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# Towards a New Discourse on Success in Alternative Education

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Towards a New Discourse on Success in Alternative Education

by

Samuel Thomas Settelmeyer

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Social Work and Social Research

Dissertation Committee:  
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**Abstract**

Although researchers agree that Alternative Education (AE) within the United States is an essential set of schools and programs that do things beyond traditional education, they do not agree on the purpose for these efforts. To understand how researchers can connect between existing perspectives and consider new ways that they can discuss success in the future, I interviewed 16 students and 15 staff from three different AE schools within the same state. Through thematic analysis, I found students and staff to describe success as an amalgamation of individual and common conceptions, requiring individual effort and support, a commitment to daily action as well as a wider, longer-term vision. AE students and staff also shared extensively about the role constructive relationships played in their pursuit of success. AE students and staff help broaden the ways researchers and policy makers can look at success in the future. They also provide glimmerings of what relationships based on wider conceptions of power can look like, something with increasingly wide implications when we broaden our considerations to relationships between not just students and staff, but also parents, the district, the local community, and society at large.

### **Acknowledgements**

Exiting my teacher preparation program, I solemnly swore that I would NEVER get a PhD. Without the beautiful and challenging experiences of my first three years teaching, I would not have. For this, I have my coworkers and students to thank, several of whom I have the bounty of being in touch with to the present day. In homage to their support, I have used a collection of their names as the pseudonyms for the students and staff I interviewed.

I feel like I have called on most people associated with the PSU School of Social Work at one time or another for support. Thet Mar Win has been a rock for me, as well as what appears to be the entire School, from the start to the end of my journey. My work at Boys and Girls Aid with Karen Pomerantz, supported by Dr. Jennifer Blakeslee was foundational to keeping me grounded during coursework, and keeping me just sane enough to carry on. My “Dolphin Pod” cohort of Anita, Nazan, Lisha, Meg, Nicole, and Sophie will always be with me in spirit, even if we have found many diverse and exciting ways to spend our time these days. I would also like to thank Dr. Junghee Lee, who always had my back and helped me keep my academic efforts in wider life context.

As I slowly but surely transitioned out of the structure provided by coursework, my network of support got more eclectic. I cannot possibly name all the souls who patiently and kindly inquired into what I was up to, as I tried out various long-winded ways of trying to describe how I was thinking about my dissertation at the time. I will remember your patience when I get the opportunity to be a hearing ear for others in the future.

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I have additionally leaned on my wonderful committee members. I appreciate each member as a wonderfully distinct example of how people can do exceptional stuff, and I have been so thankful for their support with writing, methodology, philosophy, and the ocean of other practical things that came up along the way.

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Lastly, I want to acknowledge the way Baha'u'llah and the Baha'i Faith have fundamentally shaped and driven my PhD experiences. In many ways, my spiritual education answered the questions that drove me to grad school, which became an

opportunity to apply the new things I had learned. I have been humbled by and am so grateful for the growth and opportunities I have received as I have made effort to understand and apply Baha'u'llah's teachings to my life, and I look forward to continuing to do this into the future.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Alternative Education (AE) has shaped and confounded me as a student, teacher and now as a researcher. My reading of extant literature has affirmed that I am not alone: Although researchers seem to agree that AE within the United States is an essential set of schools and programs that do things beyond traditional education, they do not agree on the purpose for these efforts. Some literature depicts AE as a means by which to support students to graduate from high school (Aron, 2006; Foley & Pang, 2006; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Thomson & Pennacchia, 2016; Tobin & Sprague, 2000; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Other researchers describe success for AE schools and programs as necessarily shaped and defined by a school or other smaller context (Bascia & Maton, 2016; Flower et al., 2011; Jordan et al., 2017; Quinn et al., 2006; Raywid, 2001; Schwab et al., 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Still other researchers imply success for AE students is necessarily specific to each individual (Hemmer, 2014; Kamrath, 2019; Lehr et al., 2009; Rudge, 2016; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Through my review of extant literature, I will demonstrate that each of these three perspectives provides clarity and incurs limitations on establishing a deeper understanding of AE success. In the present study, I aim to begin constructing a new way to discuss success that builds on and goes beyond these current approaches.

### **Aims and Significance of Proposed Research**

Constructing a new way of discussing and pursuing success across an entity as large as AE within the U.S. is beyond the scope of any one project. My aims in the

present study are to interconnect discordant views of AE success I have encountered in extant research and policy and offer new assumptions that researchers could consider in their future research. In pursuit of these two aims, I will explore the following research questions:

1. How do AE students and staff define success?
2. How do AE students and staff work towards their conceptions of success?

I turn to AE students and staff and their conceptions of success because I believe them to have experience connecting between discordant perspectives. The rationale for this inquiry is two-fold: (1) interweaving distinct perspectives on AE success will resolve longstanding limitations of extant research and (2) identifying new assumptions capable of building a unifying conception of success in AE will allow future research to move beyond the tendency to frame relationships as a battle for power. Connecting between existing and reaching for new perspectives on foundational issues is useful in other areas of research and practice in which researchers and/or practitioners do not discuss or define widely held goals or constructs, such as social justice in Social Work (Thyer, 2010; Young, 2011).

Insights flowing from educational efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic further motivate the importance of this project. For example, initial research on the pandemic sought to understand surface level phenomena, such as the rate at which COVID-19 had spread within schools, or how staff were shifting their teaching to emergency online instruction (Hinrichs, 2021; Wyse et al., 2020). However, just like in AE, restricting research on the impact of COVID-19 to related methods will miss the opportunity to

explore deeper layers of thought. Some researchers took the opportunity to ask these deeper questions, for example exploring how COVID-19 may have revealed new insights about relatedness or systemic racism (Anderson-Nathe, 2020; C. Murray et al., 2020; Reza, 2020). I believe that what we as researchers, school staff, community members, parents, and students will learn from the pandemic will depend on the depth and sincerity of the questions we ask ourselves now. As an AE researcher, I would be loath to miss an opportunity to explore new ways of defining and pursuing success within a historical moment in which staff and students have had their conceptions of school so actively challenged.

If I as a researcher am committed to exploring deeper thoughts and values with AE students and staff, then I too need to consider my own experiences and convictions (Hylton, 2012). If I say that identifying and exploring foundational assumptions is essential to constructing clearer approaches to AE success, then I too need to reflect on the assumptions and experiences that shape my own research. I shall therefore begin by sharing how my education and employment in AE settings and investigation of the Bahá'í Faith. These experiences have shaped how I read literature, the research questions I posed, and the theoretical frameworks I strive to embody.

### **Positionality and Experience in AE**

To put my engagement with the present study in wider context, I will share three formative experiences. Across these experiences, driven by curiosity and a desire to channel my energies towards positive opportunities, I tend to jump in. After jumping, I then realize that I have entered a promising and often challenging context. Many of my

jumps have been into different formal education contexts. Each of these submersions has helped me to learn ways in which I am distinct and similar to other members of my human family. More than sentimental anecdotes and fodder for philosophical musings, these experiences in my own education, employment, and search for truth shaped how I currently think and approach the present study.

The first and most tentative jump that I will describe was into middle school. In one sense, I failed to jump into the traditional school, which was double the size of my elementary and completely terrified me at the time. Based on what I had heard about middle school, 5<sup>th</sup> grade me was concerned about how I could socially navigate and continue to grow in this new environment. My parents and I quickly located a public single room school in town. It shared a campus with a somewhat mysterious program for high schoolers that hadn't quite made it at the so-called regular high school. Motivated by this novel configuration and the ominous way I had built up the traditional middle school, I enrolled in the alternative. I preferred to jump into the pond rather than what I perceived to be an uncertain ocean.

My positive experiences affirmed my decision to enroll in this new school. The highlights included an art and mathematics-centric curriculum, and a single teacher and group of classmates whom I grew to know quite well. With the benefit of hindsight, I see that essentially all my new peers shared my desire for a smaller learning environment. I have also realized that around half of us used this environment to advance faster/dive deeper than we would have experienced in a traditional school. The other half of us used the smaller school to receive additional support and remediation. While I would

eventually transfer to the traditional middle school due to impending budget cuts and a desire to prepare myself for the even larger high school, my decision to interact with this alternative education program was an extremely formative one.

Hindsight and a reading of AE literature helps me to put my 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade experiences in larger context: I had interacted with an AE program, with a locally defined and controlled conception of success. The school's one teacher had the flexibility to prioritize math and English literacy, artistic expression, and collaboration. Our smaller class size allowed for novel curricular experiences to work towards these ends, such as Lego robotics team competitions, as well as a nimble day to day schedule. This smaller social environment, a range of weekly volunteering opportunities (e.g., nursing home and middle school library), and participation in sports also helped me gain experience forming and sustaining friendships. This boosted my confidence, preparing me to engage with the very learning environment that I had previously sought to avoid.

Reflecting on my own experience also helps me to consider the way we conceptualize young people who may be interacting with AE. As an eleven-year-old, I was quite concerned with learning as much as I could to help others in the future. From observing my classmates, I had a sense that they had similar aspirations, although how they went about learning and what they specifically aspired for was necessarily distinct. At that time, many of my observations and questions centered on how to best cultivate my own capacities. Flashing to now, I have a new wave of questions beyond my own educational access: As someone who has sought out and benefitted from AE supports, what role do I have for increasing access to educational opportunities for all? What role



do I, an upper-middle class white male, have in providing access to quality education to every child? How do I - as someone who has received support from my family and wider society to be able to focus on my education and accessing tools by which to grow - value my experiences and realize that they do not mirror everyone else's? My desire to lean into my own experience and explore how others understand the purpose of education has helped me to pose the question driving the current analysis to a diverse range of students and staff: how do you define and work towards success?

Another jump I took occurred as I wrapped up my undergraduate degree requirements. I thought exploring educational efforts in different cultural contexts would help prepare me for my upcoming master's in education program. I also envisioned that these experiences would serve as a nice break from my immersive and at times intense approach to my studies. This set the stage for four months in Cape Town, South Africa, and a similar stint in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. In both locations, I used contacts and my university's study abroad programs to create opportunities to get into various classroom settings. In Cape Town, this involved volunteering in many different contexts, and concurrently taking classes online. In Santo Domingo, this consisted of working as a substitute teacher and assistant full time for a K-12 private school. These experiences helped me to see a deeper level of my own thinking for the first time. In many ways, this provided the first draft of my theoretical framework section of the present analysis.

Thinking of culture as a soup in which we are all submerged, this was my first experience jumping into a different pot. Not only did this help me to question many of

my own foundational assumptions about time, relationship, role of the family, and purpose of education, but also shed light on the simple and challenging fact that my perception of reality wasn't the only one. Or even a particularly good or useful one. It also gave me some experiences with operating in a new cultural context in which I was very visibly an outsider: How was I to act? What elements of my differentness should I change? Which should I sustain? How could I act on my belief that every person I came across was a good one, while also being realistic about the translational work that would be necessary to build a connection?

While these experiences helped to make visible some of the diversity of our human family, they also affirmed in me a deep sense of our sameness. The young man I got to help prepare for his end of secondary education exams in Cape Town was extremely street savvy, loving and almost illiterate. There wasn't enough room in another school to accommodate the deluge of middle schoolers who wanted extra maths (yes, intentionally British) help on Saturday mornings. Most of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade Dominican students were better equipped to navigate our calculus class in English or Spanish than I was and were occupied with whether they would be moving to the U.S. to pursue tertiary education. During one fateful car ride along the border with Haiti, a group of friends and I explored a series of bustling marketplaces. After over an hour of driving, I could count the number of white faces I had seen on one hand. I have never been more aware of the pigment of my skin. Across these contexts, resources were bountifully present in some places, and sorely missing in others. No place had a magic methodological formula with respect to how to support young people in building their

intellectual and spiritual capacity, nor applying this capacity to help our world. Violence, lethargy, and explicit or implicit prejudice seemed to plague all. Further guided by some concurrent spiritual growth that I will explain shortly, my experiences abroad were formative to me later attempting to reconcile the socially constructed nature of reality as well as underlying, cross-contextual truths. These experiences put me on a path towards an epistemology that embraces human perception as constructed and infinitely contextualized with an ontology that maintains there are fundamental truths that can be slowly, always partially uncovered.

The third and final jump I will share occurred as I exited my master's program. Up to this point, I had groomed my resume for an advanced math and physics position at a specialized or large urban high school. Much of my training at this point had focused on content, while many of my experiences abroad and otherwise had also alerted me to the many elements of a learning environment that goes beyond academically rigorous curriculum. I had resigned myself to learning how to teach the subjects I had grown to love, namely physics, then add in real life things over time. How I would go about this was not very precise in my mind, but it did prime me to notice an AE program that described its mission as getting to know students as real people and working to build useful life skills. I had planned to ease into aspirations like these over time, but this program seemed to already be working towards the same ends. These priorities seemed more important than any physics problem or math formula. After experiencing a very engaging and heartfelt interview process, I was all in.

The stories, insights and epic fails from my three years of teaching could fill volumes. On my first day, I had to prevent one student from physically assaulting another, because the former had *snitched* - a term I previously hadn't heard, but quickly learned about - on another. After a particularly turbulent set of interactions with a group of young men (at the time they were friends, now I would say we all are), one informed me that I really needed to take a spa day. Many of the students in my Algebra 1 class, all of whom had failed all three years of math during middle school, began to see themselves as not only capable, but skilled problem solvers with a growing understanding of all the strange symbols. Countless one on one and whole group discussions about our current actions and future aspirations occurred. While it may have been a bumpy ride, I was fully confident that I could identify and work towards a goal with any and every student. While much of this conception of success would be in the language and world view of each individual, we would also use graduation requirements and other life skills to have an ongoing conversation about success. Contrary to AE literature's conceptualization of success as a collection of distinct perspectives, no one indicator really reflected the success I tried to work towards with students.

Interactions with coworkers further refined and tested my ability to describe and work towards success. Overall, I found this task much harder than working with students. Many of my peers would focus on how aggressive, defiant, lazy, or rude a given student was. Others channeled their efforts into the specific curriculum or key insights they thought would be formative. With the benefit of hindsight, I can now say that I really struggled for ways to interact with the divergent focusses of my peers. At the time, I

simply viewed these coworkers and the larger school environment to be the problem that wider society needed to fix, rather than the students that staff had labeled as “at risk” and blamed for whatever situation they may have found themselves in.

My discontent with the idea that educational transformation could occur if teachers and schools simply got their act together eventually festered enough to drive me back to school. My thinking remained constrained to combative relationships. The Sam of 2016 thought that there must be a naïve and/or explicitly evil-intentioned person sitting in a state or federal desk somewhere, brainwashing teachers. I have since come to realize how unhelpful my focus on the problems around me and assumed intentions of conflict were, aided by meeting several state-level stakeholders and deepening my understanding of what is relationally possible through my study of the Bahá'í Faith. These experiences drew me to AE literature and to explore the different ways that researchers and practitioners could conceptualize power. I came to see growth within an individual, institution, or community not as a process of assigning blame and rooting out problems, but an iterative process by which we better embrace the unique and similar aspects that each member of humanity.

My investigation of the Bahá'í Faith was instrumental in providing the language and metaphors through which I could describe my own experience as well as structure a vision for the future. I would not have internalized my accounted experiences the way I have described without the moral framework provided by my Faith (Lample, 2004; McLaren & Jandrić, 2018). In particular, the importance ascribed to justice, unity in

diversity and a press to consider the end of a given venture from the very outset helped my experiences in AE to congeal into the present study.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

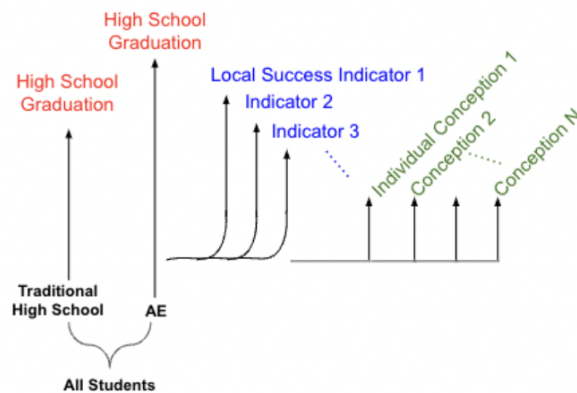
Alternative Education (AE), which I will broadly take to be educational efforts beyond traditional education, is widely present across the United States: some 10,000 public AE schools served approximately 600,000 students during the 2000-2001 school year (Foley & Pang, 2006), with these estimates likely increasing significantly over the following decade considering continued challenges with supporting all students in traditional educational spaces (Gagnon & Barber, 2015). In 2007-2008, more than 3 out of 5 U.S. school districts reported offering at least one AE program, a 20% increase from just 6 years earlier (Carver & Lewis, 2010; Kleiner et al., 2002). In 2017, AE schools accounted for 6% of all U.S. high schools (Deeds & Depaoli, 2017).

The prevalence of AE has drawn the attention of state and national policymakers, primarily for the low rate at which AE schools and programs are supporting students to graduate from high school. Deeds and Depaoli (2017) report AE schools to be six times as likely as their traditional counterparts to have a low-graduation rate, meaning “either that these alternative schools are not high quality and are not doing enough to get young people to graduation, or that these mechanisms for measurement are not reflective of the progress actually made within alternative schools” (p. 17). Given the correlation of high school graduation with several other positive life outcomes (e.g., mental health and employment), AE’s challenges with supporting students to graduate has profound, long-term implications (Baker et al., 2020; Campbell, 2015; Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Rumberger, 2020).

While AE may be garnering attention from policy makers because of questions about high school graduation, not all researchers would frame AE’s purpose this way. Nor would they agree about how to work towards said purpose. Through my reading of research and policy, I have found researchers to discuss success in AE settings in three distinct ways: high school graduation, a locally valued construct (e.g., resilience), or a construct defined by each individual. In addition to distinct end-goals, each of these groups of researchers also uses its own language and definitions of what constitutes rigorous evidence to support its claims. In the present study, I turn to AE students and staff to articulate success in a way that can span these divided perspectives. To this end, I will more thoroughly describe each of the three perspectives I am claiming to have located in extant literature. I will define each, how its proponents would have AE grow into the future and explore insights and limitations each perspective brings. From this foundation, I will then explore ways AE students and staff can shed light on ways to span these perspectives through their own definitions and pursuit of success.

