meeting schedule.

A researcher's bias can be another limitation. As the principal and lead researcher, although I was open to student voice, some situations required me to take an authoritative approach. Likewise, I had to act as interpreter of the student data for two teachers who had been at the alternative setting prior to my arrival and had developed instructional practices and perhaps biases that could have impacted the study. The teachers and I may have had

preconceived ideas about the alternative learning program from previous encounters with students assigned to an alternative learning setting and frequently hearing "that is the school for bad kids." For the most part, we could overcome these biases and limitations because we had created relational trust among the adults. In fact, we created a learning space for students they had not typically experienced. In so doing, we learned how to be better teachers and leaders.

Lastly, because of the small sample size, difficulties in generalizing the findings are a limitation. The study focuses on one ALS, a group of six students, and two teachers. It is difficult to conclude that findings for a larger study would mirror findings in this study. However, two points are salient: (1) the processes of this study can be generalized to other contexts, and (2) creating spaces in all schools and districts for student voices is critical, and small projects and studies like this one are necessary. While other sites may adapt the process, they need to ensure listening to student recommendations results in more engaging learning and the ultimate goal of graduating from high school. Therefore, overcoming our adult limitations is critical if we are to sustain equitable learning environments for students.

Leadership Development

My leadership development was the focus of research question four: To what extent does this process support my growth and development as a school leader? I focus on how the PAR project impacted my work as an alternative school principal and a practitioner researcher. To document my thoughts and reflections on events in the research and track my leadership development, I wrote reflective memos throughout the entire study project. Writing reflective memos became an important part of the process. As the only administrator at the school, duties and responsibilities could become laborious and time consuming. Therefore, I set aside time to pause and reflect, consider my thoughts and emotions, the reasons behind them, and how I

wished to approach or resolve issues related to those feelings. Writing reflective memos helped me process the information and make decisions in the best interest of my students, staff, and school.

What's more, I have relinquished the "winning the battle," heroic type leadership that values individual behaviors over group participation and teamwork (Kim & Maudlin, 2022). I transformed my leadership from heroic leadership to collaborative by interacting with the CPR team and students. By listening, reflecting, sharing, and working together in meetings with the staff, especially during Professional Learning Committee (PLC) and School Improvement Team (SIT) meetings and using tools acquired during the PAR research cycle and Project I^4, such as Inner Circle Outer Circle (ICOC), chalk talks, reflection memos and personal narratives, I began to base my leadership on collaboration.

My leadership development during this study has been a journey of contextualizing my experiences and role as administrator in an organization that often works counter to its stated goals. In my beginning time as principal of SCAS, I filled many days with answering people's questions and solving people's problems even though some of the problems could have been resolved without my assistance. Then, as the lead researcher in this PAR study, I learned to foster a school culture that was consistent with my beliefs and not a scattered attempt to keep people happy. Leading does not require you to change who you are or what you fundamentally believe, but for me, it does require learning, evolving, and shifting practice as a result of experience.

Adopting the role of facilitator and listener has been the biggest adjustment as I realized that a listening leader offers a better path to equity (Safir, 2017). Rather than offering answers, I encouraged cooperation and collaboration to create an appropriate plan of action to resolve issues. With the exchange of ideas and proposed solutions, I learned the value of dialogue.

Because of my shift in positionality and learning to listen, staff members are more receptive to and responsive to directives when I need to be more authoritative.

In order to better understand the benefits and challenges of the credit recovery program for African American male students and using student voices and experiences of AA males in alternative settings, the regulative and cognitive pillars of institutional theory specifically apply to the PAR. “That is, they consist of formal written rules as well as typical unwritten codes of conduct that underlie and supplement formal rules…” (North, 1990, p. 4). The rules and informal codes are sometimes violated, and punishment is enacted. Generally, in schools, rules/regulations are followed out of compliance or “this is the way it has always been done” premise. Many of my students have landed in the alternative school because of noncompliance to rules and procedures in the traditional settings.

