Rethinking Alternative Education to Break the Cycle of Educational Inequality and Inequity

JEONG-HEE KIM
KAY ANN TAYLOR
Kansas State University

ABSTRACT   The growing number of alternative schools seems to correlate with the mounting population of disenfranchised students. The higher the number of disenfranchised students, the more alternative schools are being built. This correlation may be caused by social, economic, and political issues that bring about pervasive social injustice, which reinforces the cycle of educational inequality. In this qualitative study, the authors examined 1 alternative high school from a critical perspective to determine whether the school benefited students to the extent that it broke the cycle of educational inequality. Using critical theory as a theoretical framework, the authors found that the school provided a caring environment for students and gained their trust. However, the school did not offer a meaningful and equitable alternative education that benefited the students. This failure led the authors to question for whom this school is truly an alternative.

Keywords: alternative education, cycle of educational inequality, disenfranchised students

Alternative schools were prolific in the late 1960s and in the 1970s across the United States. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, educational priorities were shifted back to the progressive education movement by people who were dissatisfied with the traditional curriculum (Conley, 2002; Goodman, 1999; Raywid, 1995; Young, 1990). Alternative schools offered students opportunities for success according to the belief that one unified curriculum is not sufficient for all. These schools emphasized the development of self-concept, problem-solving, and humanistic approaches (Conley).

Chapter 1, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, greatly supported alternative education. Program funding for Chapter 1 was designed to prevent student dropout and academic failure (Land & Legters, 2002). The development of alternative education was based on the idea that some students may learn better in an environment structured differently than that of traditional academic public schools. Unfortunately, many alternative schools in the 1970s did not last long because of structural or financial mismanagement: They had difficulty enduring

growing public pressure for school accountability (Marsh & Willis, 2003).

To satisfy the need for choice and diversity (Conley, 2002), the popularity of alternative education regained its momentum in the mid-1990s in the form of public and private voucher programs, charter schools, and magnet programs. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2001), which conducted the first national study of public alternative schools and programs serving at-risk students, stated that 10,900 public alternative schools and programs for at-risk students served approximately 612,900 students in the United States during the 2000–2001 school year. In this period, 39% of all school districts nationwide offered alternative schools or programs, and this number is growing every year. The study also reported that alternative schools are located disproportionately in urban districts, districts with high-minority student populations, and districts with high-poverty concentrations, making them susceptible to social, political, economic, and educational inequalities (NCES). Some of these alternative schools have succeeded by satisfying "the need to provide choice and diversity within a monopolistic bureaucratic giant of public education" (Conley, p. 177). For instance, alternative schools in the state of Washington have succeeded as alternatives to traditional public education, effectively meeting students' differing needs (see Billings, 1995).

However, public alternative schools presently run by school districts struggle with negative stigmas as dumping grounds or warehouses for at-risk students who are falling behind, have behavioral problems, or are juvenile delinquents. These stigmas are some of the biggest obstacles barring the success of alternative education (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Conrath, 2001; Dryfoos, 1997; Kelly, 1993; Kim, 2006; Mcgee, 2001; Waxman, 1992). These negative stigmas have a tacit assumption that students'

educational failure was caused largely by individual factors such as poverty, minority status, or family characteristics and ignore external factors such as school condition and societal factors. This is a deficit-thinking paradigm that blames low-socioeconomic-strata students for their failure in school. In this paradigm, systemic factors are ignored. School tracking, inequalities in school financing, curriculum differentiation, and low teacher quality—all of which help maintain the status quo—are not held accountable in explaining why some students fail in school (Valencia, 1997). As a result, students are blamed for their failures and are viewed as burdens (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997).

In the present qualitative case study, we examined an alternative school from a critical-theory perspective. Our research question was: In what ways is the school beneficial or not beneficial to the students in terms of equity? One concern central to critical theory is who benefits from education. Therefore, we explored whether the school program[1] was beneficial to students to the extent that it provided a level playing field while breaking the cycle of educational inequality. Our understanding of the term *beneficial* stems from the perspective of critical theorists that schools in general work to benefit the elite upper class to preserve their existing social privilege, interests, and knowledge at the expense of less powerful groups. Therefore, a school program that helps disenfranchised students succeed can be considered beneficial (see Anyon, 1997; Apple, 2004; Freire, 1997; Giroux, 2001).

Specifically, we considered that a school program is beneficial to students when it provides content, processes, rigor, and concepts that they need to develop and realize their future career goals. A school program that is beneficial to students engages them and leads them through varying processes to critical thinking and synthesis of the concepts and content. Conversely, a school program that is not beneficial to students is behavioristic, positivistic, and reductive. That is, the focus of the program is primarily on an either–or dichotomy: It addresses only lower order thinking and processing skills and does not move students toward their future career goals. Furthermore, a school program that is not beneficial to students represents social reproduction and social control and reinforces existing inequities.

Our research revealed themes that we categorized as positive themes and negative themes. The *positive themes* included: (a) I moved from a dumping ground to a safety net and (b) I do not want to go back to the regular high school. We identified three *negative themes* that required carefully scrutinizing the school: (a) I want to go to college, (2) I do not like the new building, and (c) We are left out of everything. These themes are significant because they indicate successes and failures of the school. We found that the school was successful when it provided a caring environment for the students and gained their trust (Noddings, 2005; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). However, the school was not successful when it did not encourage students to

achieve their goals by providing an equitable education (Conley, 2002). This failure leads us to ask for whom the school was an alternative.

Theoretical Framework

We used *critical theory* (Giroux, 2001) as our theoretical framework because it provides valuable insights for studying the relationship between theory and society. Critical theory refers to a school of thought and a process of critique regarding notions of money, consumption, distribution, and production, all of which are promoted by relationships of domination and subordination. Giroux (2001) stated that critical theory stresses the importance of critical thinking by providing an argument that it is an indispensable feature of the struggle for self-emancipation and social change. Besides supplying an argument against the suppression of subjectivity, consciousness, and culture in history, critical theory also provides an examination of the contradictions of society rather than social harmony. Critical theorists consider the ability to look at the contradictions of society and those of education in particular as starting points for developing forms of social inquiry that question what is real versus what should be. The rationale undergirding critical theory supports the idea that action should be grounded, as Marcuse (cited in Giroux, 2001, p. 9) argued, "in compassion [and] in our sense of the sufferings of others." According to Giroux (2003),

> The concept of critical theory refers to the nature of SELF-CONSCIOUS CRITIQUE and to the need to develop a discourse of social transformation and emancipation that does not cling dogmatically to its own doctrinal assumptions. . . . It points to a body of thought that is, in my view, invaluable for educational theorists; it also exemplifies a body of work that both demonstrates and simultaneously calls for the necessity of ongoing critique, one in which the claims of any theory must be confronted with the distinction between the world it examines and portrays, and the world as it actually exists. (pp. 27–28; capital letters in original)

Critical theory is central to addressing our research question because it helps researchers and educators understand what is happening in the alternative school versus what should be happening and questions who benefits from current educational practice. Thus, the focus of our analysis is what is occurring in the alternative school versus what should be occurring to eliminate social control and social reproduction, thereby promoting social justice. In other words, we wanted to examine what should be done to break the cycle of inequality that manifests in alternative school populations that comprise marginalized groups in terms of class, gender, and race. Through the lens of critical theory in our data analysis, we examined how the alternative school in the study functioned either to thwart students' aspirations and goals or to encourage them to achieve their goals. Thus, we sought to determine whether this alternative school was beneficial to the students by helping to break the cycle of educational inequality.