**Figure 1**

*Representation of common AE success conceptions.*





**AE as a High School Graduation Intervention**

To address concerns about the impact AE schools may be having, some researchers and policy makers suggest clearer and differentiated descriptions of AE success (Flower et al., 2011). Those maintaining this perspective posit that lacking a clear definition of success makes it harder to identify and support AE schools and students, the very schools and students who need this support the most (Deeds & Depaoli, 2017; Porowski et al., 2014). In order to develop a more robust conception of success in AE settings, the Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S.C., 2015) asked states to articulate their own definitions, metrics and accountability criteria for AE schools and programs (Deeds & Depaoli, 2017; Egalite et al., 2017; Hodge & Welch, 2017; Kannam & Weiss, 2019).

In response to the call from ESSA, states have considered a wider range of indicators of student and school success. Within the evaluation structure provided by ESSA, some states have begun considering extended-year graduation rates, one-year graduation rates (based on students on track to graduate entering their senior year) and completion rate as alternative measurements of success, to name but a few (Atwell et al., 2019; Deeds & Malter, 2016; Kannam & Weiss, 2019). Gillis (2017) provides a particularly comprehensive investigation of three states' innovative AE accountability criteria, highlighting the opportunities for states to learn from each other's success definitions and measures. These more diverse measures (e.g., school climate and strength of diploma index) may reflect a more rigorous means by which to assess and monitor AE student and school progress towards high school graduation (Deeds & Depaoli, 2017; Egalite et al., 2017; Geer, 2018).

Increasing the number of measures that schools use to monitor student progress towards high school graduation helps make graduation rates more meaningful. For example, Uretsky (2019) explores of the experience of persisters (still enrolled students who have not earned a high school credential by their expected graduation date) and helps to understand how a larger portion of students' progress towards high school graduation. Researchers have also found increased attendance to positively impact student graduation (Gottfried & Ehrlich, 2018; Hemmer, 2012, 2014; Porowski et al., 2014; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Considering more factors that may be contributing to students graduating from high school will help researchers get a clearer idea of how well AE schools and programs are helping students to graduate. Considering these factors for distinct student subgroups (e.g. Tajalli & Garba, 2014) will also clarify which students AE is effective at supporting.

The concerning graduation rates of students from AE schools have sparked research on for whom (Fedders, 2018; Sorensen, 2019) and how AE students, staff, researchers and/or policy makers (Mazzeo et al., 2016; Novak, 2019; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009) assist students in graduating from high school. This conversation often bypasses a consideration of how researchers and policy makers have defined graduation, or why research and policy focus so much on a specific outcome (Johnson, 2008; Kerr, 2020; Murphy, 2016). It will be challenging for researchers to develop a deeper understanding of success if we continue to pose and answer questions by quantitative methods. These types of questions generally focus on clarifying the strength of connections between or prevalence of certain already defined concepts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), such as student

attendance and graduation. Questions of this kind are not inherently restrictive (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). However, focusing on constructs already located by researchers and policy makers greatly limits the depth to which research can delve into the assumptions surrounding these same constructs. This type of inquiry can be useful: exploring which students are enrolled in and graduating from AE programs, for example, sheds light on how schools may help or hinder historically significant populations (Munoz, 2004). However, the findings that will follow from such research will not help researchers deepen their awareness of the host of assumptions they are applying, let alone unpack the consequences incurred by equating success in AE settings with graduating from high school. I will return to this challenge in the following chapter.

When researchers do discuss the importance of high school graduation, it is often as an individual economic intervention or means by which to manage future liability to society (Atwell et al., 2019; De Witte et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2020). Some promising reframes for high school graduation do exist, such as considering high school dropout as a public health crisis (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007) and constructing an evolving conceptual framework for the process of material and spiritual education more broadly (Farid-Arbab, 2018). Despite these promising alternatives, economic viability for an individual or community is far and away the primarily cited reason why high school graduation matters, both in my reading of literature and experience working in public education. Future financial health is certainly an important factor for research to explore. However, given the nearly infinite scope of education's impacts on the material, social, psychological, and spiritual elements of individuals and society (Farid-Arbab, 2018;

Lawson & Lawson, 2013; McLaren, 2015), it does seem concerning that researchers give so much unrecognized attention and power to any one indicator of success.

The reduction of AE to an economic intervention typifies liberal thinking as outlined by Castagno (2021). Rather than center the oft critiqued neoliberalism (Bass, 2015; Daniel, 2004; Geer, 2018; Hursh, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Maton & Nichols, 2020), Castagno (2021) highlights how both neoliberalism and its historical predecessor, liberal thought, “minimize the relevance of context, relationality, and community,” and simultaneously encourage “decontextualized, ahistorical, [and] individualized understanding of the world” (p. 375). For example, adding attendance to graduation rate as an indicator of student success does not consider our far-reaching assumption that a student is individually responsible for navigating our school system, independent of the context in which they live. Adding another quantified measure does not represent a shift in how researchers are conceptualizing success or AE students, but rather provides more evidence of the same type. If anything, this additional information requires those involved, be they AE researchers, staff, or students, to think about and collect even more of the same type of data. This line of thought is endemic of liberalism, which requires researchers, policy makers, teachers and/or students to bring about change through an intensification of the same type of thinking they were applying previously (Castagno, 2021; Gaitán-Barrera & Azeez, 2015). If researchers and policy makers seek clarity on how AE students and staff understand success, they need to ask questions that do not reduce success to a particular indicator or beholden to a particular assumption. Without a reframe, future analysis will simply echo or fortify existing assumptions.

**AE as a Critique of Traditional Education**

Researchers also described AE as a grassroots effort to highlight and respond to the patterned inadequacies of our current attempts at education. Such lofty aspirations require a careful consideration of the various layers and inequitable distributions of power within AE (Coppus, 2014; Phillips, 2011; Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Young, 2011). Many of the same communities and sub-populations (e.g., African Americans, young parents or those with limited economic access) have been found to be under-represented in innovation-centric AE schools, and over-represented in AE as at-risk intervention contexts (Baggett & Sndrzejewski, 2017; Bomotti, 1996; Daniel, 2004; Dorsey & Plucker, 2016; Dunning-Lozano, 2016; Fedders, 2018; Perzigian et al., 2017; Schwab et al., 2016; Wilkerson et al., 2018). Disproportionate access to innovation and discipline with specific student groups is by no means a dynamic specific to AE settings (Gharabaghi & Anderson-Nathe, 2018; Neely & Samura, 2011; Tuck, 2009).

Researchers that take AE as a critique of traditional educational efforts also take issue with how AE policy makers and staff have defined success. Rather than continue to use success defined from further afield, outside a given school or program's context, AE as critique of traditional proponents call for a wider, more locally directed definition of success (Bascia & Maton, 2016; Raywid, 2001). Some researchers bring pre-existing metrics to bear on AE settings based on local AE needs or gaps in research (Flower et al., 2011; Jordan et al., 2017; Quinn et al., 2006; Schwab et al., 2016). For example, Zolkoski et al. (2016) leverages a resilience measurement tool constructed and validated elsewhere

to assess the preparedness of AE program graduates for the future. Researchers have also explored factors useful for combating problematic norms (e.g., academic struggles), including quality student and staff relationships, staff and school autonomy, small class sizes or mental health interventions (Aron, 2006; Blitz & Mulcahy, 2017; Jordan et al., 2017; Kamrath, 2019; McGee & Lin, 2020, 2017; O’Gorman et al., 2016; Raywid, 2001; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Researchers offer these indicators as an alternative priority for AE stakeholders beyond the perspectives of state or federal policy makers (Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov, 2019; Blitz & Mulcahy, 2017; De La Ossa, 2005; Hemmer, 2014; Phillips, 2011; Selman, 2017). For example, in their review of literature, Golden (2018) names collective and ecological staff agency as a means by which to combat the negative impacts of neoliberal reforms. In their discussion, Golden (2018) later claims that “agency is reduced to compliance with mandated-from-above curricular and pedagogical decisions, and there is little space for collective, professional, and systematic sense-making of pedagogical practice” (p. 12). AE researchers do not develop novel indicators in isolation, but as tools to address a perceived gap in traditional educational approaches (Dorsey & Plucker, 2016; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Raywid, 2001; Simonsen & Sugai, 2013).

Still other researchers call for a more rigorous validation and wider implementation of locally claimed AE success indicators (De La Ossa, 2005; Flower et al., 2011; Golden, 2018; O’Gorman et al., 2016; Schwab et al., 2016). Examples of indicators taken to reflect success in AE settings include mental health (Jordan et al., 2017) and school climate ratings from students, parents, and teachers (Gillis, 2017).

Researchers claim that these locally selected and defined indicators of success, as they are implemented in progressively wider contexts, enrich the field's conceptions of success at the state or national level and expand our understanding of what is occurring within diverse AE settings (De La Ossa, 2005; Dorsey & Plucker, 2016; McGee & Lin, 2020, 2017; Mills & McGregor, 2017; B. L. Murray, 2013; O'Gorman et al., 2016). Rather than federal, state, or district entities impose a certain success indicator from the top and trickled down, those that take up this perspective on AE would have schools or programs cultivated them at the bottom and grow up.

Validating a more diverse range of success indicators does broaden the conversation about AE success. Researchers striving to create or apply new indicators to AE schools often calls upon qualitative research methods to identify a new success indicator, then enters the same process that it's AE as a high school intervention counterparts advocate, that is cross-context generalizability. This trajectory is quite typical within fad-based educational reform: Researchers and policy makers quickly replace a once novel indicator or model, despite its gains temporary notoriety (Farid-Arbab, 2018). Although the process of creating or refining local conceptions of success may be a generative one, it still dichotomizes bottom-up and top-down authority.

Claiming that AE schools and programs approve of a given metric that lends to state and federal implementation misses the conversation: If our conceptions of success are to fit the complexity of AE settings, researchers need to be able to discuss success in a way that embraces the import of local conceptions of success and overarching standards.

### **AE as Individualized Education**

AE researchers also define success as something pursued by each individual student, staff, or other protagonist. This assertion is often not explicit. Rather, researchers describe the unique needs of students and the best practices for building close relationships (Hemmer, 2014; Kamrath, 2019; Lehr et al., 2009; Rudge, 2016; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Like the call for locally cultivated conceptions of success, researchers do not describe success as an individualized construct in isolation, but as a response to the harm that current top-down, punitive approaches are inflicting (Golden, 2018; Kamrath, 2019; McGee & Lin, 2020; O’Gorman et al., 2016; Selman, 2017; Wilkerson et al., 2018). Although harm reduction is certainly important, I do not think the goal of this research is only to reduce or eliminate negative experiences for AE students. Rather, I interpret the prioritization of diverse conceptions of student needs and practices to proceed from a desire to have each student define success for themselves (Keddie, 2014; Tuck, 2009). Researcher efforts to explore diverse conceptions of success will drive them to engage with more diverse stakeholders in conversations around and the limitations of our current conceptions of success and identify still more permutations of how they can describe success.

Like the previous two perspectives of success in AE settings I have explored thus far (high school graduation and critique), individualized conceptions of success provide unique insights into the reality of AE. With respect to methodology, AE as individualized conception of success proponents largely removes the quantitative, trans-contextual questions that its AE as high school intervention peers prioritize, instead qualitatively exploring individual and smaller-groups priorities and preferences. Each student or staff



member is to build their own conception of success, rather than imposing the limitations of a classroom, state, or other group picking any one definition. This approach towards success will certainly increase the scope of what may occur under the umbrella of AE. However, researchers still do not set the stage for stakeholders holding diverse perspectives to come together and consider the deeper roots of what is occurring in AE by tasking each individual with defining success for themselves. On the contrary, researchers may minimize the importance or even possibility of collectively identifying or exploring shared assumptions by putting too undue emphasis on importance of defining success individually.

Historically, research and practice efforts to progress towards individualized conceptions of success have functioned as an escape route for the financial elite from crumbling traditional education efforts or an additional way to rationalize the continued isolation and oppression of students deemed beyond the help of current norms (Bomotti, 1996; Dunning-Lozano, 2016; Perzigian et al., 2017; Schwab et al., 2016). Researchers may claim to be doing right by individuals, but in practice create still more opportunities for white, affluent students and simultaneously advocate for wider use of disciplinary programs on racial minorities and the poor (Daniel, 2004; Dorsey & Plucker, 2016; Fedders, 2018; Tajalli & Garba, 2014). Researchers that claim success grounded in autonomy and/or individual freedom to transform or radically reconceptualize our educational system need to take care to not enact another narrow conception of success defined by a specific stakeholder group in retooled educational jargon and methodology. Another limitation of the language of individualization is that it eliminates the prospect of

a common moral code or framework. Many research and policy efforts towards common expectations to date have been poorly defined, unjustly constructed by a select few, and harmfully impactful on the well-being and livelihood of our world. This does not mean that a common vision of success is impossible, but that we have much to learn with respect to articulating and working towards such a vision.

**Table 1**

*Descriptions, insights, and limitations for each of the three conceptions of AE success I identified in extant literature.*

<b>Conception of AE success</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Insights and Limitations</b>
High School graduation intervention	<p>Given the widespread impact that high school graduation has on student quality of life, AE schools assist students who are not progressing in traditional educational environments to still graduate.</p> <p>Leans on quantitative methods and prioritizes generalizability.</p>	<p>More precise analysis of factors helping students to graduate (e.g. attendance) can refine meaning and increase access of graduation for diverse student populations.</p> <p>Focus on how and for whom graduation is happening can limit exploration of diverse conceptions of AE success.</p>
Locally defined indicator	<p>Given patterned inadequacy of traditional educational efforts, AE schools explore novel conceptions of success. Populations not reflected in traditional approaches are well-situated to co-construct these methods and conceptions of success, whether they are new or repurposed</p>	<p>Facilitates broader discussion of AE success conceptions.</p> <p>Can lead to rapid creation and shedding of success indicators.</p> <p>Dichotomizes top-down and bottom-up authority.</p>

	from other settings (e.g. resilience scale)	
Individual	<p>Given the scope of harm caused by top-down conceptions of success, AE schools seek to customize their efforts to each individual student's needs and aspirations.</p> <p>Leans on qualitative methods and prioritizes deeper understanding.</p>	<p>Seeks to draw attention to harm inflicted on sub-populations through standardized conceptions of success.</p> <p>Questions the possibility of overarching conceptions of success.</p> <p>Historically researchers, policy makers and practitioners have used an alleged focus on individual needs to rationalize creating more opportunities for white, economic elite and prescribe more remedial intervention for minorities and the poor.</p>

I have personally felt the push and pull of these distinct conceptions of AE success. As an AE student in middle school, this lack of clarity placed a tremendous onus on my family and me to not only seek out educational options to begin with, but also to sustain a constructive educational experience. While this was ultimately a positive experience for me at the time, my family is by no means representative of all. As a teacher in a high school AE program, the ambiguous definition of AE was one of the largest siphons of my time. I found students who viewed their enrollment as a means by which to allegedly “fix” them to be very hesitant to engage in... anything. Building enough trust to be able to reframe this perceived purpose was a long-term process without any guarantees. Even more challenging were coworkers who would orient potential students with their own conceptions of what our AE program was. Students would then

carry this description as well as their long list of other assumptions and experiences from school into our classroom. Getting on the same page as to what we were all working towards was a continual, never completed process. Given the amount of energy I had invested in working towards a wider and clearer conception of a single AE program, I found it affirming that literature was similarly wide with how it defines alternative education.

Through the present study, I aim to interconnect and transcend the ways extant AE research and policy have defined success. If I claim that conceptions of AE success as high school graduation, local or individual construct each yield insights and limitations, then I need to set about tending to success in a way that seeks to tend to all. I will give theoretical and empirical structure to my efforts to articulate a new discourse of success in U.S. AE by utilizing a realist ontology and constructionist epistemology.

### Chapter 3

#### Theoretical and Empirical Framework

Bhaskar (1979) describes “[m]uch of the history of the philosophy of the social sciences can thus be seen as a kind of historical seesaw, an oscillation to-and-fro between variants of these [positivist and constructivist] basic positionings” (p. 18). Farid-Arbab (2018) similarly describes education research as being a victim of fads, shifting fashion and the forces of the market. Additional research has documented or embodied the limitations of dichotomous or reductive thinking in educational environments (Dupuis & Gordon, 2010; Richmond, 2010; Tuck, 2009) and social work (Abramovitz & Sherraden, 2016; Brekke, 2012; Reamer, 1993; Salas et al., 2013; Shaw, 2014). I believe these ideological barriers and the pursuit of the next pedagogical trends make it increasingly challenging for researchers and practitioners to engage in constructive interaction across paradigmatic silos.

Tending to the ontological and epistemological assumptions I make addresses both of my aims in the present study: to interconnect extant research perspectives on success, and to create a novel perspective from which to begin constructing a discourse capable of fueling cross-paradigmatic conversations on success within AE. Tikly (2015) explains that researchers bind ontological and epistemological assumptions together when “ontological questions about the deep structures and mechanisms that give rise to observed events and phenomena are displaced by epistemic questions about the most robust way of measuring events/phenomena” (p. 239). Bhaskar (1979) refers to researchers binding ontological and epistemological assumptions together as the

epistemic fallacy. Ontology, or our assumptions about reality, need not directly mirror our assumptions about how humanity can make sense of said reality (i.e., epistemology). In the context of AE, policy makers or researchers striving to objectively define success does not necessitate that all descriptions and efforts towards success need to have the same characteristics. Alternatively, an assertion that success is a social construct unique to everyone does not omit the possible existence of trans-contextual definitions or ways of pursuing success that impact most, if not all. Rather than continue to employ the epistemic fallacy, I will distinguish between how I describe the structure of reality and the extent to which I can make sense of it.