Multiple needs for organizations to survive and grow within the framework of larger institutions are laid out by Scott et al. (2000): “Organizations require more than material resources and technical information if they are to survive and thrive in their social environments. They need social acceptability and credibility” (p. 237). In short, they require legitimacy (Scott & Davis, 2007, p. 71). In addition to resources and technical information, organizations require credibility and acceptance, or in other words legitimacy. The institutional norms, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as the framework, must be viewed as genuine, credible, and capable of providing their services. People are more likely to accept and follow these procedures, norms/rules if they believe they are legitimate. Legitimacy ensures that established procedures are reasonable since normative standards dictate what we should and should not do within an institution. I was able to establish legitimacy as a leader with teachers, staff, students, and families.

The pillar that impacts my leadership most often is cultural-cognitive. For instance, the decision to allow students to have a voice in whether we returned to eat in the cafeteria as a big group or to continue eating in the classroom. This procedure was a COVID protocol used to eliminate large gatherings. Students expected to obey authority are more likely to follow directives when they have a say and believe that their thoughts, ideas, and opinions will be considered when authority makes a change.

Second, the Cynefin framework containing five contexts developed by Snowden and Boone (2007) had an impact on my leadership. In offering a novel perspective on decision-making, the framework highlighted the significance of determining the context—be it academic or behavioral—and adjusting actions accordingly. So, depending on the issues that came up during the study cycles, I used the framework to establish the context, which guided my choice of how to address the problem. This PAR study was carried out in an alternative school where every circumstance is unique and calls for a special method of decision-making about academic support for students and restorative practices for disciplinary measures.

In summary, conducting this research study has made me more responsive to the needs of students. Engaging with the school community in CLEs, CPR and student group meetings increased my understanding of the experiences affecting students and created the space to build relationships between myself, school staff and the at-risk students we serve.

Conclusion

Inadequate academic preparation, negative stereotypes, a lack of support from teachers, parents, and the community, parental involvement issues, and a lack of positive male role models in the home, the classroom, and the community are all reasons why African American males frequently fail in school. If we are able to listen to student voices, build relationships, and get

them involved in their learning, we can disrupt this cycle of failure. To address the social and academic challenges that African American male students encounter in the classroom, we have to engage them in the process. All participants in this study wanted to graduate from high school, but, at the outset, they did not clearly see a path toward doing so. According to the study's findings, students wanted teachers who cared about their education and had a satisfactory level of expertise. Each participant set a goal and had a plan for the future that did not include failure.

The results of this study are vital to establishing an alternative learning program or school that is a successful alternative for students feeling unsuccessful in the traditional setting. Utilizing students' experiences to understand and better support them in the learning environment stimulates improvement in the academic performance of students. In summary, in the study we explored whether we could change academic and social-emotional procedures to better support AA male students, and we were successful in changing the life trajectories of many students who are on track to graduate.

Being the mother of two AA males and having observed the overrepresentation of African American males in alternative schools, special education, and disciplinary situations and knowing the consequences of the school to prison pipeline we have created, I cringe when I see students who could be successful falling by the wayside and becoming statistics. Over the course of more than thirty years as an educator, I am devoted to changing the outcomes for students of color. My hope is this research helps educators and policymakers develop strategies to improve the teaching and learning environments for this marginalized student population. We are comfortable with African American men succeeding outside of the classroom through athletics or entertainment, but if we develop relationships with students by including them in discussions about their learning, AA males may also achieve inside the classroom. They do not need to just

"shut up and dribble;" they can be active participants in their learning and craft life goals that we support as adult allies. This PAR research study can help other alternative schools make the necessary adjustments in policy and practice, so all students have the chance to learn and succeed.