Research Site

Our research site, Prairie Alternative High School (pseudonym), was in a district that had a minority student population that was high for its Midwestern location and the population of the town. The nearby military base also contributes to the area's diversity. Of the student population, 60% were students of color; 70% received free or reduced-price lunches. The school was started approximately 25 years ago as an alternative education center for truancy students and those who were not experiencing academic success at their regular high school, as well as for students who were involved with the courts for assault, gang activity, theft, or vandalism. The school served 40 students from Grades 9–11 who were behind schedule in credits for graduation. The school employed 4 full-time teachers (2 women, 2 men) who taught mathematics, science, English, and social studies, as well as 2 administrative assistants, 1 secretary, 1 clerical support person, 1 resident janitor, and several paraprofessionals. The associate superintendent of the school district was the school principal.

According to school administrators, Prairie was an exemplary alternative school for students who were not successful in their traditional school. The program of this alternative school was so well-known that another high school in the state adopted the program and modeled an alternative program after Prairie. During our first meeting with the associate superintendent, he explained the scope and depth of the school district's All Can Achieve Innovative Programs (ACAIP) and Pre-Natal Through High School Graduation agenda. His pride in the alternative school contradicted our preconceived notion that this school would provide an oppressive environment, as do many other alternative schools (Kelly, 1993; Kim, 2006).

The description of the school by Dr. Dix, an associate superintendent of the school district and principal of the school, reminded us of the work of Rogers (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), who visited schools that "did a particularly good job of serving students who have traditionally been underserved by our educational system in the past" (p. 5). Rogers traveled to six diverse major cities in the early 1990s, interviewing students from a cross-section of cultures and ethnicities in schools. Those schools included alternative schools such as Montefiore School for troubled boys in Chicago, New Orleans Free School, Milby High School in Houston, O'Farrell Community School in San Diego, and Clement McDouough City Magnet in Massachusetts.

Rogers and Freiberg (1994) identified eight consistent common positive characteristics they sought from the teachers and the school: (a) trust and respect, (b) desire to be part of a family, (c) teachers as helpers, (d) opportunities to be responsible, (e) freedom rather than license, (f) a place where people care, (g) teachers who help them succeed, and (h) choices.

Dr. Dix described changes in the program at Prairie. In January 2003, it changed from a half-day to a full-day program, operating from 7:45 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. The program focus turned to Project Recovery, designed to assist students who were behind on credits leading to high school graduation. The singular aim of the school was to provide an environment in which students caught up on high school credits to enable them to return to the regular high school for their senior year and graduation. This is represented by the school's mission statement, which appears in the school handbook: "To provide identified students an alternative opportunity to continue to earn academic credit in a structured school environment."

In March 2006, while we conducted this study, the alternative school moved into a $2.5 million remodeled Alco commercial building and was renamed the Center for Innovative Studies. The new name did not contain the words "alternative school" because the administration sought to minimize the negative perception that the neighborhood had about the school. The new building had a modern appeal with light green interior walls and high ceilings. Each classroom was spacious and well lit, with glass walls exposed to the hallway rather than solid walls. Each classroom had a sink, storage cupboards, five computers for students, and a video camera that taped classes to document any disruption by a student. The social studies room also had a Smart Board and LCD projector. Several teachers placed curtains over the windows to provide privacy for their classes. A main office had three adjoining administrative offices and a conference room. There was also a spacious cafeteria and lockers, a classroom with at least 10 computers, and another spacious classroom used primarily for the after-school curriculum.

Method

In this qualitative case study, we concentrated on the experiential knowledge of Prairie Alternative High School and closely observed its activities and phenomena (Stake, 2005). We used (a) classroom observation with field notes; (b) open-ended, structured interviews with students, teachers, and administrators; and (c) analysis of primary documents such as curriculum materials in science, social studies, mathematics, and English classrooms. We observed each classroom for half a day, twice a week for the 3 months from February to April 2006. We structured the interviews so that all the interviewees received the same series of preestablished questions before the interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005). We allowed ample room for variation in response because the questions were open-ended. Thus, the interviews sometimes became conversational (Kvale, 1996). We approached our interviews empathetically, that is, we took "an ethical stance in favor of the individual or group being studied" (Fontana & Frey). We interviewed 9 students, 4 teachers, 1 administrative assistant, and 1 associate superintendent. We tape-recorded and transcribed each interview, which lasted 1.5 hr. By interviewing persons in various positions

of power, we gained multiple perspectives about the school program. We considered students' perspectives as especially important.

Giroux (2001) indicated that students who have been marginalized by class, race, and gender are seldom invited to engage in educational discourses about pedagogical practices that shape their everyday lives. He found that,

> Working class students, women, Blacks, and others need to affirm their own histories through the use of a language, a set of social relations, and body of knowledge that critically reconstructs and dignifies the cultural experiences that make up the tissue, texture, and history of their daily lives. (p. 37)

We focused on students' perspectives to discover ways to provide better educational opportunities for disenfranchised students.

Denzin (2005) pointed out that even the so-called *objective* writings of qualitative research are interpretations, not value-free descriptions. Thus, our biases in the present research were that (a) the environment would parallel that of the *Borderlands study,* which revealed the oppressive educational atmosphere in which marginalized students continued being disenfranchised by power and control (Kim, 2006), (b) the curriculum would parallel that of Freire's (1997) banking concept and not be beneficial to students, and (c) the school and its curriculum would not represent educational equity for its students.

Appendixes A, B, and C list interview protocol questions. Each of us coded all of the data (interview transcripts and field notes) separately to establish internal validity or credibility (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). We used *constant comparative analysis* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which the researcher compares data and identifies or integrates categories and emerging themes by using in vivo codes to acknowledge participants' expressions and language. We then triangulated the data (see Table 1) to ensure trustworthiness (Stake, 2005).