### **Realist Ontology**

Following from my convictions outlined in Chapter 1 and my efforts to construct a new discourse on U.S. AE success, I take up a realist ontology that breaks reality into three levels: real, actual, and empirical (Bhaskar, 1979; Fletcher, 2017). At the deepest or *real level* are causal mechanisms or structures that drive what occurs. An example of an actual event is a challenging interaction with a family member, or a small act of kindness carried out in private. There are various mechanisms at work behind either of these actions (e.g., trauma and altruism) that are not readily observable in the event itself. Humans can only observe or directly interact with the third and most surface aspects of reality, or the *empirical level*. From this level we can make incomplete observations and interpretations of the events that we do manage to observe from the actual.

Applying these levels of reality to my reading of AE literature structures the present analysis. The perspectives on success that I earlier described: success as high

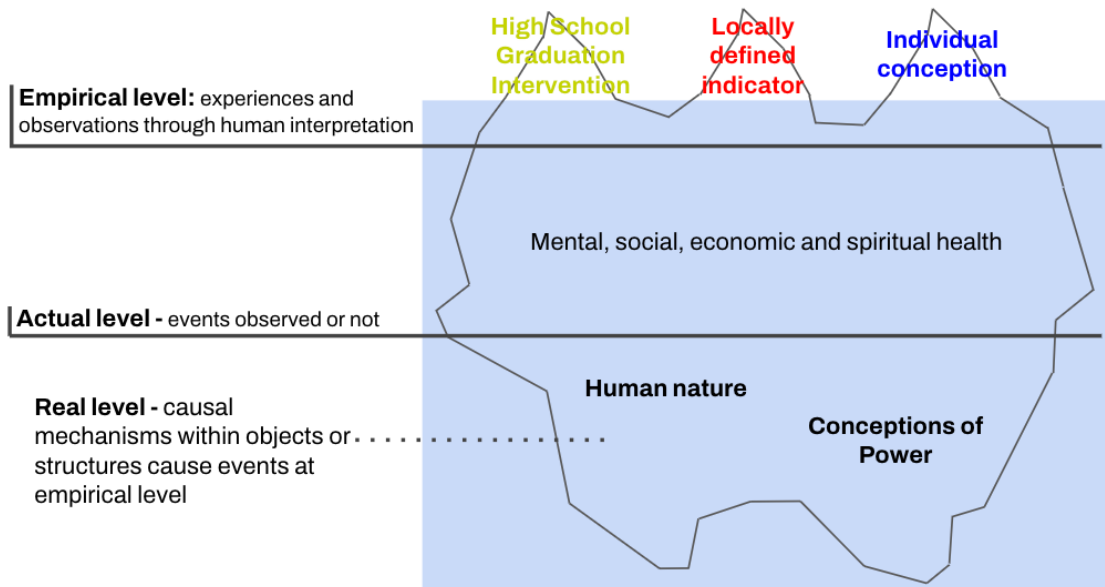
school graduation, locally defined indicator, and individual conception; operate at the empirical level. Each of these perspectives pull on specific experiences, observations, and systems for interpretation. At present, the observations and interpretations from extant literature appear to be so divergent in how they describe and attempt to pursue success that I will conceptualize them as three distinct peaks of an iceberg.

Following a realist ontology under the waterline, the actual level of reality would include the wide range of experiences and observations that the many protagonists within AE (i.e. students, staff, families, community members, district administrators, and so on) may or may not be having. The actual level would include all the events that researchers could observe - as well as those they do not - in supporting how they structure success at the empirical level. Examples of this include indicators of mental, social, economic, and spiritual health.

Notice that, while the empirical level may present as three distinct perspectives, my ontological convictions supposes that these three “peaks” are part of the same iceberg. The same Reality. Ultimately driving all this is the real level of our metaphorical iceberg. This is where human nature, conceptions of power, and other causal mechanisms exist. In my analysis I take the real level of reality to exist and that no form of analysis will be able to definitively describe this level.

## **Figure 2**

*Iceberg representation of realist ontology applied to conceptions of success from AE literature, and some examples of actual level events and real level causal mechanisms.*



### Variance Approach to Causality

In addition to using a realist ontology to layer my representation of reality, I will also structure my analysis around a novel conception of causality. In much of my reading of extant literature, researchers employ a regulatory or variance approach. As described by Maxwell (2012):

Variance theory typically involves a “black box” approach to the problem of causality in the social sciences. Lacking direct access to social and cognitive processes, researchers must attempt to correlate differences in output with differences in input, and control for other plausible factors that might affect the output (p. 37).

The idea of a black box helps visualize how researchers have defined and pursued success in AE (the black box): Through a variance approach to causation, any constructed theory will be based on carefully controlled inputs and outputs. Post-positivism has



advanced this approach by pre-supposing that no amount of input and output correlation nor control variables will definitively describe a causal process (Clark, 1998; Crotty, 1998; S. L. Morrow, 2005). This distinction aside, positivist and post-positivist approaches both treat the mechanisms and causal processes active within, in this case, AE, as inaccessible within the black box, instead focusing on inputs and outputs. In the present analysis, I will take up a process theory approach to causality. This means I will strive to describe what is occurring within the black box of AE success. I will in turn use these descriptions to begin building a new way to discuss and pursue U.S. AE success.

Having presented the ontological perspective underlying the present analysis, it is now timely for me to clarify my posture towards epistemology. Much of my personal understanding of realist ontology is through Critical Realism (CR). Historically rooted in the efforts of Roy Bhaskar in the 1970s and 80s (Archer, 1998; Fletcher, 2017; R. A. Morrow, 1994), CR has been situated in other bodies of literature, such as realism (Maxwell, 2012), emancipation (Hockey, 2010), education (Tikly, 2015) and methodology (Danermark et al., 2019; Fletcher, 2017; Parr, 2015). Across these contexts, researchers herald CR as an alternative to positivist and constructionist paradigms (Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, 2011; Groff, 2020; Matusitz & Kramer, 2011; Mirzaei Rafe et al., 2019; Norrie, 2012; Williams et al., 2017). The present analysis heeds warnings around the epistemic fallacy, utilizes its ontological realist convictions, and tends to the distinction between variance and process validity.

The two questions I used to drive the current analysis were: How do AE students and staff define success; and how do AE students and staff work towards their

conceptions of success? I posed these questions with the aim of beginning to construct a novel discourse on U.S. AE success, one with the potential to bring together currently discordant perspectives in research and policy. I will take up an epistemology that builds on the language and thoughts of AE students and staff to describe of what is occurring within the black box of AE success.

### **Constructionist Epistemology**

A constructionist epistemology underlies my aim to make sense of and construct new ways of understanding grounded in individuals' experience and relationships (Crotty, 1998; Van Der Haar & Hosking, 2004). This frames my effort in the present analysis to be constructing descriptions of how AE students and staff define and work towards success. I will then take these descriptions as empirical level suppositions and use analysis to delve into postulates of what may be occurring at the real level of reality. In this way I will attempt to tend to both context as well as construct findings that shed light on new ways researchers can describe the real level shaping their conceptions of success in U.S. AE settings.

Rees et al. (2020)'s distinction between micro and macro constructionism further helps situate the present analysis: Micro-constructionism focuses on the minutiae of language and the macro-constructionism centers broader discourses reproduced through material and social practices and structures. In this study, I lean into the minutiae of language as one way to explore novel discourses of success. In this light, I take up an epistemological fusion of micro and macro constructionism. This theoretical approach attends to contextual nuance and postulates what may be occurring within the "black

box” of AE success. Given the wide nature of a constructionist approach to knowledge construction, I leaned on additional values that I hold to give structure to my analysis. Chief among these were conceptions of power and assumptions about the nature of reality.

### **Questions of Value**

Although a realist ontology and constructionist epistemology has given some form to the present analysis, there were still many questions about how I would practically bring together diverse constructions of reality in efforts to describe a new discourse of U.S. AE success. Given educational research’s struggles with meaningfully connecting research rhetoric and practical implications (Freire, 1990, 2004, 2005; Matusitz & Kramer, 2011), concerns around bringing together diverse perspectives on a foundational topic (e.g., success in AE) are historically grounded. Researchers have claimed to do this often, but in practice have ignored or under-supported students and families from marginalized positionalities and oppressed groups (Dorsey & Plucker, 2016; Schniedewind & Tanis, 2017; Tajalli & Garba, 2014; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016). Applying a realist ontology’s empirical, actual, and real layers of reality to how I discuss power when bringing people of diverse perspectives and backgrounds together will help to address some of these challenges.

Like ontological and epistemological assumptions, how researchers presume power to function not only influences how individuals act but how they interact with others (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2019; Mertens, 2012; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). If AE researchers are striving to have their perspective on AE success defeat or flush out less

viable conceptions of success, the way they interact will be distinct from groups thinking they are engaged in a process of advancing our collective understanding of the field.

While one can take up any given assumption about how power operates, I believe assuming it to be a limited quantity held by one group over another will limit how researchers engage with perspectives that differ from their own. Karlberg (2004) has described this tendency towards fear and conflict as a culture of contest. More specifically, he argues that power isn't exclusively a commodity that one antagonistic party exercises over another. On the contrary, equal entities can build power through mutual support; adversarial and equal groups can balance power between them; and mutual and unequal individuals can foster power.

Most AE research is reflective of power taken as a limited quantity held by one group over another. However, I can also readily identify examples of other approaches to power. Some AE researchers allude to mutual empowerment as they name the supportive, empowering, and ambitious relationships between staff and schools as a driving force of a healthy school climate (Arnold & Mihut, 2020; Aron, 2006; De La Ossa, 2005; McGee & Lin, 2017). Some AE programs and their corresponding districts show how adversarial but mutually vested parties may balance power between them and achieve better outcomes (e.g. high school graduation rates) as a result (Aron, 2006; Golden, 2018; Kraftl, 2014). Still other AE researchers demonstrate what Karlberg's (2004) assisted empowerment may look like, as they identify inequalities of social and intellectual capital of students and staff in school settings while also striving to empower youth. Rigorous interrogation of ones' circumstance is necessary: Claiming to engage in mutual

empowerment when the relationship between two parties is adversarial will not be fruitful. Neither is claiming that all involved parties have equal footing when bringing together diverse perspectives.

The treatment of power that I have outlined here is not an objective depiction of how power operates in the real level of reality. It is an improved model beyond the persistent casting of power as a battle between involved parties. Although my depiction of the relationship between diverse perspectives of AE success in the empirical level of Figure 2 feels like an apt one, this does not presume that such division persists into the actual or real levels below the metaphorical water level. This distinction provides a guiding question for the present analysis: Are there certain assumptions or perspectives that belong to the empirical layer, but are currently elevated to illegitimate descriptions of real reality?

Another pervasive assumption applied within AE research is around the nature of reality. Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) point out that research often frames reality as a problem for humanity to solve. This is analogous to the assumption of power as a finite quantity held over: identifying elements of reality that are currently not functioning well and empirically delving into their inner workings is helpful. This is an empirical assertion, and a common one at that (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016). Researchers are free to make other assumptions about reality.

Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) alternatively describe reality as a miracle that all can embrace. I used this conception of reality to focus the present inquiry on success, i.e., the miracles AE stakeholders are pursuing. Alternatively, I could have centered

underlying forces shaping AE shortcomings or oppression, such as contradictions between what researchers, policy makers or teachers claimed and do within AE settings. Both ways of framing research will ensure validation: if a line of inquiry digs for problems, they shall find them. If a study looks for miracles, they shall also locate those. Exploration of how well AE is helping students who are at-risk for academic failure subtly embodies the self-perpetuating nature of research questions (Deeds & Depaoli, 2017; Fedders, 2018; Lehr et al., 2003; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). This posture towards students frames inquiry as a means by which researchers identify and offer to fix students' problems and shed light on the barriers they may face. When framing inquiry this way, researchers tend to minimize a discussion of how to address these barriers or question their positioning of AE students as passive receivers of support. I strive to better understand the miracle that is reality and center the causal mechanisms that shape AE stakeholder conceptions of success. The implications of this distinct relationship to reality merits further consideration.

Not all relationships are best exemplified by a power over relationship. However, mutual empowerment is also not universally present. There are very real, oppressive dynamics at play in AE. Examples of this includes the over placement of minority populations in discipline-centric AE schools (Dunning-Lozano, 2016; Keddie, 2014; Perzigian et al., 2017; Phillips, 2011; Selman, 2017; Tajalli & Garba, 2014; Wilkerson et al., 2018) and AE systematically failing to prepare students for future academic success (Atwell et al., 2019; Kannam & Weiss, 2019; O'Gorman et al., 2016). By centering the

voices of AE students and staff, I have already begun combating the often fraught and imbalanced relationship between traditional and alternative schools (Raywid, 1983).

I will need to tend to the presence of oppression as well as empowerment within AE settings. If I only tend to the latter, I will be carrying out the overemphasis on one isolated perspective that I am striving to transcend (Maton & Nichols, 2020; Mills & McGregor, 2017; Richmond, 2010; Tsabar, 2014). I will utilize the view of reality as a miracle for all to embrace to help expand a research base that predominantly contends with empirical problems. However, this not stating that problems do not exist within AE. I have considered this balance throughout the present inquiry and return to this discussion in Chapter 6.

Researchers must take care that one or another empirical perspective, regardless the construct or perspective it centers, not be confused with reality itself. Abrogating the epistemic fallacy helps make this clear by distinguishing between the way humanity can make sense of reality (epistemology) and the nature of the reality I explore (ontology). Another example of when research has confused the empirical and the underlying working of reality is by determining a theory's worth based on its predictive capacity. Predictive capacity is the reliability with which mental models of the past can predict the future. Research's focus on predicting the future has become so widespread that it borders on researchers taking it as a universal truth or objective statement of how they assess the utility of theory. Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) also see this confusion as problematic, and declare:

[W]e need a bold shift in attention whereby theoretical accounts are no longer judged in terms of their predictive capacity, but instead are judged in terms of their generative capacity-their ability to foster dialogue about that which is taken for granted and their capacity for generating fresh alternatives for social action” (p. 7).

A focus on prediction incentivizes the continuation of old patterns of thought, limiting the pace at which researchers can refine their empirical understanding. Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) as well as realism shifts the focus from any one current conception of reality to constant refinement thereof (Maxwell, 2012). The goal of a researcher in this approach is to question what they currently take for granted, with the goal expanding their current understanding of reality and exploring fresh alternatives for social action.

Like the earlier treatment of power over and research as problem-solving, my call for a deeper appreciation of reality is not advocating for an elimination of predictive theory. I present these examples to show how I will navigate these popular sticking points. By interrogating my own foundational assumptions, I hope to contribute to research that brings diverse perspectives together and sheds light on fresh insights (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; De La Ossa, 2005; Tuck, 2009).

The theoretical and empirical framework I have set forth helps to organize the paradigmatic challenges present in AE literature and provided a way forward. In a literature riddled with epistemic fallacy, reducing reality to human knowledge and regulatory/variance approaches to causation, I will carefully analyze what I take as the empirical, actual, and real levels of reality. I will be mindful to not lift my limited



conceptions of power, purpose of research, or how I determined the utility of theory for empirical decision to a faulty assertion about real reality. These specific examples helped translate the theoretical distinctions made above into empirical implications for the current study.

### **Gap in existing research**

Restricting AE success to high school graduation, popularizing a different success indicator, or endeavoring to define success as individualized all embody the same atomistic thinking. These descriptions of AE are the same in that they locate a problem and offer an approach grounded in and calling for a more complete submersion in their own specific position. For example, from the AE-as-intervention perspective, the problem is that students are not graduating from high school. From the critical, largely macro perspective, the problem is the ongoing oppression of students and communities.

Efforts by researchers to locate and solve problems in the context of AE gets circular because the challenges named by one perspective may be the next steps advocated for by another. Researchers, policy makers and staff that take AE as an intervention also value precise and measurable success indicators, large sample-sizes describing overarching trends (Deeds & Malter, 2016; Kamrath, 2019; Schwab et al., 2016). This very tendency agitates critical colleagues, who see the data and way of thinking about the learning process as one of the very limitations that researchers must overcome (Giroux, 2019; Milam, 1991; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). In response, there is an equally urgent call for more qualitative, contextualized inquiry (Lather, 1993; Maton & Nichols, 2020).

Researchers have made previous efforts to connect perspectives that diverge with respect to how they define success within AE. Raywid (1983, 1994, 1999, 2001) has long described AE as variegated and a useful context for researchers, policy makers and educators to learn about how they could structure traditional educational environments. Some international studies have explored wider ways that research and practice can conceptualize students and success within AE settings (Bascia & Maton, 2016; Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov, 2019; Cahill et al., 2020; Keddie, 2014). I do not claim that researchers have not made efforts to connect diverse perspectives within AE. Rather, my reading of U.S. AE literature found siloed conceptions of success to constitute most of the research and policy. To contribute to the field, I have oriented the present analysis around the theoretical assumptions I have found to characterize literature.

My experience, reading of AE literature, and theoretical framework helped me to identify the twin aims driving the present inquiry and the research questions helping focus said inquiry on the perspectives of AE students and staff. The methods I have employed further specified how I brought these conceptual convictions to bear on my research question (McLaren, 2015). In summary, I went about constructing a novel way of discussing success in U.S. AE by carrying out in-depth interviews with AE students and staff at three distinct public institutions from within one state in the United States. It is in the following chapter that I further translate my theoretical commitments into concrete methodological practice.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Methods**

Through this study, I aim to interconnect and move beyond the seemingly irreconcilable foundational assumptions made by my researchers and policy makers about success within U.S. AE. I pursued these aims by exploring how AE students and staff define and pursue success. I directed this question at AE students and staff because of my experiences seeing these parties navigate within and between the perspectives of success set forth in research and policy. For example, as an AE teacher, I needed to navigate between the importance of high school graduation and the background and aspirations of each student. I addressed my research question to AE students and staff because I perceived both to have experience navigating between the conceptions of success I outlined from extant research and policy in Chapter 2: success as high school graduation, locally made construct and individual conception.

To gather accounts of experience and greater levels of understanding of AE students and staff perspectives, I took up a qualitative methodology (Rees et al., 2020). I collected data through semi-structured interviews, as these allowed me as researcher to deeply listen and seek to understand perspectives that staff and students may be otherwise hesitant to share or attempt to explain in larger environments. Semi-structured interviews also afforded the participants and researcher (myself) the flexibility to pursue interesting and emergent lines of thought (J. Smith, 1995). Given that this study's aim is exploratory, and that I am looking to contribute to something as expansive as a discourse on success, having the flexibility to pursue emergent concepts and thoughts was essential.