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APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM: TEACHERS

ADULT CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent to Participate in Research
Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: We Choose Not to Shut Up and Dribble: Listening to Student Voices in an Alternative Learning School

Principal Investigator: Debra Windley
Institution, Department or Division: East Carolina University, Department of Educational Leadership
Address: East Carolina University, College of Education, East 5th Street, Greenville, NC 27858-4353
Telephone #: 252-328-4260
Study Coordinator: Dr. Matthew Militello
Telephone #: 252-328-6131

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this PAR study is to use students' experiences in an alternative learning school setting to better understand and strengthen their learning. I want to gain an understanding of the alternative learning program (strengths and challenges), from the students' perspective. As the school leader, I can then use the information to recognize the benefits and challenges of the ALS and its credit recovery program, and then work with students and teachers to make changes that improve learning for the students, particularly African American male students. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a teacher at ETC. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, using the experiences of students in an alternative school setting, we will discover ways to strengthen the process of learning for African American male students. If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of the two teacher participants and part of the research team.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?
There are no known reasons for why you should not participate in this research study.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?
You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?
The research will be conducted at the Beaufort County Educational Technical Center, Chocowinity, NC. You will need to meet monthly with me (lead researcher), during the study. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is approximately ten-hours over the next eighteen months.

What will I be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, you may be asked to participate in an interview, three community learning exchanges, and/or observations. The interviews or observations may be recorded in addition to handwritten notes by the research team members. All the interview questions will focus on your knowledge and experiences with student voice, credit recovery, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?
We do not know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?
We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?
It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?
ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the North Carolina Department of Health, and the Office for Human Research Protections.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?
The information in the study will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the data collection and data analysis process. Consent forms and data from surveys, interviews, and focus groups will be maintained in a secure, locked location and will be stored for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study.

What if I decide I do not want to continue this research?
You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop, and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?
The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at phone number 252-702-5170 (weekdays, 8:00 am – 4:00 pm) or email dwindley@beaufort.k12.nc.us.
If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at phone number 252-744-2941 (days, 8:00 am – 5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of the ORIC at 252-744-1971.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?
The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)	**Signature**	**Date**
_____	_____	_____

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)	**Signature**	**Date**
_____	_____	_____

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM: PARENT

PARENT CONSENT FORM

East Carolina University

Parental/Legal Guardian Permission to Allow Your Child to Take Part in Research

Information to consider before allowing your child to take part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: We Choose Not to Shut Up and Dribble: Listening to Student Voices in an Alternative Learning Setting
Principal Investigator: Debra Windley
Institution: Beaufort County Educational Technical Center
Address: 5500 NC Highway 33 East
Chocowinity, NC 27817
Telephone #: 252-946-5382
Study Coordinator: Matthew Militello
Telephone #: 919-518-4008

Participant Full Name: _____Date of Birth: _____

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why is my child being invited to take part in this research?
The purpose of this study is to work with students, teachers, and counselors using the experiences of students in an alternative learning school setting. I will discover ways to strengthen the process of learning for African American male students.

Your child is being invited to participate because he or she is a middle or high school student at Beaufort County Educational Technical Center. The decision for your child to take part in this research will also depend on whether your child wants to participate. By doing this research, we hope to provide new opportunities to support student social emotional wellbeing. If you and your child agree for him/her to volunteer for this research, your child will be one of about 6 students to do so.

Are there reasons my child should not take part in this research?
There are no known reasons for why you should not participate in this research study.

What other choices do I have if my child does not take part in this research?
Your child can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?
The research will be conducted at your child's school after school or during a free period. Students will be asked interview questions in a one-on-one setting in the counseling office. These interviews will take approximately 30 minutes.

What will my child be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, your child may be asked to participate in one or more interviews and three community learning exchanges. Interviews will be audio recorded, and students will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. If you want your child to participate in an interview but do not want to be audio recorded, the interviewer will turn off the audio recorder. Interview and focus group questions will focus on reflections and experiences with credit recovery and alternate learning programs.

Data collected in hard copy form will be stored in locked filing cabinets. All data will be accessible to the research team exclusively.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?
We do not know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We do not know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will my child be paid for taking part in this research?
We will not be able to pay you or your child for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me anything for my child to take part in this research?
It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?
ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that your child took part in this research and may see information about your child that is typically kept private. With your permission, these people may use your child's private information to do this research:

- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your child's welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify your child.