Participants

Before we selected the students, we consulted at length with Mr. Huff, the administrative assistant, and told him that we wanted to interview students who attended the school for different amounts of time and who represented a variety and cross-section in terms of gender and ethnicity. Because students could not remain in the school for more than 2 years, we wanted to compare the experiences of the 1st- and 2nd-year students. Mr. Huff recommended 3 first-year students and 5 second-year students because they were transitioning well into the alternative school setting, their attendance was regular, and they represented a mix of gender and ethnicities.

Students. We interviewed the following students from Prairie:[2] (a) Smiley, a 16-year-old female Hispanic 1st-year student who came to the alternative school from Arizona, returned to Arizona, then reentered Prairie (she volunteered to be interviewed and expressed her willingness to share her alternative school experiences with us); (b) Tarkeisha, a 17-year-old female African American 2nd-year student from Chicago; (c) Nook, a 15-year-old male African American 1st-year student who had lived in Washington, D.C., Georgia, and Germany; (d) Yancy, a 17-year-old male Caucasian 2nd-year student who wanted to drop out of school after that year and get his General Education Development certificate; (e) Durrell, a 17-year-old African American 2nd-year student; (f) Tom, a 17-year old male half-Irish and half-Native American 2nd-year student; (g) Christina, a 17-year-old female African American 2nd-year student; (h) Felicia, a 15-year-old female Caucasian 2nd-year student; and (i) Emily, a 16-year-old Caucasian 1st-year student. Table 2 summarizes the student participants.[3]

Teachers. We interviewed the 4 teachers at the school: (a) Mr. Bard, a Caucasian man who taught social studies and had been at the school for 5 years; (b) Mrs. Burg, a Caucasian woman who taught English and had been at the school for 11

TABLE 1. Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data Triangulation

	Source of data				
Major finding	SI	TI	AI	O	D
Category 1: Positive view					
I went from a dumping ground to a safety net.	✓	✓	✓	✓	
I don't want to go back to the regular high school.	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Category 2: Negative view					
I want to go to college.	✓			✓	✓
I don't like the new building.	✓	✓		✓	
We are left out of everything.		✓		✓	

Note. SI = student interview; TI = teacher interview; AI = administrator interview; O = observation; D = document.

TABLE 2. Student Participants From the Alternative School

Student	Age (years)	Race	Sex	Year at alternative school
Smiley	16	Hispanic	Female	1
Tarkeisha	17	African American	Female	2
Nook	15	African American	Male	1
Yancy	17	White	Male	2
Durrell	17	African American	Male	2
Tom	17	Half Irish/half Native American	Male	2
Christina	17	African American	Female	2
Felicia	15	White	Female	1
Emily	16	White	Female	1

years; (c) Mr. Bay, a Caucasian man who taught mathematics and had been at the school for 9 years; and (d) Mrs. Land, a Caucasian woman who taught science, had taught various subjects for 17 years, and had been at the school for 7 years. Table 3 summarizes the teacher participants.

Administrators. The administrator participants that we interviewed were Mr. Huff and Dr. Dix. Mr. Huff was responsible for taking care of daily matters such as students' behavioral issues, parents' visits, and other management concerns. He had worked at the school for 18 years. Dr. Dix gave us permission to conduct research in his school.

Results

To answer our research question regarding ways that the school program was beneficial to students in terms of equity, we categorized our data into two parts according to the emerging themes: positive views and negative views. The *positive views* included (a) I went from a dumping ground to a safety net and (b) I do not want to go back to the regular high school. The *negative views* were (a) I want to go to college, (b) I do not like the new building, and (c) We are left out of everything.

Positive Views

Two salient themes emerged from the coding process that supported our claim that the alternative school program benefited disenfranchised students in certain ways.

1. *I went from a dumping ground to a safety net.* According to the teachers, Prairie alternative school formerly housed students who dropped out of school, were delinquents, and violated school regulations. This created the school's reputation as a dumping ground for students who were unwanted and unwelcome at the regular high school. These students were overlooked in the regular high school and left to fend for themselves. The alternative school used to be a facility to which regular-school teachers sent classroom troublemakers to "get them out of their hair." Mr. Bay said,

> Well, basically, the alternative school, to me, was kind of a "dumping ground." If you had some troublemakers in your classroom, you would say, why don't we send them to alternative school? And that was what everybody was saying. It was a place for them to go, you know, kind of get them out of our hair. Now, they [students] are here because they are behind in credits. We are trying to get them back to where they should be, which is called credit recovery. This is a safety net, you might say . . . to get them back on track, but then, in a small atmosphere, less numbers.

Mrs. Land, the science teacher, commented,

> It [the school] quit being a "dumping ground." There are a few of the kids that still have behavioral problems, but I think students realize that it is not entirely that. And they don't feel the stigma that they felt in the past about it. They [regular schools] are pretty particular. They don't send us the really bad delinquents here any more.

The comments by Mr. Bay and Mrs. Land reflected the effects of the school policy to no longer accept delinquents;

TABLE 3. Teacher Participants at the Alternative School

Teacher	Sex	Content area	Tenure at alternative school (years)
Mr. Bard	Male	Social studies	5
Mrs. Burg	Female	English/reading	11
Mr. Bay	Male	Mathematics	9
Mrs. Land	Female	Science	7

students were at Prairie because they were behind in credits. The remarks of Mr. Bay and Mrs. Land showed that the school stopped being a dumping ground when it changed its program focus to credit recovery.

Dr. Dix explained that these changes were made at the district level 8 years previously. Under the leadership of two consecutive superintendents, the school revamped its program to focus on credit recovery to help students who were behind in their academic credits. The program became more structured with a specified curriculum goal, and it restricted the number of students who could attend. Students with behavioral problems were sent to the after-school program. Delinquent students had to attend the after-school program for a week and show improved behavior. Because of the change to focus on credit recovery, the alternative school did not seem to have many behavioral problems, as noted by the teachers and as revealed in our observations.