**Site selection**

I used the list of Oregon AE schools identified by the Oregon Department of Education (Richardson, 2017) as well as my own personal connections (see Appendix A) as a starting point for selecting schools to invite to participate in this study. Limiting my sample to publicly identified AE schools from a single state is sufficient for the present study because it aims to highlighting ways that AE students and staff perspectives can build upon and refine extant research and policy approaches to success. I am not seeking to describe widely held or representative perspectives of success across a given state or nation. Shifting how success is discussed across U.S. AE is a long-term endeavor, and within the present study I sought out AE schools that I believed to be environments conducive to gaining insight into generative ways to describe and approach AE success (Maxwell, 2012).

Like AE, Oregon has a complex history with respect to welcoming peoples of all backgrounds. Although popular culture describes Oregon, particularly its larger metro areas, as a progressive utopia, the state has largely unquestioned roots in Black exclusion (Imarisha, 2020; Stocks, 2023). Latino students are the fastest growing group in K-12 in the state (Katsuda, 2019). For the purposes of the present analysis, this context further emphasizes the importance of recruiting diverse participants within a state that has not historically benefitted from listening to perspectives of those not of European descent.

I used school websites to preliminarily sort AE schools/programs into the three categories of success conception I located in literature: high school graduation, locally crafted outcome(s), or individually defined aspirations. Using in vivo coding to look for

patterns in “the actual language found in the qualitative data record” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 105), I identified three schools that appeared to reflect three distinct perspectives on success. Although each of these schools provide context to what students and staff share, I did not take schools as unit of analysis in this study.

**Table 2**

*Description of AE schools that I recruited student and staff participants from.*

School	Geographic location	2022-23 student enrollment	2022-23 staff size	Notes from school website
A	City of 8,000 residents, within 15 miles of larger urban center	88	8	School experiencing complete to overall climate
B	City of over 100,000 residents	110	14	“Rooted in local, issue-centered curriculum relevant to the challenges we face as a society”
C	City of 16,000 residents	54	7	Many educational options, from GED to online courses

I then set about contacting the building administrators at each school to see if they would allow students and staff from their school to participate in my study. I was able to connect with 16 students and 15 staff through this approach. I denote the school that each of the participant with the letters A, B, or C, and identify each student with a Y, and staff member with an S. I also documented the order in which I interviewed each group of students and staff. For example, BY3 is the third student that I interviewed from School B. To allow my sharing of results to proceed more fluidly, I will refer to each of these participants by their pseudonyms, noted in Table 3.

**Table 3***AE student and staff demographic information.*

<b>ID</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Role (if staff)</b>
AY1	Isaac	Male	White	
AY2	Eli	Male	African American	
AY3	Tasha	Female	American Indian/Alaska Native	
AY4	Will	Male	Hispanic/Latino	
AY5	Kate	Female	Black/African American, White	
AY6	Ronnie	Male	White	
AS1	Mike	Male	White	Counselor
AS2	Richie	Male	White	Teacher
AS3	Ken	Male	White	Administrator
AS4	Amanda	Female	White	Secretary
AS5	Rene	Female	White	Instructional Assistant
AS6	Sharon	Female	White	Instructional Assistant
BY1	Christina	Female	Hispanic/Latino	
BY2	Aislynn	Female	White	
BY3	Maddy	Transgender	White	
BY4	Liz	Female	Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, White	
BY5	Mark	Male	White	
BY6	Geoff	He/she gender male	White	
BS1	Brian	None, male	None, radicalized white	Teacher
BS2	Alice	Female	White	Teacher
BS3	Amy	Female	White	Special Education Assistant/School to Work Coordinator/Grad Advisor

BS4	Kathy	Female	White	Administrator
BS5	Brad	Male	White	Student Teacher
CY1	Taylor	Non-Binary	American Indian/Alaska Native, Hispanic/Latino	
CY2	Justice	Female	White	
CY3	Melyssa	Female	White	
CY4	Heather	Female	White	
CS1	Jill	Female	White	Social Emotional learning teacher
CS2	Rafia	Female	Prefer not to say	Teacher
CS3	Noah	Male	White	Teacher
CS4	Ginger	Female	White	Principal

### Access

I reached out to Schools A, B and C initially via email. Many intermediate steps and shifts occurred when I connected with schools to explain invite their participation in this study. I share the details of this shifting process in the following results chapter.

When a school administrator and supervising district agreed to participate, they completed a letter of agreement. Once I received this letter of agreement, I consulted with my initial contact at the school as to the best way to recruit potential student and staff to interview. I anticipated that this would involve a series of group and individual emails.

### Data collection

I collected data for present study through semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Hesse-Biber, 2017; J. Smith, 1995) with AE students and staff. Interviews progressed from the concrete to conceptual (see Appendix B). After beginning with contextualizing questions (e.g., what drew you to work in AE?), we explored AE participant's conceptions of success and how they work towards it. I did this by posing the question of how the student or staff member defined success, and then following up with questions

about how they worked towards their various facets of success. I would then pose additional follow up questions around why the participant thought a certain conception of success was important (e.g. high school graduation) or what a particular effort towards this end can look like (e.g. trying to re-engage with school). At the end of each interview, I shared a list of statements embodying various assumptions I had located in extant research. I then asked participants to elaborate on ones that stood out to them. I also drew participants' attention to certain statements, if I felt it was something they had previously alluded to. For example, if a student had repeatedly distinguished between their role and the role of teachers, I would ask them to reflect on the statement: "As AE stakeholders become clearer on what each of their roles are and act on them, then everyone can be more successful." I include the final version of the interview guide and ways I shifted my approach in Appendices B & C.

I recorded interviews via Zoom on a laptop, with the video turned off, providing increased confidentiality. I then used Zoom to generate an audio (.m4a) and text (.vtt) file, which were both stored in Google Drive and an external hard drive. I used the transcript generated by Zoom's automatic transcription tool as a preliminary draft. I used TextEdit to open the .vtt file produced, pasted the content into a Microsoft Word document (.doc), and uploaded them to Atlas.ti. I then cleaned these data by listening through each interview twice on VLC media player, pausing to correct errors in the transcript generated by Zoom.

I had originally thought that supplemental school materials from each of the three AE schools would provide rich insight into articulating a new discourse on AE success.



However, two factors led me not to pursue these data: firstly, richness of in-depth interviews led to theoretical saturation (Guest et al., 2006). Secondly, when asked about supplemental information about their school, AE staff did not identify many possible examples.

My experience as an AE teacher for four years at two public high schools assisted me in contributing to a respectful and mutually inquisitive environment. I used my experience to pose pertinent follow-up questions and provide appropriate examples to confirm my understanding of concepts participants shared. My intention was not to objectively harvest the perspectives of AE staff, but to engage in a conversation about AE staff and students' perspectives of a reality that we have both explored. If anything, interviews sometimes became too conversational, and I had to gently redirect students and staff back to the topic of inquiry. I also believe my willingness to explain the aims of my study in person, and as well as be present on school campuses before and after interviews provided an opportunity to build relationships with students and staff, helping to open a more relaxed interview environment.

As a researcher, I acknowledge that I have made many distinct contributions to the present study. It was my task to highlight specific codes and later emergent themes and put them in wider conversation with existing literature and theory. My contributions to data analysis are no more or less fallible than the perspectives shared by AE websites, staff, and students. The quality of the insights I can offer heavily relies on the quality of the in-depth interviews, and the rigor with which I ground my analysis in these data.

### **Analysis**

I conducted a thematic analysis of AE student and staff interview. Following from my realist ontology, I began with a set of deductive codes, constructed from the extant AE and social science literature. For example, my reading of AE literature located a spectrum of conceptions of success. Some researchers and policy makers described AE as a service to a widely described, observable outcome, namely high school graduation. This is where the “Success as high school graduation” code came from. I also inductively coded for themes that emerge beyond those of extant literature (Thomas, 2006). For scale, Fletcher (2017) initially had 32 theoretical and organizational codes and expanded to 198 preliminary codes. I include my 26 codes in Appendix D.

I took individual student and staff responses as my unit of analysis. Although I did intentionally engage with a diverse range of AE schools, I did not incorporate schools and a unit of analysis in the current study. To make sense of the perspectives of AE students and staff, I engaged in cyclic process of coding, reading codes, re-reading codes, drafting emerging themes, consulting with my committee members, and model building. I recount each of the analytic steps I took in Appendix E.

### **Establishing trustworthiness**

The credibility of my analysis is based on the “credibility of the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the study, and the ways in which the researcher used the study’s data to assess these interpretations and conclusions in light of plausible alternatives” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 148). I made many interpretations and conclusions to frame the study (e.g., taking up a constructionist epistemology and realist ontology, centering the study around the concept of success, highlighting power and alternative

assumptions about reality). My efforts to make these decisions explicit before, throughout, and after analysis offers transparency and enhances trustworthiness.

I made many different efforts to make my decisions as explicit as possible. Reflective memoing and collaboration with my committee members helped me identify new questions and clarify my interview schedule as I carried out AE student and staff interviews. A particularly informative experience occurred when I debriefed with my Dissertation Committee chair on my application of codes. This refined my understanding of how I was applying codes and focused my subsequent analysis on data pertinent to my research question. It also helped me to see that I needed to clarify how I was distinguishing between success outcomes and context.

I sought to bolster the credibility of my analysis by operating in a non-linear fashion (Hylton, 2012) elements of my analysis (such as the methodology I was taking up) throughout. Another example of non-linearity is how I posed and pursued questions that emerged during analysis. These questions helped me to reorganized data, and more clearly describe codes, themes, and their interconnections. I explore these efforts in the following chapter. While quite daunting to carry out, I believe my willingness to articulate more thoroughly what I was thinking and doing bolstered the credibility of my analysis.

Triangulation helped me to connect my own views to those of AE staff, AE students, and extant literature (Hesse-Biber, 2017). For example, several students who had described AE staff to have affirmed their identity also seemed to have a decreased willingness to engage with novel perspectives of others (e.g. peers or family members).

While this appeared to mirror the insular way that I had described different research and policy perspectives on success, this connection did not hold up after further analysis of AE student and staff responses. On the contrary, affirming relationships seemed to open students and staff to still more perspectives. This example of triangulation also demonstrates how I sought out contradictions to emerging themes. Another example of when I sought out contradictions was when I considered my own analysis as a potential contradiction to the claims I was making about power as a mutually constructed entity. I sought out this contradiction by considering whose quotes I used as examples, and the wording I used to situate students and staff to each other. I have summarized each of my analytic efforts in Appendix E.

### **Ethical considerations**

AE students, staff, and I delved into thoughts and values that we tightly held throughout this study. At various points, AE students identified with or otherwise named the wider characterization of them as struggling with one or another element of school or life (Aron, 2006; Deeds & Malter, 2016; Flower et al., 2011; Foley & Pang, 2006; Porowski et al., 2014; Quinn et al., 2006; Selman, 2017). At these points I would ask clarifying questions about their views of their capacity or experience. In a few cases, students mentioned experiences with suicidal ideation as well as navigating other challenging situations. In all these cases, I asked follow-up questions and clarified that students felt supported in navigating those challenges now. At other times, AE staff would allude to a negative characterizations of AE students (e.g., being from broken homes), and I would need to check my inner frustrations and ask questions to get a

clearer idea of what the individual was trying to communicate. The structure and oversight provided by the Portland State Institutional Review Board helped me to think through how I would navigate these conversations beforehand. I also leveraged my practical experience, research, and the guidance from AE staff to navigate these dynamics as they emerged across interviews.

### **Deliverables**

I will format findings for academic and AE school audiences. The former will take the form of a dissertation and potential future publications, while the latter will be a consolidated report of findings and implications. I will also offer to present these findings to the AE school participants and engage in a wider conversation around them. Sharing my findings with the schools whose students and staff provided the insights on which they are based is of personal and ethical importance. While it is a very small example, when I share results with students and staff I provide a slightly richer example of what school-university relationships can look like (Blitz & Mulcahy, 2017). On a personal level, I feel responsible to circle back to the conversations that I had with students and staff, many of which included questions and interest around what I would learn through the present study. I could share findings through a co-facilitated conversation and presentation (e.g., Kelly & Wilkinson, 2020).

## Chapter 5

### Results

I have structured the present study around two research questions: How do AE students and staff define success? And how do these same students and staff work towards their conceptions of success? After exploring these questions with 16 students and 15 staff through semi-structured interviews, I have identified a total of four themes. Regarding my first research question, AE students and staff defined success as an interconnected amalgamation of individual and common conceptions. I constructed an additional three themes with respect to how AE students and staff described their pursuit of success: Success required a balance of individual effort and support; Success progressed through daily steps and tending to a wider vision; and forming relationships, especially between students and staff, was foundational for success to flourish. Within this final theme, I describe how AE students and staff went about forming relationships through three sub-themes: Small environments provided room for relationships to grow; Reflection on one's own strengths, challenges and life experiences helped to connect with others; and staff used curriculum and structures to foster relationship formation for themselves and students. To further orient the reader to the structure of this chapter, I offer Figure 3. Before delving into these four themes and sub-themes, I will briefly elaborate on how my recruitment and analysis efforts unfolded.

#### Figure 3

*Two research questions and corresponding four themes and three sub-themes.*

Research Questions	How do AE students and staff define success?	How do AE students and staff pursue success?
Themes	1.) An amalgam of individual and common conceptions	2.) Continual balance of individual effort and support  3.) Daily effort towards a wider vision  4.) Foundational relationships, fostered through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a.) Smaller environments</li> <li>b.) Reflection on strengths, challenges and life experience</li> <li>c.) Curriculum and school structures</li> </ul>

**Emergent Recruitment and Analysis**

I anticipated that much of my recruitment and subsequent interviews with AE students and staff would occur online, facilitated by Zoom. In practice, in-person communication was much more effective in connecting with participants. I carried out my first two interviews with staff over Zoom. I connected with these staff after I joined their in-person staff meeting. I conducted the remaining 13 staff interviews at their school after subsequent campus visits. Interviewed all 16 students at their school. The vast majority of student and staff interviews occurred over two-day periods when I would remain on campus for back-to-back school days. This resulted in me interviewing 9 female, 5 male and 1 non-binary identifying AE staff; and 8 female, 5 male and 3 non-binary students. With student participants, 9 identified as racially white, 2 identified as Hispanic/Latino, and 5 identified as a mixture of African American, American

Indian/Alaska Native, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and/or White. With staff participants, 13 identified as racially white, and 2 identified as none or preferred not to say. The reader can find a full account of students and staff participant demographic information in Table 2 of Chapter 2.

My thematic analysis of the 31 student and staff interviews emerged as I engaged more and more with the data. More broadly, this involved switching between inductive and deductive coding, using lists and tables to sort codes, creating models that strove to interconnect codes, articulating emerging themes, and engaging in conversations with committee members. For example, as I applied the second iteration of deductive codes to all student and staff transcripts, I returned to questions I had previously created to help define key code more precisely, such as: How am I distinguishing between explicit statements that AE students and staff make about human nature and the assumptions I as researcher am deducing them to have made? How do I keep popular codes (i.e. relationships) sufficiently broad to catch pertinent insight, and appropriately narrow, to not mark everything as related to said code? I outline each of the analytic steps I took in Appendix E.

My recruitment and analysis emerged as I applied the plan I had made to my growing reality of the circumstances that I sought to apply it in. Through this analysis, I was able to explore two research questions. The first, and subject of the following section, was how did students and staff define success?

### **Success as an Amalgam of Individual and Common Conceptions**



I explored conceptions of success with students and staff to inform how researchers could discuss success in AE settings in the future. The most prominent way that students and staff defined success was as an interplay of individual and more widely held conceptions of success. For many students, their perception of common conceptions of success gave shape and motivation to their individual efforts. I will use the term common conceptions of success to refer to conceptions of success that wider society holds and explicitly or implicitly propagated widely. Individuals know of these conceptions of success and feel impelled to relate themselves to them. Examples of this included high school graduation, transitioning to employment or tertiary education, and embodying various qualities or attitudes (e.g. being mature). Justice provides a personal example of how a shift in their inner narrative has helped them be mature:

It just gives me hope, like, how I am choosing to be mature. I don't want to be a mean person or a bad person. I don't want to do any of that stuff. I want to have a future for myself [and know] that I have an open mind... I know because I'm the smartest person in the world, wherever I end up, it's not going to be too bad.

While Justice has previously harbored a negative self-concept, they realize they have made progress towards their understanding of maturity. This perception of individual progress towards a common construct helps them to sustain and be optimistic about what future individual outcomes are within their reach. Several other students (Eli, Christina, Maddy, Liz, Mark, Taylor, and Justice) outlined a similar logic: due to their desire and perception of initial success in pursuit of the common conception of success (e.g., future financial security or a particular vocation), they were eager to make daily

decisions and actions to continue advancing towards success into the future. For example, Mark explains how they came to connect high school graduation (common conception of success) to their individual experience of being unable to provide for their family:

There was definitely a point in my life where I didn't want to graduate, and I was like, I'll figure it out... But I think deep down I knew that I wanted to graduate... I mean, on average the high school dropout [is] making \$19,000 a year. And on average the high school graduate is making \$28,000 a year. And just based off that... sure, you know, you can look at Steve Jobs. [He] didn't go to college, all these people didn't go to high school, now they're millionaires. That's so rare, you know. We only have so many, so many of those. I think I knew I needed to graduate High School just like economically... money has always been, like, a big thing, like a big push for me to be like "I'm going to graduate, I need to get this diploma, at least."

Mark was not initially inclined to pursue any widely held conception of success.

However, when they connected a common success indicator to their individual experience and desires, they were inclined to try.

Just as common perspectives can give direction to individual conceptions of success, individual conceptions can inform how AE students and staff interact with common conceptions of success. Many staff reflected on efforts to express these conceptions of success - such as high school graduation, college enrollment, or the purpose of a given class - in language that is understandable and relatable to specific student backgrounds (Rene and Alice). Amy provides a poignant example, reflecting on

their own experience of staff assuming their individual needs and determining which common conceptions of success were possible for them:

Because [my teachers] were like... we know where you come from. You're not likely to go to college. Well, you don't know anything about me, right? I mean, I was a straight A student. I was a varsity athlete, like all-league. [T]o say they knew... based on my family socioeconomic status was... gross. [I] don't want that to be something that happens to these kids... Do I think that every child should go to college? No... I am willing to talk about trades, what it looks like to become a carpenter... I'm just ready for them to see that success means something different.