How will you keep the information you collect about my child secure? How long will you keep it?
The information in the study will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the data collection and data analysis process. Information gathered from the interview will be maintained in a secure, locked location and will be destroyed upon successful completion of the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study.

What if my child decides he/she doesn't want to continue this research?
Your child can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if he/she stops, and he/she will not be criticized. Your child will not lose any benefits that he/she would typically receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?
The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact Debra Windley at phone number 252-946-5382 (days, 8:00 am – 4:00 pm) or email dwindley@beaufort.k12.nc.us.

If you have questions about your child's rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of the ORIC, at 252-744-1971.

I have decided my child can take part in this research. What should I do now?
The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that my child can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, my child is not giving up any of his/her rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Parent's Name (PRINT)	**Signature**	**Date**

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)	**Signature**	**Date**

APPENDIX C: ASSENT FORM

Assent Form: Things You Should Know Before You Agree to Take Part in this Research

IRB Study #UMCIRB 21-001672

Title of Study: We Choose Not to Shut Up and Dribble: Listening to Student Voices in an Alternative Learning Setting

Person in charge of study: Debra Windley
Where they work: Beaufort County Educational Technical Center
Study contact phone number: 252-946-5382
Study contact E-mail Address: windleyd83@students.ecu.edu

People at ECU study ways to make people's lives better. These studies are called research. This research is trying to find out: ***How can a group of students share their insights and experiences in an alternative learning program so that teachers and leaders can better support students?***

Your parent(s) needs to give permission for you to be in this research. You do not have to be in this research if you don't want to, even if your parent(s) has already given permission. You may stop being in the study at any time. If you decide to stop, no one will be angry or upset with you.

Why are you doing this research study?
The reason for doing this research is: If we can help students make sense of their experiences in an alternative learning program, they will gain necessary skills to complete the program successfully and build positive relationships with staff members.

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?
We are asking you to take part in this research because using the experiences of students in an alternative learning setting is vital to discovering ways to strengthen the process of learning for students.

How many people will take part in this study?
If you decide to be in this research, you will be one of about six students and two teachers taking part in it.
What will happen during this study?

- Students will participate in individual interviews, occurring during school hours, over the next 18 months.
- Students will participate in three community learning exchanges, occurring during school hours, over the next 18 months.
- Students will be observed in online credit recovery and face-to-face classes, over the next 18 months.

These activities will be limited to one hour. Interviews will be recorded. Audio and video recordings may be requested to be turned off. There will not be follow-up to this research study. The information in the study will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the data collection and data analysis process. Consent forms and data from surveys, interviews, and focus groups will be maintained in a secure, locked location and will be stored for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study.

- **Check the line that best matches your choice:**
  _____ OK to record me during the study
  _____ Not OK to record me during the study

This study will take place at Beaufort County Educational Technical Center and will last 18 months.

Who will be told the things we learn about you in this study?
A research team (CPR), composed of myself as lead researcher and two teachers from the school will have access to the information collected.

What are the good things that might happen?
Sometimes good things happen to people who take part in research. These are called "benefits." The benefits to you of being in this study may not be of any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

What are the bad things that might happen?
Sometimes things we may not like happen to people in research studies. These things may even make them feel bad. These are called "risks." There are no risks of this study. Things may also happen that the researchers do not know about right now. You should report any problems to your parents and to the researcher.

Will you get any money or gifts for being in this research study?
You will not receive any money or gifts for being in this research study.

Who should you ask if you have any questions?
If you have questions about the research, you should ask the people listed on the first page of this form. If you have other questions about your rights while you are in this research study, you may call the Institutional Review Board at 252-744-2914.

If you decide to take part in this research, you should sign your name below. It means that you agree to take part in this research study.

_____ _____

Sign your name here if you want to be in the study **Date**

_____

Print your name here if you want to be in the study

_____ _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent **Date**

_____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Assent

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL - STUDENT

WE CHOOSE NOT TO SHUT UP AND DRIBBLE: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH ON LISTENING TO STUDENT VOICES IN AN ALTERNATIVE LEARNING SCHOOL

Individual Interview Protocol (Student)

Introduction

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedules to meet with me today. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview and will limit the time to one hour.