Another contributing factor to the improved school image from that of a dumping ground to that of a safety net was the change in 2003 from a half-day program to a full-day program. Before the alternative school implemented a full-day program, merchants in the community complained about students who were out on the street after school acting inappropriately, for example, being involved in gang activity. Since the school started having students at school for a full day until 2:30 p.m., complaints significantly subsided, and the school gained more positive recognition from the community. Students likely were influenced by the community's negative perceptions of the school and their views paralleled those of the community, creating a desire to avoid the negative association. Some students had had unconstructive experiences at the regular high school where they were negatively labeled. The labeling disenfranchised them further from the regular high school. Students had no choice about attending the alternative school because they were behind in graduation credits. However, their perceptions changed once they enrolled. Students expressed their hatred at having been placed at the school, but after attending for a while, they believed that it was a good environment for them. Tom said,

> Before I got here, they said to me, "You are going to have to go to the alternative school next year." I was like, "Don't send me there [alternative school]. I will do anything, I will go to summer school, I'll stay after school, I will do anything, please do not send me there." But they did. On the first day here, I was all mad. I was just like, "I hate this place." It was like a place where you never want to be. Everybody told me bad rumors about the school. This is the worst place you can go to. But now I like everything here in this school. If I don't like it I will stay away from it. If I didn't like anything here I would probably be doing exactly what I was doing in high school.

From our observation, Tom had a positive experience at the school. He always sat beside his girlfriend who tried to help him focus on classroom tasks. His teachers spoke highly about him for his changed behavior.

2. *I do not want to go back to the regular high school.* The goal of the alternative school was to move students to grade level in mathematics, science, social studies, and English. All the interviewees—teachers and students—believed that the school was trying to work as a safety net for the disenfranchised students so they could return to their regular high school to graduate. Although the policy of the alternative school was that students could stay for the 2-year maximum, all student interviewees said they wanted to stay until their graduation. Tom was one of the students who had to return to the regular high school the next year. He said,

> Everybody has been really good to me. In the beginning of my first year here, I didn't want to do anything. But they [teachers] stuck with me and made sure I was going to do my work. They knew I wanted to learn and they helped me through all that. And now I don't want to leave because they have been too good to me.

Tom indicated that the school environment created by caring teachers was the reason he wanted to stay at the school. However, Prairie regulations required him to return to the regular high school. Christina, who also liked the alternative school better, echoed Tom's sentiments: "Actually, I kind of like it over here a lot better. I don't want to go back to high school."

Tarkeisha could have attended the regular high school but chose to return to the alternative school after her 1st year at the alternative school. Although she had ambivalent feelings about her choice, she acknowledged that the school had helped her:

> I had the opportunity to go to the [regular] high school, but I chose to come back here because I thought it was better here for me than to be at the [regular] high school. . . . It's [alternative school is] a good deal for me. It's easier. It keeps me focused more than I think I would be at the [regular] high school. When I got here, everything was hard. But now, it's like I am racing through stuff, so it is really easier.

Tarkeisha's statement is noteworthy: She made a conscious choice to come to the alternative school because she believed it would be better for her. From our observations, she was more engaged than were other students, indicating that she was well adjusted to the school.

In contrast to Tarkeisha, Durrell was told he had to attend the alternative school. He said, "They [regular school administration] said I had to come here. So I came here and for some reason I liked it. So I just wanted to stay." Later in his interview, Durrell said that his favorite feature about the school was the teachers and "how everybody knows each other." In spite of the mandate for Durrell's attendance, he ultimately liked the school, its environment, and the teachers.

Yancy made a comparison between the school and his former regular high school, describing the regular high school as a place where they are "more stuck up":

> They [regular high school] will label you at the beginning of the year. Even when you do your work and you change,

they still label you. But down here [alternative school], they help you no matter what, unless you are sent out of class every day. They are good. If I wasn't going to drop out of school after this year, I would come back here because it is a lot easier than the [regular] high school. You get more help here. We spend more time on what we are doing than at the high school. Here they go slowly and step-by-step and so it is easier. Like graphing, we spent two and a half weeks on it and that way we know it. When we did the test, almost everybody passed it.

Yancy emphasized the extra help he received from teachers at the alternative school. His positive experience reflected in part what a progressive alternative school's educators should strive to achieve, for example, individual attention, teachers' willingness to help, and adjusting the pace of instruction for the students, ensuring their understanding.

Students' narratives showed that they did not want to return to the regular school—but, rather, they wanted to stay at Prairie as long as they could. They knew how much teachers and staff cared about helping them succeed. Mr. Huff affirmed the students' perceptions:

> I really want to stay. It would take a bomb to get me out of here. I really love what I am doing. . . . What keeps me here? The love of those kids. The love of kids. I look at it as someone has given up on these kids somewhere in their life. . . . Now for whatever reason, I am not going to be that person. I am not going to be the last person that says you are going to have to go out the door. . . . And that is what keeps me here. I want to see these kids make it, be successful, and become a contributing member of society.

Mr. Huff's love for the students and his commitment to their success seemed to positively influence students' desire to remain at the school. The teachers' tenure at the alternative school (see Table 2) also demonstrated their satisfaction with teaching at Prairie.

These positive themes indicate that Prairie provided a constructive experience for the students. Administrators and teachers believed they were providing the education that these students needed, and students believed they were doing a better job than they did in previous schools. Since Dr. Dix started sending students with behavioral issues to the after-school program at Prairie, teachers and students thought they could focus on learning without interruption. These positive themes confirmed why this program was well-known in the state and became a model program for other school districts.

Negative Views

The fact that students, teachers, and school staff agreed that their experience at this alternative high school had been positive was encouraging. However, three themes that required scrutinizing the school more carefully emerged: (a) I want to go to college, (b) I do not like the new building, and (3) We are left out of everything.

1. *I want to go to college.* Unlike the common belief that alternative school students do not wish to go to college, the students we interviewed wanted to attend college to achieve their dreams. Felicia said, "None of my family went to college. But I have better plans. I want to go to college, and if I can't afford to go to college I'll work like at a motel or whatever, and pay for college." Tarkeisha, who had been at Prairie for 2 years, identified her goal: "I want to be a pediatrician. I kept saying that since I was 6 years old. I want to go to college. My cousin is going to [college] for medical school." Smiley said, "I want to be an architect. I want to design houses. That is my goal, to become an architect. I'm going to finish college. . . . I want to start college right after I finish high school." Nook described his goals: "My goals are playing high school football and going to college. My grades are up. I got straight As and Bs." Christina expressed her realization that she needed to attend college: "I don't mind learning. I like math. I just try my best because I know I will have to go to college one day." Emily, who wanted to be a writer, said, "I really just want to graduate from the high school, and not disappoint any of my family members. I do want to go to college. I want to further my knowledge."