Given their experience with staff making assumptions about their needs and desires, Amy is eager, now that they themselves are staff, to have a distinct conversation with School B students. They aspire to help students assess and pursue common success options (in this case, focused on future education and vocational paths). Rafia connects common and individual conceptions of success in their math class:

I'm teaching a student algebra... visually... using hands on equations... I figured out that... by reading her IEP and working with her, she's a very visual learner. And so, we're having a great amount of success doing algebra through pictures. And then I've got students that are learning all on paper... Some of them need notes to guide because they're taking over-notes. Some of them don't take enough notes. It's like... some of them you take the pencils out of their hand and have them talk through the math; it just depends... on what it looks like.

Careful interaction and observation of how each student is interacting with common conceptions of success, in this case mathematics concepts, helps Rafia to shift their curricular approach. Earlier, Rafia referred to their approach as “thinking outside the box,” and emphasized that their focus is on helping diverse learners (i.e., diverse individual needs or conceptions of success) engage with common conceptions of success.

AE students and staff used individual and common conceptions of success to clarify or engage with the other. Taylor provides another example of this when they used their understanding of their friends’ individual interest in welding to help them navigate a question from math class. Greater clarity of an individual’s conception of success allows for a clearer pursuit of common conceptions of success. The inverse is also true.

Kathy, the administrator from School B illustrated how individual and common conceptions of success could interact within relationships between staff, as well as between a particular school and its district. Initially, Kathy clarified that they see their personal definition of success to be meeting students where they are and helping them to become a “productive member of society.” Kathy recognized that this may be different than how their peers define success. This provides an example of how AE staff can relate their conceptions of success to what they perceive to be the widely held perspectives within their building. Kathy provided another context-spanning example: due to their relative success with common conceptions of success, such as high school graduation, Kathy perceives that their district has given School B greater flexibility. This allowed them to make shifts in their schedule and course offerings. In this way School B used

their success through common conceptions to fuel their ability to better meet students where they are.

Defining success as mutually shaped by individual and common conceptions has many implications for AE research, policy, and practice. I shall discuss these in the following chapter. I will now set forth three additional themes that I constructed in light of how AE students and staff described their efforts to work towards success.

### **Pursuit of Success**

Cultivating a clear discourse by which to describe the purpose and function of AE across the United States will take a very long time. I strive to contribute a small step towards this new discourse by exploring how AE students and staff define and pursue success. I have just set forth how AE students interweave individual and common conceptions of success. I will now pivot to share the many ways in which AE students and staff described working towards their definition of success. I focused my analysis on three themes: 1) Success requires continual balance of individual effort and support; 2) Success progressed through daily steps and clarifying wider vision; and 3) Student and staff relationships are foundational to their pursuit of success. I further broke this last theme into three sub-themes that specify how AE students and staff built their relationships.

#### ***Success Requires Continual Balance of Individual Effort and Support***

Some AE staff and students asserted that the pursuit of success, at the end of the day, is ultimately the task of the individual. For example, Amanda asserts that individuals making effort to overcome their own internal challenges are successful. Aislynn similarly

gives paramount importance to the individual's choice to engage in bringing about succeed. Taylor and Tasha use very vivid language to describe the individual need to "break through" or "punch these challenges in the face." Placing entire ownership of the educational process with the individual student was also a popular narrative within my experience as an AE classroom teacher, from both students and staff.

Brian outlined a different relationship between individual effort and support in the context of AE. Brian validated the importance of understanding the barriers faced by historically marginalized groups, yet believes that focusing on these barriers with students is maladaptive:

One of the things I think we're more keen to notice nowadays than 10, 20 years ago is calling it systemic oppression - You know what I mean? - Our boundaries that are faced by people in certain historically, you know, marginalized groups. And while I think that that's all real and valid and good to study, it's, uh, the application of that philosophy on the individual level I find to be maladaptive. As in, you know, if you go to somebody that's in, you know, one to three categories and you say, like, oh, wow! Like, you're gay, like, and brown. Like, your life's gonna suck! Like that's not super helpful, I don't think as a parent or a teacher. So, on the individual level what it ... well, we understand that while we can acknowledge all the experience that you might be having, uh, giving, helping to instill in each other, young people, and I think our peers [i.e. teachers] included, a sense of resiliency, of fortitude.

Brian acknowledges the importance of identifying and directing resources towards addressing pervasive ways that society at large oppresses “marginalized groups.” Brian also thinks it is not helpful for individuals that belong to one or more of these marginalized groups to hear that their individual efforts are up against formidable or even unsurpassable odds. Instead, Brian finds it helpful to focus on fortitude and resilience in conversations with individuals. This staff member was not alone in warning about overly under or over emphasizing the impact that individual effort as well as sustained support could have on student or staff experience.

In some cases, it may even be unclear where individual effort ends and provided support begins. Christina illustrated this by presenting the same efforts as both something they are doing as an individual, as well as a support they are providing to the wider community:

I think it's important to choose things that are good – well - for you... that benefit yourself as well. But I think benefit [for] your community, I think, is important as well... And to reach even farther, the government - voting... and then I think... [an] even bigger way would be like... doing charity work.... like, going to your beach... [and] picking up trash or like even the smallest things... I think it's important to focus on your local community, because once you start working with your local community, and at that point you'll work up, and then we'll help others too.

Christina's reflections on their individual aspirations and wider community needs allude back to my exploration of how students and staff define success. Christina provides an

example where an individual could consider one single action to be an individual effort as well as support provided to others (i.e. wider community) within the context of their pursuit of success. Christina encourages us to regularly direct our individual efforts towards things that will provide support to our community, as this will help us individually and collectively to advance towards success.

Even when individual effort and support are distinct, AE students and staff described them as mutually reinforcing forces in their pursuit of success. For example, staff and students feel more capable and open to making individual efforts when they also feel supported (Geoff, Brian, and Jill). Christina provides an example of receiving support intertwined with making individual effort as they reflect on their effort to attend college to become a nuclear physicist or marine biologist:

Well, I've kind of noticed that ever since I was very young, like in third fourth grade, I noticed I could understand that I wasn't a very loud kid or person that asked many questions or talked in class... But later, I was like, I need to change or else I'm not going to go anywhere: I'm just going to be lost in the class or [can only] help myself in a way. And so I just tried to build more connections with teachers.

In addition to making their own efforts to connect with teachers and their peers, Christina has also benefited from the support of School B staff, who have helped her “become more confident in class overall, and I think it's also gave me confidence in my work and asking questions if I was wrong in something or like just asking questions in general.” Through this connection, Christina found resources that helped them prepare for the



college environment. As Christina made individual effort, staff supported them, which helped them to make more individual effort, which led back to receiving more specific support. Carrying out one fortifies the impact of the other.

Similarly, Rafia describes the importance of students who are struggling in math class to reflect on their efforts: “If you don't know... where you're stuck, I can't help because I don't know where you're at.” Rafia then describes how students have come to articulate their individual efforts:

And they're starting to advocate for themselves and say, okay, I understand this and this. I need help here, and that's like been a huge way to measure that growth meeting some students just to find a way to focus themselves, even to get them to begin.

In this way reflection on individual effort can guide support. Brian and Noah add that individual effort that supports others builds esteem and bolsters one's ability to make individual effort. Several students describe making individual efforts and providing or receiving support as skills they desire to hone: Aislynn states that “I think I learned that I can't do everything on my own,” and “I've learned how to recognize when I'm denying that I need help.” Critiquing and expressing a desire to help their peers, Tasha admits that “If you don't speak up, you won't be able to get help to be motivated to be doing all these things... People, people be stubborn. Don't need to be so stubborn, be a little open minded.” Eli explains:

I feel like especially with today's students - they want to start doing things themselves, like, as early as they can. Because they don't want to be, you know, in

a sense, babied the whole way there and all that. [But] yes, they want to be, they [do] want to be guided through the journey of life. And I feel like if other people, other peers could guide them.

Eli's realization of the limitations of leaning on only individual effort, Tasha's description of the effort that needs to be made to access support, and Aislynn's thoughts on the desired ratio of individual effort and support by students all speak to individual effort and support as interconnected perspectives on success.

Sharing some examples where AE students and staff frame individual effort and support as mutually reinforcing is relatively straight-forward. A more complex task is to go about considering the more nuanced implications of these two approaches towards success. Considering more nuanced or counter examples of student and staff treatment of individual effort and support is especially challenging if one considers the distinct perspectives of students and staff. For example, when students discussed the relationship between individual effort and support, they primarily talked about themselves as the individual making effort and receiving support. In contrast, when staff were discussing effort and support, they more often took the student to be the individual making effort. Not themselves, i.e. first person. I highlight this because I perceive a tension between claiming individual effort and support are both important forces in student and staff pursuit of success, and then staff sharing little about their individual efforts and far more about their perception of students' efforts and need for support. For example, Noah described their entry into the teaching profession as a personal calling and emphasized

the importance of identifying and applying timeless principles with students to their lives.

They also describe students and their parents in a very patronizing way:

Traditionally a parent role is to instill some kind of common sense into your kids, you know some universal principles... that are timeless. But these kids don't have it. They come in instead with this... I don't know, it's like a sense of nihilism, you know. They reject, or they don't know about your standards. They don't know about ethics. And they don't know that there's consequences... to your actions.

They basically think life is meaningless to a degree. And one of my jobs I see as a teacher is to affect a paradigm shift in them, where they have a change of thinking where they realize life has a purpose and they can determine their destiny to a large degree.

This staff member frames themselves as the holder of the correct paradigm or morals, and students to be in sore need of their support. Although this same staff member may allude to ways they as an individual may need to make individual effort, examples such as this direct much more emphasis on students making individual efforts.

Several staff provide helpful examples of how to consider their own individual efforts, while also exploring how they support students. Richie has made many efforts across multiple teaching positions to reflect on their own contributions to educational spaces. One example of this is when Richie applied the idea that both the head and heart can help shape decisions to their own tendencies:

I'm a head heavy person, and I've had to deflate and lean into my heart more. But I think, just being able to - when you mentioned the skill sets of listening to

understand versus just listening to kind of placate - is a pretty big distinction people can feel. Articulating how to make that shift, and even knowing how to listen takes some deeper heart level work when we're not actually conditioned to listen to ourselves.

Brad similarly reflected on their efforts to better foster relationships and redirect student behaviors. Rafia questions how much effort is reasonable to expect from students:

[S]hould we remove all barriers? Like no, they should have accountability... I mean they should have accountability, but at the same time... let's be reasonable. At least have some humanity for where these guys are. I'm all about rewarding hard work but... not everybody starts on a level playing field. Let's level the playing field a little better. I ... certainly do not want an uphill climb all the time. If everything was that hard all the time, who would want to do it?

Although staff may reflect on students' efforts and needs for support, they also consider their own. Pursuing success through a mixture of individual effort and support will progress in several ways at the same time: in one sense, such a concept across a setting as wide as AE in the U.S. will never be fully operationalized in research, policy, and practice. In another sense, preliminary AE student and staff descriptions of individual effort and support as mutually reinforcing ways that they progress towards success can help inform conversations in research, policy, and practice.

### ***Success Progresses Through Daily Steps Towards Wider Vision***

Thus far, I have set forth how I found AE students and staff to define success as an amalgamation of individual and common perspectives. I have also outlined one way

these same students and staff work towards success: through individual effort and support. Students and staff additionally described their pursuit of success as a consideration of daily, practical steps and a wider-scale vision. They used daily steps and wider vision, like individual effort and support within the previous theme, to reinforce and clarify each other. For example, staff commented on large challenges and changes they would like to address within their classroom and school over time, and noticed that they could make small, daily efforts towards these larger goals. For example, Brian identifies the small, daily ways they work towards their wider aspirations:

I do that through my curriculum and through preparing people for their future....

You can also make people smile. Tell a joke, and it's funny... I figure that I'm in charge of the tone of this time that I have with my students, and I'd like to make it not suck as much as possible, because, like we're all going to die some day and we have limited minutes. If we're going to do this school thing, might as well make it as good as I can.

Daily efforts that Brian mentions includes curricular structure, helping students prepare for their future, and infusing humor into their interactions with others. All of these are in service to the wider vision that also informs their progress towards success:

I have a personal mission statement, and it's: "I stand in beauty, truth, and goodness with my myself, kith, community and nature." So to kind of break that out: so usually goodness is sort of, you know, classic values: The idea that if something has, I guess, has value, it's because it's one of those 3 things:..

Beautiful... means it's fun. It's interesting to look at, it's nice. It's a pleasure to the

senses. Truth is if it is true, it's not a lie. And then good as in... it can almost be defined as bringing the other two things to others.

Brian further unpacks their personal mission statement, but I think this excerpt is sufficient to illustrate what I am referring to as their "wider vision." It is wider in the sense that it guides actions across life contexts, over time, and is not contingent on a particular outcome or indicator. While providing conceptual clarity about what they value, they also work to unpack the daily or practical implications of this wider vision. Brian illustrates how they use a wider, longer-term conceptions of success to inform daily, practical efforts towards success.

Several students described a long-term vision that involves earning a living by helping others navigate challenges they have personally experienced (e.g., homelessness and incarceration). In pursuit of this vision, students have identified a range of coherent shorter-term actions. For example, Taylor abstains from staying at home and watching T.V. over winter break and instead uses their time supporting a local shelter and befriending and supporting another youth who was working to locate housing. Motivated by their experience with incarceration as a younger person, Mark identified that they want to work as a social worker. They have further broken down this sub-goal by identify which program they will pursue and how they would fund themselves through college. Eli and Kate similarly worked backwards from their desires to help others through the medical field and psychology respectively. Some students directly experienced or thought through what a potential profession would look like on a day-to-day basis, which helped them determine they would like to pursue different careers in the future (Tasha, Kate, and

Ronnie). For Isaac, direct experience and conversations affirmed their longtime interest in training to be a lineman after high school. Eli notes that the example of their mother's intense persistence and daily joy working towards a cause she feels strongly about helped to motivate them to locate a similar vision for themselves and persist with similar vigor. While some students were able and eager to describe their long-term goals in terms of specific vocational or educational next steps, they need not reduce their future goals to what job they want to pursue in the future.

Kate helps us describe a "wider vision" in a more nuanced way, as they feel that asking teenagers to specify their life goals at this stage of life is unrealistic: To satisfy adults that ask about their post-secondary plans, Kate says that they want to study psychology. However, they really want to learn how "to teach [themselves] how to be okay with not having the answer," with respect to what their future will look like. They do have a general way they would like to be of service to their community and they are aware of specific skills they will need to build along the way. Kate asserts that having "a general idea of what you're doing is good. [Have] like a rough sketch that can be erased because it's in pencil. Write it in pencil." Kate's comments help emphasize the importance of conceptions of success that go beyond any one phase of life, or outcome. In the previous examples of Taylor, Eli and Kate, they had identified a particular career or field of study to pursue. They had a quick answer to the question "So what do you want to do when you grow up?" However, the vocation they had identified was simply a medium-to-larger next step they were taking in pursuit of a wider desire to help others.

While continued education or a particular vocation may be a part of how students seek to operationalize their wider vision, the former is not reducible to the latter.

Amongst staff, the administrator at each AE school had the most to say around harmonizing daily effort with longer-term vision. Driven by wide, conceptual commitments to infuse love through communication and trust into all their interactions, Ken sees their work and the entire school's task to be clarifying this overarching vision, and identifying implications for how students and staff interact daily. Ken refers to these daily patterns and wider vision as "culture." Kathy shares many practical considerations for how School B can foster staff unity. Due to recent staff turnover, Kathy sees less clarity across staff as to School B's wider vision of success, let alone how to work towards it. Kathy therefore saw summer of 2023 as a time to prepare for reinvigorated conversations about the wider vision of the school, and its day-to-day implications. Ginger also thinks in terms of wider vision (e.g., developing school-wide systems such as a master schedule that fits students' patterns of life) as well as daily indicators that growth is occurring (e.g., patterns of speech or interaction). Ginger sees their focus on daily successes as distinct from how School C staff at large think of success, and Ginger is exerting a lot of effort to help more staff to be able to think in terms of wider vision and its day-to-day implications.

AE administrators' exploration of both their relationships with AE staff and students emphasizes that all their efforts in pursuit of success unfolds within relationships. To make individual effort and give/receive support, one must be in relationship with others. To assist with practical efforts as well as clarify vision, one must



be in relationship with those making these daily and wide actions. By far the most consistent way that AE students and staff named being able to pursue success was through relationships.

***Student and Staff Relationships are Foundational to their Pursuit of Success***

In my efforts to glean insights as to how AE students and staff define and pursue success, I found them to time and again describe the importance of relationships. Students and staff described many ways that they formed and bolstered these relationships, thereby pursuing success more broadly. The most prominent approaches (sub-themes) that I will explore are A) Small environments create space for relationships to flourish; B) Reflection on one's strengths, challenges and life experience can help connect to others; and C) Staff used curriculum and structures to foster relationship formation for themselves and students.

**Small Environments Create Room for Relationships to Flourish.** AE staff took small classroom and overall school sizes to be formative to forming relationships with students, and success more broadly (Kathy and Noah). Staff note that the district allows this smaller environment due to the high needs of AE students (Amy), who they also identify as possessing tremendous capacity (Rafia and Ginger). A smaller learning environment reduces anxiety (Liz), makes it less daunting to ask questions and/or contribute to classroom discussion (Liz, Geoff, and Heather), and helps students to feel that they receive more help (Ronnie). This smaller environment also helps students to get to know each other, and helps staff create a "drama free" environment (Isaac & Maddy).

In apparent contrast, Melyssa saw conflict between individuals or groups as extra impactful in the smaller environment of School C: “It’s really hard, since we’re such a tiny school to avoid each other when something happens.” So, a smaller environment may not be inherently a “drama free” zone but does make conflict more visible and possible to address. These same challenging social dynamics or other barriers to success may remain hidden or be easier to dismiss in larger educational settings.