My name is Debra Windley. The rationale for this study is formulated under the backdrop of students attending the ALS needing support and interventions to ensure their academic success and propel them towards high school graduation. By the principal gaining understanding of the alternative learning program (strengths and challenges), from the students' perspective, the school leader can utilize the information to first recognize the benefits and challenges of the ALS and it is a credit recovery program, and then work with students and teachers to make changes that improve learning for its students, particularly for African American (AA) male students. Students can provide an important viewpoint to the study since they are closest to the problem and are best positioned to suggest solutions (Guajardo et al., 2016). Students' experiences, even if they are unpleasant, can provide a notable perspective. What if students were given a chance to tell their stories in their own words? What would happen if these experiences were not seen as deficits but as assets and not overlooked or ignored?

Disclosures:

- **Your participation in the study is <u>voluntary.</u> It is your decision to participate, and you may elect to stop participating in the interview at any time.**
- **The interview will be <u>digitally recorded</u> to capture a comprehensive record of our conversation. All information collected will be kept <u>confidential.</u> Any information collected during the session that may identify any participant will only be disclosed with your prior permission. A coding system will be used in the management and analysis of the interview data with no names or school identifiers associated with any of the recorded discussion.**
- **The interview will be conducted using a semi-structured and informal format. Several questions will be asked about both the individual knowledge and skills gained, and the organization practices used.**
- **The interview will last approximately one hour.**

Interview Questions

TURN RECORDER ON AND STATE THE FOLLOWING:

"This is (Your Name), interviewing (Interviewees Name) on (Date) for using the experiences of students in an alternate learning setting to discover ways to strengthen the process of learning for African American male students.

Interview 1

1. **Tell me about how you came to be enrolled at ALS.**

2. **What do you like about attending ALS? What works for you here?**

3. **What do you wish was different at alternative school? Tell me more.**

4. **What is different about this school and the traditional high school you attended that is most important to you?**

5. **What (or who) encourages and motivates you to stay in school?**

6. **Are you enrolled in any online credit recovery classes? Is this your first time taking an online credit recovery class?**

7. **Describe for me your experience taking an online credit recovery course?**

8. **If you were able to make changes in the online credit recovery program, what would it be?**

9. **Tell me about your parents' or guardians' experiences in school? How has it impacted your experience? Tell me more.**

Interview 2

1. **Tell me about the traditional high school you previously attended.**

2. **What did not work for you at your previous high school?**

3. **What prevented your success there?**

4. **Anything else about your high school experience that you would like to share (positive or negative)? Friends? Teachers?**

5. **What does student voice mean to you? How have you used your voice to improve your education experience?**

6. **Which do you feel is more important and why: "push-out" – cohort graduation without skills or "CCR – graduating with skills needed to be successful in career, college, or military?**

Interview 3

1. Tell me more about what you meant when you said _____ (excerpt from the previous two interviews).

2. In the group meetings, what was most significant about what you heard from the group about experiences in school? What stands out to you?

3. In your own words, why is student voice important? Listening to others tell their stories, how has it helped you?

4. Do you think online credit recovery programs need to change? Why or why not?

5. Do you feel your voice makes a difference? Is it possible for the change to happen?

6. If the entire education system were redesigned, how would you rebuild it if you were in charge?

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL - TEACHERS

WE CHOOSE NOT TO SHUT UP AND DRIBBLE: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH ON LISTENING TO STUDENT VOICES IN AN ALTERNATE LEARNING SCHOOL

Individual Interview Protocol (Teacher)

Introduction

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedules to meet with me today. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview and will limit the time to one hour.