Students at this alternative school had hopes, dreams, goals, and aspirations for their futures. They identified a college education and their realizations of its importance. In contrast, the expectations of Dr. Dix for the students were different. He believed that reading and mathematics are the most important subjects. He believed that by teachers' emphasizing reading and mathematics, the students could do well enough to get by in science and social studies. According to Dr. Dix, these core basic courses may not prepare the students to become nuclear engineers, but, he rhetorically asked, "How many kids at the alternative school want to be a nuclear engineer?" Although the students interviewed did not identify nuclear engineering as a career goal, their aspirations included the medical field and architecture. Their dreams required a more rigorous college-bound curriculum and career counseling. However, the students did not receive such counseling at the alternative school, and precollege curriculum and career counseling were not part of the school's stated purpose or vision. Dr. Dix clearly possessed the traditional positivistic perspective, wherein the perceived role of schools as instrumental adjuncts of the workplace impose "technocratic rationality" on students (Apple, 2004; Eisner, 2001; Greene, 2003). Although the school's focus on credit recovery may help students graduate, the school needed to offer a rigorous curriculum beyond credit recovery.

Some teachers were critical about a curricular computerized program used extensively in the alternative school—the A+ program for students' credit recovery. According to Mr. Bard, the program was an easy way for students to recover credits. Students could go back to the same questions repeatedly until they knew the right answer. Some students wrote the answers down to ensure that they answered them correctly. With this program, students could earn a half credit in a week. Mr. Bard said, "I have seen kids flunk a semester from a regular school and come

down here [alternative school] and get credit in two days. What kind of integrity does that build?" Although the A+ program may build some students' self-confidence because they can earn credit in a short time, Mr. Bard's question makes a significant statement.

However, some students thought the A+ program was good for them. They were proud that they were earning credits and getting better grades than they did in the regular high school. They gained self-confidence and a sense of empowerment and control over their lives and learning. They realized that they could learn and that they were not "stupid." Smiley said,

> Now I have been doing A+. I have been doing good. I should have about seven and one-half credits at the end of this year. I am happy. My grades are really good and I am just proud of myself. I never thought I would do this good. I figured that I would get an F or something and not accomplish what I wanted to do.

Credit recovery seemed to be favored by some students because they could earn credits in a short time. This is revealing in the sense that credit recovery is not about meaningful learning, rather, it is about "getting it over with" as quickly as possible while earning a good grade by repetition or memorizing the answers. It is highly doubtful whether meaningful learning was taking place when the A+ curriculum was implemented as a quick fix.

The basic courses of reading, mathematics, science, and social studies taught by the 4 teachers was supposed to be the same (i.e., adopting the same textbooks) as those subjects taught at the nearby regular high school. Reasons for using the same curriculum were that it was easier for (a) making comparisons based on standardized test scores between the students in the two high schools and (b) fitting into the regular school program when students returned to the regular high school. However, the alternative school focused on remedial classes for students because they were at the fourth- and fifth-grade levels in mathematics and reading.

We observed that, with the exception of the social studies teacher, the alternative high school teachers rarely used high school textbooks. The teachers relied mostly on curriculum materials such as handouts and worksheets. Computers were integrated into teaching and learning in the four core classes. Each classroom had four or five computers for the students. Mr. Bard, social studies teacher, integrated movies, the Internet, field trips, and other formats that provided variety and multiple modes for understanding. Mr. Bay, mathematics teacher, tutored students individually when they had questions. Ms. Land, science teacher, created her own lessons without relying on the textbook. Mrs. Burg, English teacher, relied heavily on *Read 180*, a canned curriculum. There was scarce evidence of rigorous curriculum or instruction that the regular high school offered. The only paired work or cooperative groups that we observed were for worksheets; especially with the small class sizes, opportunities for other learning configurations were ignored.

Our interview transcripts revealed that students received some counseling for work study but not for college. Teachers advised the students to participate in jobs that did not require education beyond high school. Dr. Dix described plans for the 2006–2007 academic year to provide one elective course for students to work at Job Corps, a vocational training program administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, but the plans were not implemented during our observations and research. The school was entering into a contract with Job Corps that would provide transportation to and from the school, pay students $150 plus $25 every 2 weeks for being enrolled in the classes, a clothing allowance if students needed special clothing for the course, and $250 to students who completed the Job Corps program and graduated with a high school diploma.

Dr. Dix believed that job training was relevant to students; for him, relevancy meant that students must relate their education to their future jobs. He said, "So that is the kind of vision I have. To me, it is going to make school more real to these kids, more than anything we can do in the classroom." He also focused on external rewards for students, rather than cultivating their internal motivation and desire to learn for understanding. Dr. Dix believed that making the curriculum culturally relevant or considering students' different learning styles was not necessary because (a) it is impossible to meet every individual's different needs and interests and (b) it is not the way society operates. He implied that mathematics and science were not conducive to integrating culturally responsive teaching, expressing a mindset that continues to create learning environments that are not personally meaningful to students and that perpetuates disenfranchisement and marginalization. He also believed that students had to be prepared for the real world to remind them that there is no alternative work world.

2. I do not like the new building. The second theme with a negative perspective was that students did not like the new building. In spite of a $2.5 million initiative by Dr. Dix and the district to move into the renovated building housing the Center for Innovative Studies, the general consensus among teachers and students about the new building was negative. The reasons that the students did not like the new building were that (a) it was like a school, (b) it was too big, and (c) it had too many types of programs. Students had mixed feelings when preparations were under way for them to move to the new building. The old building was the place where their ties were formed and solidified. Overall, students felt that the old school was more like a home than a school. They expressed a definite dislike of the new facility. Christina said,

> I don't like this new building because it is like a school. Our old school building was smaller and we were comfortable. This is like an actual school building. I feel like they have put me back in the high school. It is more open, and too much space. I liked it when it was smaller.

Christina's comments that she did not like the new building because "it is like a school" implied that she did not

have a good school experience. Takeisha compared the old school to a home:

> No, I can't stand it [the new building]. I would rather be back in the old building because it is homey. We were closer together there [the old school] than we are now. They got a new building, new attitudes, and new rules. They just started coming up with their own rules and not doing what the Handbook says, but doing what they want.

Durrell confirmed Tarkeisha's feeling about the old building, expressing his feeling closer in the old school. His comments likely referred to the closeness felt by a family:

> It's not like the old building. The old one, it seems like we were closer. This one has everybody spread out. It don't seem like hardly anybody likes it. . . . I don't like it [new building]. I want to go back to the old building.

Yancy gave a contradictory account about the new school versus the old school. He began by identifying some of the things that he liked about the new school but then countered with the things he missed about the old building:

> It [new building] is bigger. There is a lot more room for the classes and we have a bigger cafeteria. At the old school there was a refrigerator and a microwave you could use and here you can't. We used to be able to bring stuff from home and pop it in the microwave.