Students and staff describe small settings as a context in which other strategies or dynamics can more easily unfold. In many cases, students describe these smaller-environment dynamics in contrast with their previous experience within traditional education. For example, Tasha describes School A staff as:

...more helpful than the [Traditional] high school. They make you like feel like you don't have to be scared to answer questions or speak your own mind about stuff. They make it comfortable... I think it's [...] the way they approach things. Like their body language. Like PMA. Positive mental attitude.

Justice and Melyssa similarly appreciate the approachability of AE staff, in contrast to their previous experiences with traditional high schools. This shifted relationship with staff has helped Justice “come out of their shell” with respect to asking more questions and connecting to staff and their peers. Many other students valued AE staff’s willingness to listen and provide practical help. For Geoff, a teacher and instructional assistant provided this support throughout a given lesson. Frequent staff check-ins helped Will to not feel alone in their school efforts.

Students and staff describe several other factors that support their pursuit of success within a small AE environment. Among the factors that AE students and staff shared were all parties making consistent effort to form and sustain relationships, communication of staff care, and evolving assumptions about the roles and responsibilities of students and staff. I allude to these examples (see Appendix F for more detail) to emphasize that AE students and staff described smaller learning environments as a means by which to channel more of their effort into building relationships. A smaller learning environment did not directly lead to them fostering relationships, but as a means by which they could make additional efforts to pursue success via forming relationships.

**Reflection on One's Strengths, Challenges and Life Experience Can Help Connect to Others.** Across specific efforts to foster relationships, some students and staff had clearly engaged in extensive self-reflection about how their lived experiences (in school and beyond) related to the experiences of other AE students and staff. Amy and Rafia note how their upbringing (e.g., in a rural, large, blue-collar family; and as a teen mom who was self-sufficient from very early in life) mirrors the experiences of many students. They used this overlap in experience to share insights and help students to understand their own often implicit ways of thinking. CY6 noted that staff with experiences like their own helped them to make sense of and express components of their identity.

Alice and Brad noted how divergent their experiences were from those of most School B students and had considered multiple ways to shift their interactions accordingly. By reflecting on their own positionality, these staff were able to modify how

they sought to foster relationships with AE students. Brian has clearly engaged in similar work, as they reflected on how the general disposition of students, and the deep sense of affirmation they get from hearing they have substantially improved someone else's life had drawn them to work at School.

I prompted AE students and staff to reflect on their own strengths and challenges. Becoming aware of both, as well as their interaction, helped students and staff to deepen relationships and equipped those involved with better information from which to pursue success. Kate described the process of tending to one's strengths and challenges as a balancing act:

Being able to recognize your barriers and things you need to work on, but not taking it to the extreme of thinking that you're worthless. Because you do still have worth, wonderful qualities that you need to remind yourself of, affirmations and things like that. And I think if you focus too hard on one over the other then you're going to tip your seesaw.

Many other students assert that tending to both strengths and challenges are essential when working towards success (Tasha, Kate, Liz, and Geoff). While noting that tending to both are important, some students have asymmetric comments. For example, Christina warns that staying too focused on perceived strengths may limit learning opportunities:

Because I think using your strengths... can only get you so far, you know. Just relying on what you're good at can only get you so far. It's kind of like growth mindset, and all that type of stuff... But [this approach] won't take you anywhere

you [will] experience failing, you won't experience all those important things like that. [You won't find] new strengths.

Focusing too much on one's strengths could limit one's opportunities to fail, thereby honing new strengths.

Melyssa, Heather, and Aislynn all note the role of challenges, barriers, and negativity in their life: Melyssa notes the prevalence of challenges in their life, and sees how positivity could provide helpful structure:

I think that'd be helpful for me too... all the positive things... Because in the last 2 years there's been a lot of negative things in my life. It's a big part of my life, and I end up talking about it a lot, and it makes me angry, and it's definitely a challenge - like family problems and things like that. So... I do wish I would focus on more positive things. I think that would definitely help.

Melyssa was not alone in having more experience considering their challenges. Heather was quick to identify their persistent "attendance problem," and how being in the smaller learning environment of School C has helped them address it. Aislynn reflected on their lack of support growing up, reticence to accept help, and battles with mental illness.

Noticing how they have overcome these barriers and are making positive choices gives Aislynn hope for the future:

It just gives me hope, like, how I am choosing to be mature. I don't want to be a mean person or a bad person. I don't want to do any of that stuff. I want to have a future for myself that I have an open mind to - because I don't know exactly what

I want yet, but that's kind of normal for people my age. But I know because I'm the smartest person in the world wherever I end up, it's not going to be too bad. Describing themselves as "the smartest person in the world" proved to be a bit of a mantra for Aislynn throughout our interview: a description of themselves that helps them keep an open mind to what they could accomplish or experience in the future.

A handful of staff (Sharon, Brad, and Rafia) note that both they and students need to practice tending to strengths and challenges. Brad talks through their interplay within their own learning efforts:

One of my strengths that I think I'm able to use in the classroom is I'm a... relational, joyous person. I can't always be in that role, [especially when] talking about something super serious, or... trying to redirect a negative behavior. But I think a strength that I have is... build[ing] relationships with students in passing... On the converse, or on the flip side of, I think a barrier that I've been working through is...being able to like jump in and redirect those negative behaviors. I've always been like a pretty non-confrontational person... I think those can be related: I'm learning that I can jump into and confront behaviors I don't want to, or directly talk to students in a way that might upset them in the moment. But... if I'm still building those relationships, and showing in different ways throughout the day, like my care for them, then it's not me like making a personal attack on them.

Brad leans on their relationship-building strength to help navigate redirecting students, a challenge they are trying to learn how to better overcome. This example illustrates how

awareness of strengths and challenges can be mutually reinforcing, clarity with one providing an opportunity to apply or more deeply understand the other.

Staff and student reflection on their life experiences, strengths and challenges informed how they went about pursuing success, as well as forming relationships with others. Students and staff were able to make these connections in part because their learning environment involved less students and staff. Staff also took advantage of their smaller class sizes to consciously cultivate relationships within the structures of their classroom and AE school.

**Staff Used Curriculum and Structures to Foster Relationship Formation for Themselves and Students.** AE staff make explicit curricular and structural decisions in classrooms and across schools to pursue success with students through relationship-building efforts. Like one-on-one interactions, Brad noted that interactions in the classroom can be an opportunity for staff to provide concrete examples of how to constructively communicate and interact with others. Staff can intentionally structure curriculum to provide opportunities to connect with others and form a group identity. Liz observed this happening through warm-up questions at the outset of class:

[The teacher] would make like warmups that would make you think. And you would actually go into deep conversations [and] let everyone have a turn to speak. [I]t kind of brought the class more together, because once everyone knew what everyone was thinking: Like, oh, yeah, I agree with that! Or I disagree with that! But it's fine - it's fine to disagree.

The classroom can also open space to explore how to work as a team and practice listening to each other. Amy explains how creating group norms in collaboration with students helps to establish a fruitful learning environment:

At the beginning of every cohort [students and staff will] create their class rules, their expectations, what they want their class culture to look like. And there's a lot of community building that happens in our classrooms. [T]he teachers will collect data and play fun games with information about students. And there's like circles where the students can express how they feel about certain things. So I think, as a school, listening to your students. Not just here's a list of rules, and everything is black or white. Allowing them... the agency, to come to us with ideas.

From the outset, how staff structure a class can assist all in forming and deepening relationships.

A couple staff also spoke to how grounding classroom activities in a particular purpose was supportive of engaging students and fostering meaningful relationships. Brad notes that looking for a purpose for a given activity at school is different than their own schooling experience, but they are learning how to take up a different approach:

So I think a lot of this is like giving purpose to what we're doing. Like, yes, we're learning about reconstruction. We're learning about... reading through different young adult novels. These are the skills that we're building. Like, this is our purpose of doing that... And when you give that context... to students in the classroom, they're a lot more willing to jump in.



Being able to adjust the scope of content addressed in a class allows staff at School B to “slow it down and, like, take our time to like, really understand an important concept and draw skills from that.” Noah similarly talks about classroom activities (e.g. interactions with literature) having a specific purpose, this being to shed light on universal principles. They share an example of a particular book which has an outward facing story that many students relate to, and exemplifies “timeless principles,” such as “you reap what you sow.” Noah then tries to help students practice applying these timeless principles to their own lives.

AE student and staff relationships are fundamental to their pursuit of success. Within this overarching theme, students and staff additionally explained that small environments help create opportunities to tend to relationships. I also found students and staff to use reflection on the life experiences, strengths and challenges of themselves and others as a means by which to deepen relationships. Although students and staff made efforts to build relationships in virtually any context, I also found staff to share how they leveraged in-classroom and cross-school routines and structures to foster relationships formation between themselves and students. These three sub-themes help flesh out how AE students and staff pursue success via forming and deepening relationships.

I undertook the present study within the longer-term vision of contributing to a new way of discussing success within U.S. AE schools and programs. As an intermediate step, I interviewed 16 students and 15 staff, seeking to understand how they defined and worked towards success. In analyzing their responses, I found students and staff to define success as an amalgamation of individual and common conceptions of success. AE

students and staff pursued success through mutually reinforcing individual effort and received support; they progressed towards success through practical, daily steps and considering their longer-term visions for their future. Central in essentially every student and staff reflections on their pursuit of success was the centrality of relationships. The three sub-themes recounting how AE students and staff went about cultivating their relationships were the topic of the immediately preceding sections of this chapter. In the upcoming chapter, I will unpack how these findings demonstrate to AE researchers and practitioners how to engage more perspectives, and assume relationships are inherently mutualistic. The implications that follow from these two insights have the potential to recast AE research and practice as we know it.

## Chapter 6

### Discussion and Implications

Alternative Education (AE) students and staff defined and pursued success in fundamentally distinct ways than my reading of U.S. AE literature. I found extant research and policy to define success in AE schools and programs within the United States in three distinct, largely siloed ways: Some took AE schools to be successful when they help students to graduate from high school. Other researchers defined success in AE settings by diverse, locally constructed indicators (e.g. resilience in Zolkoski et al., 2016). Still others described success as uniquely defined by each individual, and AE as an educational effort to meet everyone where they are. Relationships between these perspectives were largely adversarial, as each perspective sought to solidify its claim to be the proper conception of AE success. AE students and staff do not take up a fragmented view of AE success. The students and staff I interviewed defined and pursued success in terms of interconnections between different perspectives and people, grounded in the assumption that these relationships can be mutually reinforcing and clarifying, i.e. mutualistic.

Researchers and practitioners can completely transform AE as we know it by conceptualizing relationships to be mutualistic in nature. Imagine: State and Federal institutions learn how to support the aspirations and challenges of growingly diverse groups of schools. Schools appreciate and reciprocate this trust and support by regularly deepening their understanding of the success indicators that state and federal entities monitor, to better share and inform their daily efforts. Parents and school staff continually

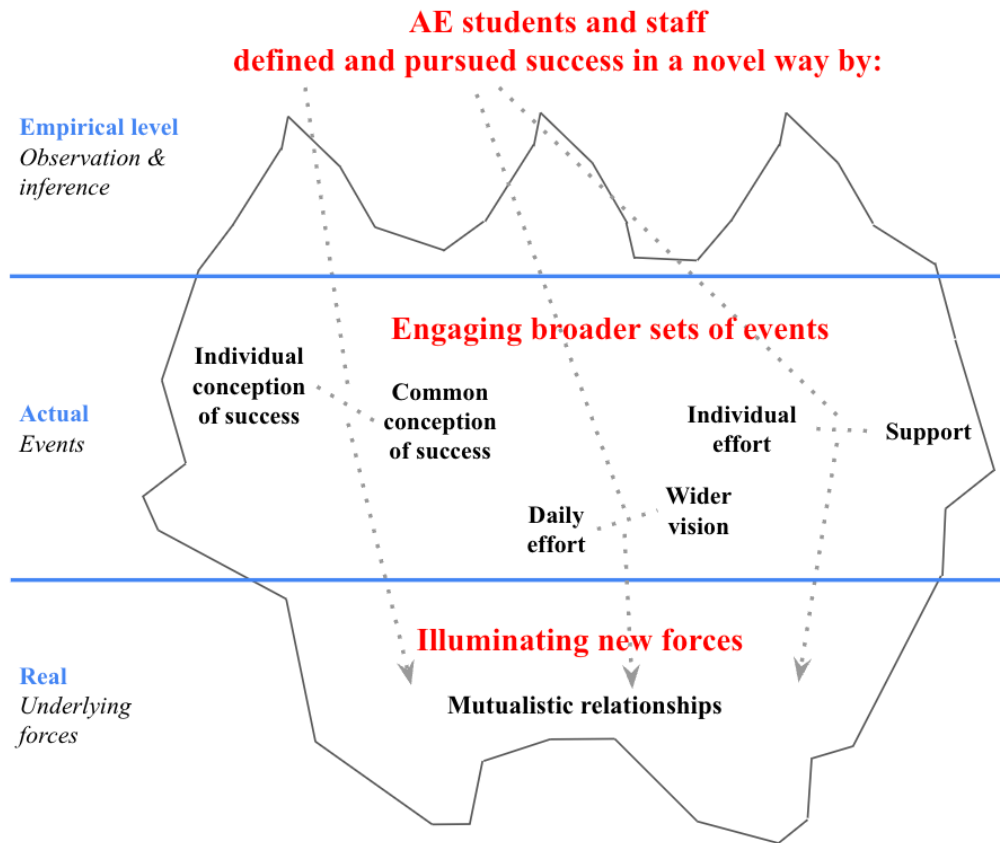
learn about new ways to work together in their shared enterprise of supporting the education of young people. Such things require quite the imaginative stretch, due to how strongly inculcated the assumptions of adversarial relationships and liberal thought are within current research and practice (Castagno, 2021; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Karlberg, 2004). AE students and staff do not just make novel assertions and leave us to wonder about what the future could look like: they also provide concrete ways that researchers and practitioners can recast their efforts in light of assuming relationships are mutualistic in nature.

AE students and staff identify a number of ways to move beyond the fragmented gridlock of extant literature and advance research and practice towards better understanding and cultivating mutualistic relationships. AE students and staff described success and its pursuit in terms of three interconnections: individual and common conceptions of success; individual effort and support; as well as daily effort and the pursuit of a wider vision. Each of these dyads reveals a distinct way of describing success at the empirical level of reality. However, these findings are not a new siloed way to describe success, a fourth peak on the critical realism iceberg I first described in Figure 2 of Chapter 2. Each of these perspectives prompts researchers and practitioners to interact with a wider range of events occurring within the actual level of reality. Just below the metaphorical waterline, the actual level of reality contains all the events (i.e. perspectives of success) occurring throughout reality, observed and not. In contrast with extant research, AE students and staff demonstrate how to engage and interconnect distinct events. Within the real level of reality, the underbelly of metaphorical iceberg, AE

students and staff shed light on an underlying force that diverges from extant literature’s fragmentation and reshapes how all the events in the actual level unfold: assuming relationships to be mutualistic.

**Figure 4**

*AE student and staff insights in the empirical level of reality demonstrated a novel definition and pursuit of success by engaging a broader set of events and illuminating a new underlying force.*



AE researchers and practitioners can advance towards a new discourse on AE success by engaging broader sets of events and new foundational assumptions. To do this, researchers and practitioners alike will need to pose and explore challenging questions, particularly with respect to their own foundational assumptions, how they

apply these assumptions, and how they communicate with others who they perceive to hold similar or divergent views. I will now unpack the implications of these two key insights for both future research and practice.

### **Draw On and Interconnect More Actual Events**

AE students and staff defined success in a way that engaged wider swathes of events within the actual level of reality than extant literature. AE students and staff define success in terms of common conceptions of success grounded in their own individual experience and success. In contrast to my reading of extant literature, students and staff are saying that it isn't a question of high school graduation or individualized conceptions of success: they constructed their definition of success through a careful consideration of both. AE students and staff also described their pursuit of success as simultaneously informed by daily actions and a constantly refined wider vision for the future. The third and final way that AE students and staff help to engage a wider set of perspectives was by clarifying that they pursued success through individual effort as well as provided support. The former is not sufficient without the latter, nor is it entirely clear where individual effort ends and provided support begins.

How AE students and staff defined and pursued success - individual and common conceptions; daily effort informed by a wider vision; individual effort and support - are examples of empirical perspectives that shed light on novel ways of interacting with the actual level of reality. Rather than treat any one of them, or some combination thereof as a fourth peak of the iceberg I present in Figure 2, Chapter 2, I use them as examples by which to spark novel research and practice.

*Develop a More Nuanced Relationship between Individual and Common Conceptions of Success*

One way researchers and practitioners can apply AE student and staff's wider engagement with the actual level of reality is by developing a more nuanced relationship between common and individual perspectives of success. For researchers, they can do this by reconsidering how high school graduation is associated with increased future income (e.g. (Campbell, 2015)). In my conversation with students who expressed an elevated concern for their future financial health due to their experience with poverty during their childhood, they were seeking something much more nuanced than money. For Mark, their desire to provide for their family was rooted in the conception of gender roles, as the only male of the family. Mark also saw providing support for young people experiencing challenges like himself as an ideal part of his future career, seeking to both do that and earn a livable wage for him and his family. Future research would do well to consider connections such as these: high school graduation to a subgroup of students that will help provide greater nuance to the implications or import of high school graduation. Other questions based in preliminary connections that emerged from this study include: How do youth from historically marginalized populations see high school graduation increasing their access to tertiary education?; How do AE students perceive their ability to be successful in future academic, vocational or general life circumstances outside the AE environment they were nurtured within?; How are AE students' perceived needs and hopes for the future addressed within AE schools and programs that focus on assisting students to graduate high school?