My name is Debra Windley. The rationale for this study is formulated under the backdrop of students attending the ALS needing support and interventions to ensure their academic success and propel them towards high school graduation. By the principal gaining understanding of the alternative learning program (strengths and challenges), from the students' perspective, the school leader can utilize the information to first recognize the benefits and challenges of the ALS and its credit recovery program, and then work with students and teachers to make changes that improve learning for its students, particularly for African American (AA) male students. Students can provide an important viewpoint to the study since they are closest to the problem and are best positioned to suggest solutions (Guajardo et al., 2016). Students' experiences, even if they are unpleasant, can provide a notable perspective. What if students were given a chance to tell their stories in their own words? What would happen if these experiences were not seen as deficits but as assets and not overlooked or ignored?

Disclosures:

- **Your participation in the study is <u>voluntary.</u> It is your decision whether or not to participate and you may elect to stop participating in the interview at any time.**
- **The interview will be <u>digitally recorded</u> in order to capture a comprehensive record of our conversation. All information collected will be kept <u>confidential.</u> Any information collected during the session that may identify any participant will only be disclosed with your prior permission. A coding system will be used in the management and analysis of the interview data with no names or school identifiers associated with any of the recorded discussion.**
- **The interview will be conducted using a semi-structured and informal format. Several questions will be asked about both the individual knowledge and skills gained, and the organization practices used.**
- **The interview will last approximately one hour.**

Interview Questions

TURN RECORDER ON AND STATE THE FOLLOWING:

“This is (Your Name), interviewing (Interviewees Name) on (Date) for using the experiences of students in an alternate learning setting to discover ways to strengthen the process of learning for African American male students.

Interview 1

1. **How long have you been teaching at ALS?**

2. **Why did you choose to teach here? What do you like about teaching at ALS?**

3. **What do you wish was different at alternative school? Tell me more.**

4. **Describe for me your experience with credit recovery programs.**

5. **Describe for me your experience with student voice and if it is integrated into your instruction.**

6. **Describe for me your experience with culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and if it is integrated into your instruction.**

7. **Would you like to learn more about CRP?**

8. **What benefits and challenges do you see with integrating student voice into your instruction?**

Interview 2

1. How do you learn about your students' ethnic backgrounds and how do you learn about them?

2. What is your responsibility as a teacher in helping your students understand their culture?

3. What teaching methods do you use to reach out to all students?

4. In your classroom, what curricular adjustments and preparation do you use to ensure students are learning?

5. How do you reflect on your teaching technique once you've finished teaching?

6. What impact does your own cultural heritage have on your teaching?

APPENDIX F: COMMUNITY LEARNING EXCHANGE (CLE) PROTOCOL

Community Learning Exchange (CLE) Artifacts

Each semester for the duration of the participatory action research study, the researcher will host a Community Learning Exchange on a topic related to the research questions in the participatory action research (PAR) project. At the CLE, the researcher will collect and analyze artifacts that respond to the specific questions listed below. The researcher will collect qualitative data based on the activities in which the participants engage at the CLE. The data will be in the form of posters and notes that participants write and drawings that participants make in response to prompts related to the research questions.

Participants will include the Co-Practitioner Researchers and other participants who sign consent forms. If students are participants, consent and assent forms will be used.

Date of CLEs: Fall 2021/Spring 2022/Fall 2022

Number of Participants: 8

Purpose of CLE: To listen to a group of students share their insights and experiences in an alternative learning program so that teachers and leaders can make decisions on ways to better support students in achieving academic success.

Questions for Data Collection:
1. Students will identify benefits or challenges in the alternative learning program?
2. Students will identify benefits and challenges in taking online credit recovery classes.
3. Students will suggest ways to improve online credit recovery programs?
4. Students will discuss their success or failure with face-to-face classes in an alternative learning setting.
5. What is your learning style?
6. How can teachers increase your level of motivation and student engagement in class?

APPENDIX G: POST-OBSERVATION CONVERSATION PROTOCOL

Post-Observation Conversations

After a researcher conducts classroom observation, the researcher facilitates a 15-minute post-observation conversation with the teacher. The researcher takes notes on the observation and then codes the post-observation notes using a set of pre-established codes and open coding.