We did not expect to find that students had negative feelings about the new building. This represented a common administrative practice of planning and implementing initiatives without involving the stakeholders (students and teachers) in the decision-making process. Another change that came with the new building was that students had to share it with the middle school students who also were behind in their credits for graduation. As the alternative school students and teachers moved to the new building, they experienced not only the challenge of getting used to the new physical building but also of middle school students being incorporated into the setting. (When the building is completely finished in a year, the school will also house the Head Start program and become complete as the Center for Innovative Studies.) Most students expressed their discomfort with the change in the program, particularly with the inclusion of the middle school students and the adjustments required because of their presence. Yancy said,

> I don't like the middle schoolers being here because they are all loud and we get in trouble. We had to close the bathrooms a couple of times because the little kids mess it up. We can't do a lot of stuff now that we used to do, like run around. It will get too out of hand. We are supposed to set an example for the little kids. We can't do what we want to now. We had a lot more freedom at the old school.

Christina disliked having middle school students in the building. She said,

> This is like an actual school setting. Now, we've got the middle schoolers and second chance people. We have too many different people. I liked it when it was smaller and didn't have the middle schoolers in it. They cause more trouble and they are in the hall and I don't like that part. It's like they ask for trouble.

Yancy's and Christina's narratives expressed resentment about having middle school students in the same building. The presence of middle school students in combination with the new building made them feel that they were in the regular school rather than in the old building with its feeling of closeness.

Teachers also expressed dissatisfaction with the building. They were not consulted about their classroom layout, equipment location, or the grounds surrounding the new facility. It did not have a gym. Mrs. Land, science teacher, pointed out that the new building was not necessarily better because it was surrounded by asphalt with no room outdoors for physical or class activities. Earlier at the old school building, she liked to take students outside as a part of her classroom activities. The teachers' dislike of the new building exposed another significant finding. They felt disenfranchised because they were not included in the planning and implementation of the new facility.

3. *We are left out of everything.* The alternative school teachers felt that they were treated as second-class citizens. The teachers were dissatisfied with the way that the school district treated them. Researchers and educators should not ignore this discontent because it exemplified another inequity in the alternative school. Teachers at the alternative school stated that they did not have the same opportunities for professional growth as did teachers in regular schools in the same school district. During teachers' district meetings, alternative school teachers felt like outsiders. Alternative school teachers had little involvement with regular teachers except when the regular school sent a problematic student to the alternative school. The e-mails in which alternative school teachers sent suggestions to their district administrators were ignored. District administrators waited 3–4 months before coming to the alternative school to fix a problem. Technically, this alternative school was considered part of the nearby regular high school. Although they were two different schools, the administration of the alternative school was included under the high school. However, according to Mr. Bard,

> This is the thing, the problem with alternative schools is that it is the dead end career wise. In this school district, we are left out of everything. Everything. I mean, I haven't been to a workshop, seminar, or anything since I have been in the alternative school. I don't get informed about it.

During the interview, Mr. Bard expressed his aggravation about being treated unequally by the school district. He also expressed his frustrations about some of the practices at the alternative school. According to Mr. Bard, this alternative school housed the "leftover teachers" from regular schools. He said paraprofessionals secured employment at the alternative school not by their qualifications—but by whom they knew. One paraprofessional at the alternative school was released from the regular high school because of sexual harassment. He was at the alternative school for awhile last year but ended up in jail. Mr. Bard showed his discontent with the administration. He said,

We have too many administrative conflicts. It is not a team effort here I don't think. I don't know what the program is going to be like for sure or not. What we decided on last year is not the same thing we have now.

Mr. Bay echoed what Mr. Bard reported:

As an alternative school we are told over and over and over, we don't have to do everything exactly like the high school, but you turn around and they try to model us after the high school. So we don't want to take any chances. And when we have in-services, we want to try new things, and make plans. But we turn around, and we are going back to the same grind.

The teachers' comments caused us to reconsider the positive view of how this school changed from a dumping ground to a safety net. Although the administration's work to change the perception of the school seemed to be somewhat successful, we had to consider the teachers' feelings about their positions at the alternative school. Teachers still felt they were not treated as equally and equitably as were teachers in the regular school. Therefore, we revisited Kelly's (1993) argument that students in the alternative school were treated as second-class citizens of education. Our findings indicated that not only students but also teachers were treated as second-class citizens of education, representing relationships of domination and subordination.

Discussion and Implications

Critical educators who work toward social change endorse theories that are *dialectical* (i.e., theories that "recognize the problems of society as more than isolated events of individuals or deficiencies in the social structure"; McLaren, 2003, p. 69). McLaren's statement implies that problems occurring in the school structure mirror those in the social structure at large. Hence, we believe that education problems are created in an interactive context between the school structure and the students who respond to it, which is opposed to the deficit-thinking paradigm that we described in the Introduction. Although we cannot argue that our findings represent the views of all students at Prairie, their implications are significant because they demonstrate consistent views from participants and our field notes.

We discovered that Prairie provided a caring environment in which students felt comfortable. This positive school experience for all participants was demonstrated by (a) changed perceptions of the alternative school from a dumping ground to a safety net and (b) students' initial disdain for the school but later belief that it was a good place from which they wanted to graduate. These changed perceptions implied that the school program benefited Prairie students by offering the nurturing environment that they needed to succeed. Students had a good relationship with those teachers who were caring, understanding, and respectful. Teachers and students believed that they

were part of a family in their small-school environment in which only 6–10 students were in each classroom, giving them a welcome feeling that they did not experience in the regular high school. Teachers gained the trust of those students who believed that the teachers were at the school to help them succeed. Students consistently identified the characteristics of Prairie teachers and staff that represented respect, caring, honesty, genuineness, and trust (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994).

However, on a deeper level, the school seemed to lack systemic support that would break the cycle of educational inequality. For this alternative program to provide equal and equitable educational opportunities that would help break this cycle, the school needs to reconsider its program and provide more integral, systemic support.

First, Prairie needs to offer a more rigorous curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking, synthesis, and higher order thinking, which, in turn, would help students achieve their goals. The low-level curriculum was behavioristic and reductive—it only helped students recover the credits needed for graduation or obtain basic skills, which are common practices in schools serving low-income, marginalized students (Anyon, 1980; Dance, 2002; Fine, 1991; Oakes, 1985). For instance, the A+ program that was designed to help students recover high school credits did not represent real learning or understanding. It was a mechanistic drill with numerous flaws. A+ not only was devoid of the meaning of why students' learning was important but also lacked interaction between teacher and students and students and peers. Its purpose seemed to be a quick fix; it did not build student integrity. A+ did not position students in engaged or deep meaningful learning for understanding or higher order critical thinking. This represents Freire's (1997) *banking education*, in which students are considered passive receptacles and merely learn how to get by. A+ deprived Prairie students of the education that they deserved and needed to achieve their goals. Student retention and meaningful learning in these types of cases is, at best, questionable.