AE administrators, teachers and other staff can also refine the way they engage and interconnect common and individualized conceptions of success. To begin, it may be helpful to reflect on the reality of their experience at a given school or program: On a spectrum from entirely focused on common conceptions of success to the other extreme of entirely focused on individual conceptions of success, where do you as an individual tend to be? Where would you place the school or program’s collective vision on this spectrum? In light of these reflective questions, practitioners could then consider what strengths they already possess, as well as the areas they could learn more about. For example, an individual that sees themselves as very “student centered” working within a school that they perceive to be very common success outcome centered will have distinct work from a staff member who perceives themselves to share or diverge from their school’s perspective on high school graduation. I offer questions to consider for when perspectives between parties diverge and are homogenous in Table 4 below.

**Table 4**

*Potential personal and school/program positionalities with respect to engagement with common and individual perspectives of success.*

Relationship Between	Personal Perspective	School/Program Perspective	Questions to Consider
<b>Divergent Perspectives</b>	Individual	Common	Why do I lean towards this end of the spectrum from individual to common conceptions of success?  What specific implications does my leaning have with respect to my daily work?
	Common	Individual	



			<p>How can I learn more about the motivations and methods of my colleagues who I perceive to have a different leaning?</p> <p>What experience do I have with learning with and working towards unity with groups and individuals who have different views than my own? Can I utilize any of these strategies here?</p>
<b>Homogeneous Perspectives</b>	Individual	Individual	<p>Why do I lean towards this end of the spectrum from individual to common conceptions of success?</p> <p>What specific implications does my leaning have with respect to my daily work?</p>
	Common	Common	<p>What are the implications of continuing to work in a setting where we all hold approximately the same leaning?</p> <p>What small, prompt step can I as an individual, or we as a school take to engage a wider range of perspectives on the spectrum from common to individual conceptions of success? How will we start this conversation?</p>

To be frank, I am proposing that AE practitioners engage in a conversation that I perceive to be very challenging at present. Educator’s leanings towards individual or

common conceptions of success mirror the antagonistic interactions between individuals holding distinct political viewpoints within the current divisive U.S. political climate (Ali & Altawil, 2023; Iyengar et al., 2019; Liu, 2020). In my practical experience, conversations that staff perceive to be challenging or charged, particularly along political lines, simply do not happen. For example, if a teacher thinks that the primary issue has to do with a student's behavior and perceives an administrator to be more concerned with the upkeep of an overarching rule or standard, my experience has been that the teacher will avoid having the conversation. However, if we seek to apply the view of AE students and staff that success necessarily involves the interconnection of common and individual conceptions of success, practitioners must learn how to have conversations that involve individuals with a wide range of perspectives. This is where leaning on the questions that I offer in Table 4 will help practitioners deepen their understanding of their own individual perspectives as well as how to listen to and learn from others with divergent perspectives. Identifying a shared conception of success (e.g. meeting students where they are) seems to be a helpful strategy in these challenging conversations.

### ***Dig Underneath Individualized Conceptions of Success***

AE students and staff also illustrate the limitations of taking a given perspective as individual preference. For example, many AE students claimed that they personally enjoyed helping others, which motivated them to seek out specific future vocations and life circumstances that would allow them to do this. However, several of these students described their interest in helping others as simply their own personal preference. AE researchers, policy makers, staff and students are perfectly free to posit that their

perspective of success is simply unique to their individual personality, soul, or however else they define themselves. However, doing so will incur the limitations of liberal thought, namely that they will not glean new insights into wider historical or moral forces. Researchers have already shown how this approach obfuscates exploration of perspectives or assumptions beyond the current norms (Dorsey & Plucker, 2016; Dunning-Lozano, 2016; Fedders, 2018). Back to our example, if we take helping others as simply their own preference, subsequent research will not explore it as a viable option for a common conception of success. Returning to the language of a realist ontology, this isolates future inquiry from considering events in the actual level of reality, limiting the types of questions one can ask and limiting the amount of information one considers when making empirical observations.

AE researchers can move beyond the limitations incurred by assuming a given perspective is simply a matter of individual preference by asking additional questions. When a researcher encounters a seemingly distinct view within their analysis, it is expedient to consider how this view appears in other parts of their data. Is it really an isolated view? Researchers would also do well to frame questions that allow for a more careful exploration of the views of sub-populations: For example, trouble getting a ride or otherwise accessing education may appear to be an isolated experience for a small number of students at a certain school. However, when a researcher takes a step back and realizes that the school is primarily composed of families of higher socioeconomic status, it will be clear that what may appear to be a challenge experienced by a select few may be an overarching challenge that has a much more complex relationship with the school

or program. This also emphasizes the importance of researchers carefully considering with whom they engage in research. In the present study, I was aware from the outset of the specific historical context of racism in the state in which I recruited participants (Imarisha, 2020; Stocks, 2023). As such, I over-recruited for students of diverse backgrounds, ultimately interviewing a group of students that is more diverse than overarching state demographics. Recruiting diverse staff was harder, exacerbated by even more pronounced homogeneity in this population (Lewis, 2013; Unda, 2023). Continued investigation of AE with staff would do well to engage a wider diversity of participants.

AE practitioners are similarly able to circumvent the limitations of liberal thought by asking additional questions and carefully considering with whom they are engaging in conversation. One way I have seen students and staff get stuck, in the present inquiry and within my practical experience, is by attributing the approach or set of abilities they have, or they observe in another as simply innate. One student partially does this by stating that she has been aware that she is a quiet individual since childhood. However, this student does not get stuck assuming a quiet individual will stay that same way indefinitely. She instead sees this as the reason why she needs to make extra effort to learn how to build social connections with her peers and staff. AE practitioners can take a similar approach, asking pointed questions in response to unstable assertions. For example, if a staff member finds themselves thinking that a given student or colleague is inherently ill mannered, unruly, or some other negative and overarching descriptor, quickly pivot to asking: What experiences have led to forming this assertion? What do I know about the circumstances of that individual? Are there other environments or perspectives (e.g.

parents, co-workers) that could expose me to a wider picture of this individual's strengths and challenges? As a staff member, is some element of what is frustrating me in a given interaction or situation something that I am consistently challenged by? What questions does this generate about my own habits and communication with others?

***Interconnect Success Indicators Across Various Time Scales and Layers of AE***

The third and final way I will explore how AE researchers and practitioners can engage a wider subset of the actual level of reality is by identifying and further understanding interconnections between success indicators. For example, one student shared extensively about their desire to build their capacity to interact with others. This student rooted their current challenges in their experience, including their friend group dissolving and social isolation at the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. They knew that building up their ability to interact with peers through specific, daily efforts is important if they are to work as a scientist in the future. They gravitated towards this profession because they saw the worsening condition of our planet's environmental and political health, and see it as their individual responsibility, along with the community at large, to contribute to its betterment. This student is thinking about their previous social experience and connections, experiences during COVID, aspirations for education and further employment, as well as an overarching desire to be of service to humanity. Given the nuance of this student's reflection, researchers cannot segregate individual experience and context: daily steps are part of progress towards wider vision, which in turn helps identify and motivate daily steps. A handful of other students described wider visions motivated by moral convictions and challenging personal experience (e.g., incarceration,

homelessness), as well as daily habits and intermediate steps, such as high school graduation.

Researchers can expand the complexity of their analysis of AE success by building on and beyond the indicators they have previously centered. For example: Researchers can connect high school graduation to wider and shorter-term indicators: How does high school graduation shape an individual’s ability to help others? In light of connecting high school graduation to something wider, researchers can then pose a range of questions seeking to understand how high school graduation can be pursued in light of an overarching desire to support students to be able to support others. Researchers can also explore questions across success perspectives concurrently held by layers of stakeholders within AE. Table 5 outlines some examples of these types of questions below. While I consider three different time scales and layers of AE, researchers could consider more than three time scales or layers.

**Table 5**

*Examples of questions that explore connections between success indicators of different time scales (e.g. daily actions, attendance, earned credit, high school graduation, tertiary and vocational pursuits, and wider vision) and different layers within AE.*

Success across	Shorter/Smaller	Middle	Wider/Higher
Time Scales	Daily Actions	High School Graduation	Help Others
Questions between:		↔ How does high school graduation shape an individual’s ability to help others?	
	↔ What daily actions support AE students to graduate from high school?		

	←-----→ How do the aforementioned daily actions shift if we additionally think of high school graduation as a means by which to prepare students to help others across life contexts?		
<b>Layers of AE</b>	Individual	School/Program	District
<b>Questions between:</b>	←→ How do students engage with school if they perceive divergent conceptions of success?		
		←→ What types of interactions help a given AE school/program and its District office to trust each other?	
	←-----→ In what ways do District administrators learn about the needs and aspirations and students?		

Extant research has already explored contexts in which individual effort and support reinforce each other. One school of thought that addresses this is funds of knowledge (Amanti et al., 2005; Cahill et al., 2020). This pedagogical approach posits a teacher’s role is to develop a growing understanding of a student's life circumstances. This knowledge helps staff to construct learning experiences within contexts where students already have experience or are inquisitive about, such as examples of science unfolding in their neighborhood. In this way support facilitates the increased presence of individual effort. Conversely, the individual effort or experience of students attracts the support of educators.

AE staff would also do well to expand their understanding of interconnections between success indicators or perspectives. One administrator demonstrates this by clarifying that there was a difference between their personal conception of success and

how different members of their staff may define success. By not assuming that their conceptions were the same, this administrator was able to articulate their own conception of success and how it may converge with the perspectives of their staff. They had also noticed that factions had been forming within the staff, along divisions related to conceptions of success. They therefore found it timely to create spaces to bring staff together to discuss and re-create a more united conception of success. AE staff would do well to discern between their own perspectives of success, as well as learn about the perspectives of others and how to work to identify points of unity. Variations on the questions I posed in Table 4 may also be useful to situations in which schools feel they encompass largely divergent or homogenous conceptions of success. AE staff would also do well to carefully distinguish between their own formative experiences and definitions of success and those of their students. By not falsely projecting one onto the other, it frees them to better understand their own views, as well as the views of students, and work towards finding points of unity towards which to work together.

### **Implications of Assuming Relationships to be Mutualistic**

Underlying how AE students and staff engaged wider swathes of events (e.g. individual effort and support) was an assumption at the real level of reality that diverges from extant literature: they characterized relationships in terms of interconnection. With individual and common perspectives of success; daily effort and wider vision; as well as individual effort and support, AE students and staff made empirical observations of a wider set of events within the actual level of reality. Rather than assume a given perspective was incompatible or at least challenging to connect, AE students and staff



assumed that each reinforced and clarified the other. Each of these interconnections implies a range of implications for research and practice, which I explored in the preceding section. However, assuming relationships to be mutualistic in nature has still more implications on AE research and practice.

Whereas the implications I have explored thus far help to build on and interconnect siloed perspectives of success in AE literature, exploring the nature and implications of mutualistic relationships has the potential to restructure the entire conversation on success in research and practice. Extant literature demonstrates how characterizing relationships as adversarial leads to perspectives being challenging, if not impossible to harmonize. Researchers and practitioners need not continue to make this assumption, and the implications of alternatively assuming relationships to be mutualistic has nearly utopian implications: Imagine an educational environment in which students and staff perceived themselves to be working together towards a common goal. Imagine if schools and their connected school districts regarded each other as good friends.

Although it will take a long time to fully realize the implications of assuming relationships to be mutualistic, researchers and practitioners are free to identify concrete ways to work towards such a future. AE students and staff offer three specific steps in this direction: Think more concretely about the nature of their interactions that help foster mutualistic relationships; Engage in more robust reflection; and begin shifting routines and systems (i.e. curriculum and school structures) in light of wider aspirations to foster mutualistic relationships. In another sense, AE students and staff have just started the conversation about what mutualistic relationships look like, how students and staff

cultivate them, and where AE stakeholders perceive such relationships to be present. I will now unpack the implications that AE students and staff directly offer to researchers' and practitioners' exploration of mutualistic relationships, as well as questions that can help further expand the field's understanding into the future.

### ***Applying How AE Student and Staff Fostered Mutualistic Relationships***

How AE students and staff framed small environments (i.e. less students and more staff) as a means by which to engage in a wide range of generative practices helps researchers and practitioners engage with this common construct in a more generative way. Students and staff used the relatively smaller environment of AE to connected with each other, share their personal views on important topics, and exert more effort over time to sustain their relationships. This is helpful for researchers to expand beyond the narrow way they have discussed smaller class sizes as an isolated practice, not delving into how staff utilize smaller class sizes (e.g. Flower et al., 2011). Smaller environments were not impactful in themselves, but to the degree that students and staff knew how to take advantage of the opportunities to foster mutualistic relationships. This is also a useful consideration for practitioners, who can reflect on how they leverage opportunities to interact more directly and intimately with coworkers and students alike.

How AE students and staff emphasize the import of reflection also challenges researchers to consider their own efforts. Most notably, considering just strengths or weaknesses were, on their own, insufficient for student and staff reflection: focusing too much on one or the other would result in an unclear and paralyzing view of reality, playfully referred to as tipping one's seesaw by a particular student. As I mentioned in

Chapter 3 AE research has a propensity to focus on the problems or challenges of current efforts (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Considering the disproportionate exploration of challenges, researchers would do well to center their research on better understanding strengths present within AE. I offer my efforts in the present analysis as a small example of this: I framed my analysis around a construct that would elicit insights and expertise from AE students and staff. Throughout my analysis I chose to center codes and resulting themes that described generative ways that AE students and staff described and pursued success. I did this while also tending to the limitations and challenges present within AE.

AE practitioners can also benefit from reflecting on their strengths, weaknesses, and personal experience. Multiple staff demonstrated how essential reflecting on their own life experience, language and aspirations was to then communicate with students with markedly similar or divergent experiences. Without this step of reflection, staff may incorrectly assume their experience, or conceptions of success are the same as students. The metaphor of a seesaw for tending to strengths and challenges similarly helps conceptualize interactions with students, coworkers, and the wider community in a more nuanced way: if your thoughts or experiences have predominantly dealt with strengths or weaknesses, it may be timely to consider how to tend to the other. It is also helpful to recall the twin importance of strengths and challenges when navigating challenging situations: what strengths can staff leverage to navigate the current situation? In reverse, when circumstances are particularly favorable, it is timely to consider ways staff can improve or tend to challenges that will be more pressing in the future.

The last way AE students fostered mutualistic relationships that informs AE research and practice is intentionally structuring curriculum and school-wide structures. This approach demonstrates that pursuing mutualistic relationships can inform everything from how AE staff structure classes to the physical arrangement of a school. For researchers, this sparks a range of questions like those I shared in Table 5, asking questions about how curriculum and school social or physical structures shift when applied as a means to address a wider goal. For example, what activities bolster understanding of a given mathematical concept as well as student's ability to apply their mathematical knowledge to other contexts of their life? Are there certain curricula or educational approaches that seem to foster mutualistic relationships? How do they go about this, and what indicators suggest that students, staff, and other AE stakeholders are forming such relationships? AE practitioners can ask similar questions of their own curriculum and school structures: How do the daily interactions within my classroom reflect school aspirations or conceptions of success? Alternatively, what are the implications on our curriculum or school-wide structures of a given value or wider-scale aspiration?

#### *Additional Questions on Mutualistic Relationships*

It is imperative that researchers and practitioners expand on the preliminary insights that AE students and staff offered into the nature and features of mutualistic relationships. AE students and staff provided many examples of relationships between ideas and individuals that appeared to involve mutually supportive, clarifying relationships. However, AE students and staff were less clear about how they applied

their desire to be mutually supportive within a context characterized by a wide range of authority (e.g. between students and staff). For example, while some staff voiced their desire to empower students in one way or another, they would later describe students in very condescending ways and assert several of their views as the definitive solution to students' problems. AE students and staff help to identify the importance and wide impact of mutualistic relationships, but by no means offer a comprehensive model of these relationships.

Karlberg's (2004) wider conceptualization of power provides a useful model around which to structure subsequent research into mutualistic relationships within and beyond AE settings. To move beyond the common, narrow conception of relationships as fundamentally adversarial and power held by one group over another, Karlberg (2004) represents relationships between parties on an axis from adversarial to mutualistic, as well as a perpendicular axis ranging from inequality to equality. Within this 2-dimensional space, we can describe a rich range of relationships. For example, involved parties could be unequal in authority and adversarial in how they interact, resulting in the group involved conceptualizing power as a limited quantity one group holds over another. In the opposite quadrant are relationships between equal parties that are mutualistic, which Karlberg (2004) calls mutual empowerment. AE students and staff offered many insights into what the latter end of the adversarial to mutualistic relational spectrum can look like but were less discerning in their distinction between what mutualism looked like for groups that had equal or unequal amounts of authority, i.e. students and staff. Using Karlberg's terminology, this would involve AE researchers

exploring how AE stakeholders (students, staff, parents, community partners, and so on) describe and operationalize assisted empowerment. As researchers construct a clearer understanding of how AE stakeholders apply their assumption that relationships are mutualistic, they will also be able to connect with existing common conceptions of success. For example, how does a school's ability to establish mutualistic conceptions of success approach supporting students to graduate from high school?

AE practitioners need to continue to refine how they conceptualize and apply their assumptions about the nature of relationships. While insights from the present analysis illuminates some implications for assuming relationships in a certain way, a comprehensive definition or consideration of its implications for practice are far from complete. AE practitioners can advance these conversations in two layers concurrently: Conceptually, staff can learn how to share and explore their fundamental convictions about the types of relationships they would aspire to build with students, each other, and more distant collaborators (e.g. district office, parents, and the wider community). At the same time, AE practitioners can consider how to shape their daily interactions, curricular decisions, and school-wide structures in light of their unfolding conceptual conversations.

Researchers also need to explore where AE stakeholders assume mutualistic relationships are present, and where they do not. For example, in the present analysis, AE students and staff were very clear on the import of mutualistic relationships between students and staff. However, relationships between students and their parents, or staff and student parents were less clear. It makes sense that AE students and staff would more centrally consider student and staff relationships, and it is also clear that a much wider

range of relationships shape the AE environment. Additional relationships that AE students and staff in this project and would benefit from additional inquiry include the relations between a given AE schools and their district office; administrators and teachers; staff and students' parents; as well as students and their parents.