Date of Post-Observation Conversation:

Teacher Identification Code:

Brief Description of Lesson Focus

TIME	Notes of Conversation	Coding

FOR DATA ANALYSIS

Researcher uses four categories with 23 possible codes for evidence from post-observation conversation. The codes and categories have been validated by calibration by other researchers (Saldaña, 2016; Policy Studies Associates 2020).

Opening and Coaching Stance

1. **Greeting**
2. **Quick turnaround on analyzing evidence**
3. **Transparency of conversation**
4. **Collaborative approach**
5. **Direct informational approach**

Processes and Strategies in Conversation

6. **Follow-up questions: paraphrasing teacher responses**
7. **Question form: open-ended and clarifying questions**
8. **Ratio of talk time (observer: teacher)**
9. **Redirect to focus on teaching and learning**
10. **Responding to ideas from teacher**
11. **Positive feedback on key parts of the lesson**
12. **Acknowledging tensions of roles; emphasizes support and development role**
13. **Teacher knowledge: checks teacher knowledge about instructional practices**
14. **Observer summary: frequently summarizes conversation**

Focus on Evidence

15. **Opening question: related to equity data**
16. **Focus on evidence throughout, particularly equity data**
17. **Teacher has data in advance of conversation**
18. **Use of tool and factual evidence**
19. **Next steps teacher-driven & related to evidence and equity focus**

Body Language, Tone and Setting

20. **Sitting side by side**
21. **Nonverbals: looking at teacher, nodding, sub-vocal responses (hmm)**
22. **Asset-based**
23. **Supportive**

APPENDIX H: CHALK TALK PROTOCOL

Chalk Talk

Developed by Hilton Smith, Foxfire Fund; adapted by Marylyn Wentworth.

Purpose

Chalk Talk is a silent way to reflect, generate ideas, check on learning, develop projects, or solve problems. It can be used productively with any group — students, faculty, workshop participants, or committees. Because it is done completely in silence, it gives groups a change of pace and encourages thoughtful contemplation. It can be an unforgettable experience. Middle level students absolutely love it — it's the quietest they'll ever be!

Time

Varies according to need; can be from 5 minutes to an hour

Materials

Chalk board and chalk, white board and dry-erase markers, or large roll paper on the wall and chart markers

Process

1. The facilitator explains *very briefly* that Chalk Talk is a silent activity. No one may talk at all and anyone may add to the Chalk Talk with words or graphics as they please. You can comment on other people's ideas simply by drawing a connecting line to the comment. It can also be very effective to say nothing at all except to put finger to lips in a gesture of silence and simply begin with Step 2.

2. The facilitator writes a relevant question in a circle on the board.
   Sample questions:
   - What did you learn today?
   - So What?, or Now What?
   - What do you think about social responsibility and schooling?
   - How can we involve the community in the school, and the school in community? • How can we keep the noise level down in this room?
   - What do you want to tell the scheduling committee?
   - What do you know about Croatia?
   - How are decimals used in the world?

3. The facilitator either hands a piece of chalk to everyone or places many pieces of chalk at the board and hands several pieces to people at random.

4. People write as they feel moved. There are likely to be long silences — that is natural, so allow plenty of wait time before deciding it is over. Participants may write comments, ask questions, draw images/ graphics, show connections between various comments.
5. How the facilitator chooses to interact with the Chalk Talk influences its outcome. The facilitator can stand back and let it unfold or expand thinking by:
   - Circling other interesting ideas, thereby inviting comments to broaden
   - Writing questions about a participant comment
   - Adding their own reflections or ideas

• Connecting 2 interesting ideas/comments together with a line and adding a question mark

Actively interacting invites participants to do the same kinds of expansions. A Chalk Talk can be an uncomplicated silent reflection or a spirited, but silent, exchange of ideas. It has been known to solve vexing problems, surprise everyone with how much is collectively known about something, get an entire project planned, or give a committee everything it needs to know without any verbal sparring.

6. When it's done, it's done.

7. The Chalk Talk can be considered complete at this point or it can become the basis for a further discussion. Questions to raise with the group might include:
   - What do you notice about what we wrote?
   - What do you wonder about now?
   - What was the Chalk Talk like for you?