Second, Prairie needs to invite students and teachers to join in planning and implementing school changes. It is disheartening that students and teachers did not like the new building in spite of the school district's $2.5 million investment. The modern look of the new school building was appealing with its spaciousness, cafeteria, and lockers. However, it was revealing that students and teachers reacted negatively to the new building and voiced their resentment about housing programs such as Head Start and about the middle and high school students occupying the same building. The perspective of the school district may have been that the new building would be efficient for administering all the alternative programs, but it was more like a warehouse in a newer facility. Having all the disenfranchised students from preschool through high school in one building could negatively affect students' self-esteem and promote a self-fulfilling prophecy. Making changes in

the Prairie program without inviting input from teachers and students alienated both groups. Instead of Prairie's improving students' and teachers' self-worth, participants experienced oppression and an absence of ownership in the process or outcome. This form of hierarchical decision making was embedded in the education system in general and continued to reinforce disenfranchisement.

Last, the school district needs to increase its support of teachers at Prairie. Opportunities for professional growth for alternative school teachers need to be offered more systematically, and the teachers' work needs to be highly valued. Teachers' resentment about how they were treated should be acknowledged and addressed. Teaching at an alternative school should not feel like being in a dead-end career or being a second-class teacher who works with students whom the regular school has discarded. Unless the school district makes a systemic effort to boost the level of support for the teachers, the negative image about the alternative school will persist.

From the critical-theory perspective, we infer that without such systemic support, the alternative school will maintain the status quo that is reinforced by dominant groups who are not interested in breaking the cycle of educational inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983; Persell, 1977). The school will serve merely as a tool to reproduce the ideologies of the dominant social groups and the hierarchy of the class structure rather than promote social change, equality, and equity. Hence, not only students but also teachers at Prairie will not benefit enough from the school program and structure. This lack of support perpetuates the need for self-emancipation and social change rather than satisfying it.

Conclusion

We revisited the purpose of an alternative school for disenfranchised students by investigating its program and the nature of alternative education from multiple perspectives. Our emerging themes—positive and negative—indicate the successes and failures of Prairie, now known as the Center for Innovative Studies. We found that the school provided a caring environment for the students and gained their trust (Noddings, 2005; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). However, the school did not offer the alternative described by Conley (2002), which encourages students to achieve their goals by providing a needed equitable education.

Ultimately, a multidimensional state of disequilibrium permeated the school environment. One facet represented a state of caring that existed between students, teachers, and administrators. Another facet disclosed an authoritarian and hegemonic bureaucracy, which prevented the school from providing an education beneficial to the students. Because of the disequilibrium, we asked who truly benefited from this kind of alternative education. The alternative education at Prairie was evidently offered to benefit the population of the regular high school with an assumption

that it might work better without the problem students in this era of the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Moreover, housing the Head Start Program and the alternative middle and high schools in one new building seemed to be a way of warehousing disenfranchised students. Providing a new, expensive building without substantive and innovative curricular changes and without a hearing of students and teachers was a benign but superficial act. Consequently, the school vision remained shortsighted and did not challenge the status quo.

Our findings are significant for the following reasons:

1. A caring and safe learning environment does not necessarily guarantee an equal and equitable education. An ethical ideal of caring must be nurtured through dialogue, practice, and confirmation (Noddings, 2005).
2. Mainstream education marginalizes not only students in alternative schools but also their teachers.
3. When planning and implementing school changes, policymakers should hear the voices of students and teachers. This requires policymakers to reconsider their hierarchical decision-making practice, which pervades the education system in general.

We hope that the significance of our research outcomes will contribute to the development of successful and effective alternative education programs, thereby enhancing social justice. We urge educators to critically examine and redefine the programs of alternative schools. As the number of these schools continues to grow in the United States, educators must develop alternative programs that disrupt the status quo, leading in turn to educational policy for equity and social justice. To provide an alternative education that successfully eliminates inequities and disequilibrium, we must first posit this question: For whom is the education alternative?

NOTES

1. We use *school* and *school program* interchangeably to refer to Prairie Alternative High School because teachers in our study referred to their school as an alternative program, whereas students called it a school.
2. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
3. Each participant self-identified his or her ethnicity and age.

REFERENCES

Anfara, V. A., Brown, K. M., & Mangione, T. (2002). Qualitative analysis on stage: Making the research process more public. *Educational Researcher, 31,* 28–38.

Anyon, J. (1980). Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Journal of Education, 162,* 67–92.

Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto schooling: A political economy of urban educational reform.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Apple, M. (2004). *Ideology and curriculum* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge Falmer.

Arnove, R. F., & Strout, T. (1980). Alternative schools for disruptive youth. *Educational Forum, 44,* 452–471.

Billings, J. A. (1995). *Educational options and alternatives in Washington state.* Olympia, WA: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books.

Conley, B. (2002). *Alternative schools: A reference handbook*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Conrath, J. (2001). A Kappan special section on alternative schools: Changing the odds for young people—Next steps for alternative education. *Phi Delta Kappan, 82*, 585–587.

Dance, L. J. (2002). *Tough fronts: The impact of street culture on schooling (critical social thought)*. New York: Routledge Falmer.

Denzin, N. K. (2005). Emancipatory discourses and the ethics and politics of interpretation. In N. K. Denzin & U. S Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 933–954). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dryfoos, J. G. (1997). Adolescents at risk: Shaping programs to fit the need. *Journal of Negro Education, 65*(1), 5–18.

Eisner, E. (2001). What does it mean to say a school is doing well? *Phi Delta Kappan, 82*(5), 367–372.

Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Fontana, A., & Frey, J. (2005). The interview: From neutral stance to political involvement. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative inquiry* (3rd ed., pp. 695–728). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Freire, P. (1997). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Giroux, H. (1983). Theories of reproduction and resistance in the new sociology of education: A critical analysis. *Harvard Educational Review, 53*, 257–293.

Giroux, H. (2001). *Theory and resistance in education: Towards a pedagogy for the opposition*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

Giroux, H. (2003). Critical theory and educational practice. In A. Darder, M. Baltodano, & R. Torres (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader* (pp. 27–56). New York: Routledge.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.

Goodman, G. S. (1999). *Alternatives in education: Critical pedagogy for disaffected youth*. New York: Peter Lang.

Greene, M. (2003). In search of a critical pedagogy. In A. Darder, M. Baltodano, & R. Torres (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader* (pp. 97–112). New York: Routledge Falmer.

Kelly, D. M. (1993). *Last chance high: How girls and boys drop in and out of alternative schools*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Kim, J. H. (2006). For whom the school bell tolls: Conflicting voices inside an alternative high school. *International Journal of Education and the Arts, 7*, 1–21.

Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Land, D., & Legters, N. (2002). The extent and consequences of risk in U.S. education. In S. Stringfield & D. Land (Eds.), *Educating at-risk students* (pp. 1–28). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Marsh, C., & Willis, G. (2003). *Curriculum: Alternative approaches, ongoing issues* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill-Prentice Hall.

Mcgee, J. (2001). A Kappan special section on alternative schools: Reflections of an alternative school administrator. *Phi Delta Kappan, 82*, 585–588.

McLaren, P. (2003). Critical pedagogy: A look at the major concepts. In A. Darder, M. Baltodano, & R. Torres (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader* (pp. 69–96). New York: Routledge.

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2001). *Public alternative schools and programs for students at risk of education failure: 200-1-01*. Executive summary. Retrieved October 14, 2006, from http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/frss/publications/2002004/6.asp

Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Persell, C. H. (1977). *Education and inequality: The roots and results of stratification in America's schools*. New York: The Free Press.

Raywid, M. A. (1995). Alternative schools: The state of the art. *Educational Leadership, I*(September), 26–31.

Rogers, C., & Freiberg, H. J. (1994). *Freedom to learn* (3rd ed.). New York: Merrill.

Stake, R. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 443–466). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2002). No Child Left Behind: A desktop reference. Retrieved March 7, 2007, from http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2002/12/index.html?src=ln

Valencia, R. R. (1997). Introduction. In R. Valencia (Ed.), *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice* (pp. 1–12). Washington, DC: Falmer Press.

Valencia, R. R., & Solorzano, D. G. (1997). Contemporary deficit thinking. In R. Valencia (Ed.), *The evolution of deficit thinking* (pp. 160–210). Washington, DC: Falmer Press.

Waxman, H. (1992). Reversing the cycle of educational failure for students in at-risk school environments. In H. Waxman, J. de Felix, J. Anderson, & P. Baptiste Jr. (Eds.), *Students at risk in at-risk schools: Improving environments for learning* (pp. 1–10). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Young, T. W. (1990). *Public alternative schools: Options and choice for today's schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

APPENDIX A
Interview Questions for Students

Name: _____   Age: _____

Ethnicity: _____   Gender: _____   Grade: _____

1. How did you get to this school?
   a. How long have you been in this school?
   b. What school did you go to before?
   c. Why did you choose to come here?

2. What is your school experience like?

3. How do you perceive this school?

4. What are your learning interests/needs?

5. Do you think the school meets/supports your interests/needs? Why or why not?

6. What do you think of the learning materials (curriculum materials)?

7. What are your aspirations after school?
   a. Is this school helping you to pursue your aspirations?
   b. If yes, how? If no, why not?

APPENDIX B
Interview Questions for Teachers
_____

Name: _____   Age: _____

Ethnicity: _____   Gender: _____

Years Teaching: _____   Years Teaching in this school: _____

Grade(s) and Subject teaching: _____

Degree: _____   Concentration: _____

 1. How did you get to this school?
    a. How long have you been in this school?
    b. What school did you teach at before?
    c. Why did you choose to come here?

 2. What is your teaching experience like in this school?

 3. How do you perceive this school?

 4. What are your teaching interests/needs?

 5. What do you think students' needs/interests are?

 6. Do you think the school meets/supports your interests/needs? Why or why not?

 7. What do you think of the curriculum materials you use?

 8. What kind of support do you receive from the administration?

 9. What do you think the community's perception of the school is?

10. How are parents involved?

APPENDIX C
Interview Questions for Administrators
_____

Name: _____   Age: _____

Ethnicity: _____   Gender: _____

Years in administration: _____   Years working in this school: _____

Degree: _____

 1. How did you get to this school?
    a. How long have you been in this school?
    b. What school did you work at before?
    c. Why did you choose to come here?

 2. What is your professional experience like in this school?

 3. How do you perceive this school?

 4. What are your teaching interests/needs?

 5. What do you think students' needs/interests are?

 6. Do you think the school meets/supports your interests/needs? Why or why not?

 7. What kind of support do you receive from the administration?

 8. What do you think the community's perception of the school is?

 9. How are parents involved?

JER

<u>Among Those Present</u>

R. WILLIAM DOHERTY is an assistant researcher at the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, & Excellence (CREDE) in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. His work focuses on improving pedagogy in higher education and restructuring teacher-education programs to better prepare new teachers for diverse classrooms. He is interested in the ethics of research in education. **R. SOLESTE HILBERG** is an education research analyst, also at CREDE. Her recent research includes effective pedagogy to achieve educational equity and greater achievement for all students, particularly those from groups not traditionally served by U.S. schools. She is also interested in teacher–student discourse in mathematics instruction.

JEONG-HEE KIM is an assistant professor in curriculum studies in the Department of Secondary Education at Kansas State University. Her current research interests focus on curriculum theory, narrative research methods, and teachers as researchers. **KAY ANN TAYLOR** is an assistant professor in foundations of education at the same university. Her research focuses on current and historical issues of equity for educators and students from underrepresented backgrounds. She also addresses multicultural issues to bring these theories and ideas into various disciplines.

JENNIFER WILHELM is an assistant professor of mathematics and science education in the College of Education at Texas Tech University. The focus of her research involves the design and implementation of inquiry-based, project-enhanced interdisciplinary learning environments. Her interdisciplinary research primarily concerns the productive integration of mathematics and science; mathematics, science, and technology; and mathematics, science, and language arts. **SONYA SHERROD** is a graduate assistant in the College of Education at the same university. She is interested in classroom interactions and discourse. **KENDRA WALTERS** is a science teacher at Wester Middle School in Frisco, Texas. Her interests include project-based instruction.

MICHAEL GREEN is an associate professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. His primary interests are improving mathematics performance of elementary students and their teachers through constructivist theory. **JOHN A. PIEL** is an associate professor at the same university. He is interested in the impact of constructivist teaching practices on students learning mathematics. **CLAUDIA FLOWERS** is a professor at the University of Carolina at Charlotte and specializes in applied statistics and alternate assessments.

AMY E. AUWARTER is a counselor at the Eugene field Accelerated School in Mexico, Missouri. **MARA S. ARUGUETE** is an associate professor at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. She teaches psychology.

ROBERT M. CAPRARO is an associate professor of mathematics education at Texas A&M University. His research interests include mathematical representations, quantitative methods, and mathematics teacher preparation. **BRUCE THOMPSON** is a distinguished professor of educational psychology and distinguished professor of library science at Texas A&M University and an adjunct professor of family and community medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. His areas of specialization are statistics and measurement.