Protocols are most powerful and effective when used within an ongoing professional learning community and facilitated by a skilled facilitator. To learn more about professional learning communities and seminars for facilitation, please visit the School Reform Initiative website at www.schoolreforminitiative.org.

APPENDIX I: A PICTURE IS WORTH A 1000 WORDS PROTOCOL

A Picture is Worth 1000 Words

Developed by Amie Cieminski.

Purpose

Allow participants to express their feelings about a project, concept, or implementation by using metaphor based on a picture. To be used as an opening activity as it allows for people to get their voice in the room, share from their own perspective, and prepare for the topic at hand.

Time

15-30 minutes depending on the size of the group

Materials

Collection of pictures from clip art, magazine clippings, etc. You can use 4-5 pictures or sets of 20-30 postcard sized or 5X7" sized pictures.

Process

1. Give participants the prompt and time to decide regarding which picture best represents the concept. Emphasize that there are no right or wrong responses.
   a. Prompt: Which one do you feel best describes _____. Why? Be prepared to share your feelings.
2. Using a round robin approach, have participants share their picture and their response. Depending on the size of the group, have participants share in small /table groups or with the whole group. *Variation:* Post 4 different pictures in the corners of the room. Have participants choose the picture which most closely represents their feelings toward the concept. When they get to the corner, have them share why they chose that picture and why and then have a spokesperson from each corner summarize the group's discussion and feelings with the larger group.
3. Debrief the content
   a. Make generalizations about similarities and differences of responses or ask participants for their impressions.
4. Debrief the process
   a. How did the protocol help people transition and get their voice in the room?
   b. How comfortable were you in sharing your feelings?
   c. What would you change or how would you use this protocol with a group with whom you are working?

Protocols are most powerful and effective when used within an ongoing professional learning community and facilitated by a skilled facilitator. To learn more about professional learning communities and seminars for facilitation, please visit the School Reform Initiative website at www.schoolreforminitiative.org.

APPENDIX J: ENDOWED OBJECT PROTOCOL

Endowed Object

Choosing an endowed personal object to tell the story is a way to connect the storyteller to something tangible and tell a part of his/her/their personal narrative through talking about the object.

Endowing the object means that you bestow special meaning to the object. An object does not have to be expensive to be of great importance and personal value. Some objects are highly symbolic and function as metaphors for events in our lives or relationships and qualities we value. Some objects may be negative in nature and remind us of painful or difficult issues or times. (a losing lottery ticket to the gambler, the "dear John letter", etc). In the theatre, characters handle "props" that have great meaning to them; the King's crown, the magic sword, the wedding ring, etc. Playwrights use props to help tell the story in a visual, immediate way.

We all have objects in our lives that connect to our own personal stories and narratives. Pick an object to use in the telling of an important personal story, and make sure it is one that connects and illustrates the story you want to tell.

Bring one object that represents a part of history or current event that has significance, or one that represents a powerful relationship or personal turning point. Please bring objects, not images, articles, or photographs, as they are too literal. The object represents a possibility for symbolic curation as the objects through this new lens of endowment. Inevitably people will make choices that are meaningful to them, and they will endow the objects with emotional meaning as they present to the group.

APPENDIX K: PERSONAL NARRATIVE PROTOCOL

Personal Narrative: Activity

Select one of the following quotes that best represents your feelings and thoughts looking forward to the next phase of the dissertation. Discuss with a partner why you selected the quote.

The older I get, the more I'm conscious of ways very small things can make a change in the world. Tiny little things, but the world is made up of tiny matters, isn't it? -**Sandra Cisneros**

I skate toward where the puck will be, not where it has been. -**Wayne Gretzky**

Action without vision is only passing time, vision without action is merely daydreaming, but vision with action can change the world. -**Nelson Mandela|**

“You’ve got to think about big things while you’re doing small things so that all the small things go in the right direction.” **-Alvin Toffler**