Careful consideration of which relationships practitioners consider to be mutualistic will help them reflect on their own efforts and engage wider swathes of community support. With the benefit of hindsight on my own practical experience in AE and the insights from interviewing these AE students and staff, I now realize that I had conceptualized my relationships with students as mutualistic but related to staff in an adversarial way. If I am claiming that mutualistic relationships are generative across settings, then I need to carefully consider why I am assuming that my relationships with co-workers - particularly those with perspectives that I perceive to diverge from my own - are fundamentally adversarial. While all AE teachers may not suffer from this same short-coming, I offer my experience as an example of considering different groupings of relationships and the assumptions I make about them. Is it reasonable to assume that the relationships I may be taking as adversarial to benefit from my posture? Is there a way that I can reconceptualize that relationship as a mutualistic pursuit of a unifying conception of success?

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Students and staff, the individuals operating on the front lines of AE, defined and pursued success in fundamentally interconnected ways. AE researchers and practitioners could completely transform how they engage with success by taking up this same

assumption. For example, what would the U.S. education system look like if all (or at least most) students and staff saw each other as collaborators working towards a common goal? How might education research and practice shift if schools and families made regular efforts to help each other support and nurture students? Questions such as these stretch our imagination, as extant AE literature so tidily describes a reality in which distinct views or roles within AE are inherently challenging or even impossible to interweave. However, AE researchers and practitioners are free to make alternative assumptions, and the present analysis identifies many concrete ways that AE students and staff work towards such a lofty future.

Researchers can work towards a new approach to AE success by centering future research on more deeply understanding common conceptions of success. For example, they can construct a deeper understanding of high school graduation by exploring how distinct populations of students and families experience, understand, and pursue these indicators (e.g. Lea et al., 2020). When there appears to be clarity in research about a given indicator from a certain perspective, carry out research how this perspective interacts with other views, or success indicators on a different time scale. For example, if it is clear that high school graduation is a useful indicator for state and national institutions to track AE student success, then how do schools use this same indicator to work towards wider visions that students have, such as being able to help their families, community, and wider society? How do schools shape their behavioral intervention structures, or staff inform their daily interactions with students, in light of this wider vision?



Researchers also need to scrutinize their own efforts for the field to progress towards clearer realizations of mutualistic relationships. To help construct a richer understanding of AE, researchers need to consider who they engage for research, as well as the frequency with which they explore strengths and challenges. Karlberg's (2004) model of a wider conceptualization of power is a powerful tool that researchers can use to organize their inquiry, as it provides room to conceive of relationships as mutualistic as well as tend to how relationships across stakeholders with distinct amounts of authority are operationalized.

AE practitioners can contribute to deeper understanding and application of mutualistic relationships by striving to better understand their own experience and views. By identifying their own personal leanings with respect to the importance of individual and common perspectives of success, staff will better prepare themselves for essential conversations with others who hold distinct views. A clearer understanding of their own strengths, challenges and lived experience will help AE practitioners to relate to students, coworkers and community members with overlapping and distinct views and experiences. Engaging in active self-reflection will help AE practitioners to avoid projecting their own experiences and views onto others, enabling them to better interact with and understand the views and experiences of others.

AE practitioners also need to translate the conceptual considerations related to mutualistic relationships to their daily actions. For example, if researchers and practitioners alike assert the importance of tending to strengths and challenges to navigate a given situation, AE practitioners need to consider how they are maintaining the seesaw

like balance between the two in their own daily practice: How do they become aware of students' strengths and challenges? How do their lesson plans engage their own strengths and challenges, as well as the strengths and challenges of the students they are working alongside? For any wider vision they identify with (e.g. meeting students where they are), AE practitioners need to learn how to articulate this vision to others, as well as identify how this vision shapes their daily actions.

Exploring the presence and implications of mutualistic relationships between ideas and people is generative for many more areas of research and practice than AE. Any field with researchers who have a propensity to silo between divergent perspectives or regularly refer to unclear common constructs would benefit from research like the present analysis. For example, social work researchers and practitioners could how they define and pursue social justice (Thyer, 2010; Young, 2011).

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## Appendix A

### List of AE schools

The schools I contacted for participation in this study are listed below. Unless noted, these schools are present in Richardson's (2017) audit of AE schools and programs in Oregon:

1. Al Kennedy Alternative High School (<https://kennedy.slane.k12.or.us/>)
2. Albany Options School (<https://aos.albany.k12.or.us/students-parents/programs/>)
3. Alliance High School (<https://www.pps.net/alliance>)
4. Alliance High School at Meek Campus\* (<https://www.pps.net/Domain/89>)
5. Alliance High School at Benson\* (<https://www.pps.net/Domain/3756>)
6. Arts and Technology High School (<https://www.wlwg.k12.or.us/Domain/9>)
7. Burns Alternative School (<https://www.burnsschools.k12.or.us/Page/357>)
8. Centennial Park School (<http://cps.csd28j.org/>)
9. Central Medford High School (<https://www.medford.k12.or.us/central>)
10. College Hill, Corvallis OR\*\* (<https://www.csd509j.net/schools-and-programs/programs/college-hill/>)
11. Columbia County Education Campus  
(<https://www.sthelens.k12.or.us/Domain/278>)
12. Community School (<https://www.beaverton.k12.or.us/schools/merlo-station-chs>)
13. Destinations Academy (<http://harding.cbd9.net/destinations>)
14. Durham Center (<https://www.ttsdschools.org/Page/6636>)

## 15. Early College High School

(<https://sites.google.com/a/salkeiz.k12.or.us/echshome/home>)

16. Eugene Education Options (<http://eeo.4j.lane.edu/>)

## 17. Falcon Heights Academy

(<http://ksd.dev.projecta.com/SectionIndex.asp?SectionID=58>)

18. Gateways High School (<https://www.springfield.k12.or.us/Page/106>)19. Hawthorne Middle/High School (<https://hhs.pendleton.k12.or.us/>)

## 20. Innovative Learning Center, Combined with Hermiston High School

(<http://www.eastoregonian.com/eo/local-news/20170202/innovative-learning-center-merges-with-hermiston-high-school>)

21. Kalapuya High School (<http://www.bethel.k12.or.us/kalapuya/21>)22. Marshall High School (<https://www.bend.k12.or.us/Marshall/our-school/school-information>)

## 23. McMinnville High School\*\*

## i. Rural, High School graduation/own construct/individual

1. Cody McIntosh - email

2. Mike Fair –text

3. Chris Jones (Teacher on Special Assignment) - email

24. Metropolitan Learning Center (<https://www.pps.net/domain/2293>)25. New Urban High School (<http://newurbanhs.org/about/>)26. North Columbia Academy (<http://northcolumbiaacad.or.rsdmschoolinsites.com/>)



27. Pioneer Secondary Alt. High School  
(<http://crookcounty.k12.or.us/schools/pioneer-high-school/>)
28. Reynolds Learning Academy (<https://www.reynolds.k12.or.us/rla>)
29. Roberts High School (<https://roberts.salkez.k12.or.us/>)
30. Roseburg High School Alternative Program\*\*  
(<https://www.roseburg.k12.or.us/departments/student-services/alternative-education>)
31. Sheridan Spartan Academy (No existing program by that name, several district schools may be alternative in nature)
32. Wahtonka Community School (<https://www.nwasco.k12.or.us/communityschool>)
33. Woodburn Success (<http://www.woodburnsd.org/success-alternative-high-school/>)
34. Dillard Alternative High School (<http://www.wdsd.org/DAHS/>)
35. EAGLE CAP Innovative HS (<https://eaglecap.baker5j.org/>)
36. Samuel Brown Academy (<http://www.gervais.k12.or.us/samuel-brown-academy/>)
37. URCEO (<http://urceo.eaglepnt.k12.or.us>)
38. Winter Lakes School (<http://www.coquille.k12.or.us/winter-lakes-school/>)

\*Not explicitly named on Audit 2017 List of Alternative Schools, but surfaced as connected to a school that was explicitly mentioned

\*\*Added to this list because of previous connection to author

**Appendix B**

**Interview Schedule**

Interviews have been taking between 45 and 80 minutes. These semi-structured interviews will follow a flow of questions, organized around four broad categories ("Research Question Component," below). The specific questions that I ask may vary, consistent with semi-structured interview protocols, with additional prompts offered as needed.

I preface all interviews with an explanation of the overall flow of our conversation. I shall also describe the participant’s role as one of the local experts, as well as how I plan to share findings. After learning about their own experience, I will ask for their help in modifying the theory that I have been constructing.

**Table B 1**

*Interview outline and follow-up questions for interview.*

Research Question Component	Related Questions
Contextualizing questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did you come to interact with AE?</li> <li>• What experiences motivated you to pursue/accept your current position?</li> <li>• What are some of your personal highlights? What sustains you in this work/school?</li> </ul>
<p>How do AE stakeholders define <u>success</u>?</p> <p><u>Additional terms</u>: vision, hopes, aspirations, goals, purpose, outcomes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you know students/staff/school have been successful?</li> <li>• What do you hope for students/staff /school?</li> <li>• What does this success look like for a student/staff member/school?</li> </ul>

<p>How do AE stakeholders strive to operationalize and pursue their conceptions of success?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you do on a daily basis to pursue your idea of individual/school/district/state success?</li> <li>• How is that carried out?</li> <li>• What are some barriers to realizing your definition of success?</li> <li>• How does your conception of success interact with other perspectives (school/state/staff/students)?</li> </ul>
<p>What causal mechanisms shape AE stakeholder conceptions of success?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Theory Ranking Exercise (below) will help start this conversation</li> <li>• Given the importance of surpassing challenges and building on strengths, how do you balance between them?</li> <li>• Which relationships have you found the most helpful/challenging in your efforts?</li> </ul>

**Theory Ranking Exercise**

Our conversation will take a slightly different form at this point. Some helpful terms to clarify are:

- AE = Alternative Education
- Stakeholders = everyone you see being involved in AE

**Please place the following statements on the following spectrum:**

*It is okay for you to place multiple statements at the same “amount” of accuracy (e.g. Statements 1 & 3 both being between more and somewhat accurate)*

**MOST ACCURATE**

**SOMEWHAT ACCURATE**

**NOT ACCURATE**

(To be cut out)

#	Statement	Theory embodied
1	As AE students work to surpass their challenges, they will be more and more successful.	Power over Certain protagonist as problem
2	As AE students work to identify and build on their strengths, they will be more and more successful.	Power over Certain protagonist as miracle to explore
3	As AE staff help remove barriers for AE students, then students will be better able to work towards success.	Assisted empowerment Student as problem
4	As AE staff help identify and build on strengths of AE students, then students will be better able to work towards success.	Assisted empowerment Student as miracle to be
5	All AE stakeholders need to remove barriers if anyone is to be successful.	Mutual empowerment Reality as problem
6	All AE stakeholders need to identify and build on their strengths if anyone is to be successful.	Mutual empowerment Reality as miracle to be explored
7	As AE stakeholders become clearer on what each of their roles are and act on them, then everyone can be more successful.	Balance of power

## Appendix C

### Modifications to Interview Schedule

**May 2022 Revision**

#### Human Research Protection Review **FORM 5: AMENDMENT REQUEST**

**Important:** Complete this form **ONLY** if the project has received a formal determination (exemption or approval) from the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP). Do not submit this form for projects pending review. This form must be completed if the project will change from what was originally determined exempt or approved through the HRPP. Amendment requests must be reviewed **PRIOR** to implementation.

#### SECTION 1: KEY PROJECT INFORMATION

**A. IRB Protocol Number:** 227692-18

**B. Project Title:** Deepening our understanding of what shapes success in Alternative Education

**C. Principal Investigator Name:** Ben Anderson-Nathe

**D. Student Investigator Name:** (if applicable) Sam Settlemeyer

#### SECTION 2: AMENDMENT REQUEST

**A. Check all that apply:** Protocol forms and materials must be updated to reflect the changes indicated.

- Change to investigator(s)
- Change to external funding
- Update to financial conflict of interest reporting
- Change to project duration or timeline
- Change to study objectives or study rationale
- Change to subject population
- Revisions to recruitment or consent procedures, forms or materials
- Revisions to study design or methodology
- Change in research setting
- Revisions to data management
- Changes to confidentiality of data or privacy of subjects

- Updates to study resources or investigator qualifications
- Other, briefly list:

**B. Provide a description of the proposed changes:**

We are proposing to shift the student focus groups to individual student interviews.

**C. Explain the rationale for the proposed changes:**

This proposed change came about during the student investigator’s Dissertation Proposal Defense. The Committee thinks that interviews are a better match for the present study’s level of analysis. Interviews will also allow students to share their thoughts with respect to success with reduced fear of censure by their peers.

**SECTION 3: Risk Assessment**

**A. Do the proposed changes introduce any new risks, or alter any existing risks?**

- Yes  No

*If yes, describe the new or altered risks to subjects:*

Interviewing AE students will require the student investigator to interview minors in a one-on-one environment.

**B. Do the proposed changes affect the overall risk previously approved for this study?**

- Yes  No

*If yes, describe how the changes affect overall risk to subjects. Include in the response how risks will be minimized in order to protect subjects’ rights and welfare.*

While this shift does mean that minors will engage in conversation with the student investigator in a smaller setting, parent consent and youth assent help to clarify that this environment is part of participation in the study. In light of the student investigator’s background as both student and teacher in alternative education, it was the thought of the student investigator’s committee that this smaller setting would actually be more comfortable for students to discuss their conceptions of success (compared to a focus group with peers).

**SECTION 4: Amendment Submission**

To request an amendment, email Form 5: Amendment Request to the PSU Human Research Protection Program at [psuhrp@pdx.edu](mailto:psuhrp@pdx.edu) with the following updated/new materials attached



(check all that apply):

- Human Research Protocol (Form 1, Form 2 or Form 3, as applicable)
- Recruitment Materials
- Consent Materials
- Instruments / Data Collection Tools
- Data Use Agreement(s) or other documentation of permission
- IRB Authorization Agreement Request Form
- Other; describe:

**September 2022 Revision**

### **Human Research Protection Review FORM 5: AMENDMENT REQUEST**

**Important:** Complete this form **ONLY** if the project has received a formal determination (exemption or approval) from the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP). Do not submit this form for projects pending review. This form must be completed if the project will change from what was originally determined exempt or approved through the HRPP. Amendment requests must be reviewed **PRIOR** to implementation.

#### **SECTION 1: KEY PROJECT INFORMATION**

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**D. Student Investigator Name:** (if applicable) Sam Settelmeyer

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- Change to external funding
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- Change in research setting
- Revisions to data management
- Changes to confidentiality of data or privacy of subjects
- Updates to study resources or investigator qualifications
- Other, briefly list:

**B. Provide a description of the proposed changes:**

**The participant recruitment process was streamlined by combining previous screening documents into one single google form. Template responses for participants who screen into and out of the study were also created. The interview schedule has also modified.**

**The expanded google form is attached as a pdf, but can also be accessed at the following url: <https://forms.gle/unxk7KBPqTbY3fh69>**

**C. Explain the rationale for the proposed changes:**

**The proposed changes make it possible to know some general demographic information about participants before their interview. This will allow for a more intentional recruitment of diverse participants. The scripts for communication with participants who are being asked to participate or are being notified that their help will not be needed will be needed. They simply didn't exist before.**

**The modifications to interview schedule are minor, and are made in light of ongoing study of realist evaluation. A ranking activity was previously mentioned, but no document provided for this to occur on. This document has now been created.**

**SECTION 3: Risk Assessment**

**A. Do the proposed changes introduce any new risks, or alter any existing risks?**

- Yes  No

*If yes, describe the new or altered risks to subjects:*

**B. Do the proposed changes affect the overall risk previously approved for this study?**

- Yes  No



If yes, describe how the changes affect overall risk to subjects. Include in the response how risks will be minimized in order to protect subjects' rights and welfare.

#### SECTION 4: Amendment Submission

To request an amendment, email Form 5: Amendment Request to the PSU Human Research Protection Program at [psuirb@pdx.edu](mailto:psuirb@pdx.edu) with the following updated/new materials attached



(check all that apply):

- Human Research Protocol (Form 1, Form 2 or Form 3, as applicable)
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- Data Use Agreement(s) or other documentation of permission
- IRB Authorization Agreement Request Form
- Other; describe:

**April 2023 Revision**

### Human Research Protection Review **FORM 5: AMENDMENT REQUEST**

**Important:** Complete this form **ONLY** if the project has received a formal determination (exemption or approval) from the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP). Do not submit this form for projects pending review. This form must be completed if the project will change from what was originally determined exempt or approved through the HRPP. Amendment requests must be reviewed **PRIOR** to implementation.

#### SECTION 1: KEY PROJECT INFORMATION

**A. IRB Protocol Number:** 227692-18

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**C. Principal Investigator Name:** Ben Anderson-Nathe

**D. Student Investigator Name:** (if applicable) Sam Settelmeyer

**SECTION 2: AMENDMENT REQUEST**

**A. Check all that apply:** *Protocol forms and materials must be updated to reflect the changes indicated.*

- Change to investigator(s)
- Change to external funding
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- Change to project duration or timeline
- Change to study objectives or study rationale
- Change to subject population
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- Revisions to study design or methodology
- Change in research setting
- Revisions to data management
- Changes to confidentiality of data or privacy of subjects
- Updates to study resources or investigator qualifications
- Other, briefly list:

**B. Provide a description of the proposed changes:**

During the latter half of the interview, participants were asked to rank a series of seven statements, from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). These same statements are provided, but will be cut into separate pieces and participants will be asked to place them on a spectrum from Very accurate to less accurate. A picture will be taken of how the participant orders the seven statements, which will be stored as a document in Atlas.ti.

A couple other questions have proven useful for facilitating this conversation, and these have been added to the final row of Table A. The acronym AE and term “stakeholder” have also needed consistent clarification, so they are now noted.

**C. Explain the rationale for the proposed changes:**

From earlier experiences carrying out interviews, the format of the “Theory ranking” portion at times distracted from the intended discussion around theories pertinent to how success is shaped in alternative education. The new format will provide a more flexible format for having a more focussed conversation with participants about their views on the theories that I (the researcher) am bringing to the analysis.

**SECTION 3: Risk Assessment**

**A. Do the proposed changes introduce any new risks, or alter any existing risks?**

- Yes  No

*If yes, describe the new or altered risks to subjects:*

**B. Do the proposed changes affect the overall risk previously approved for this study?**

Yes  No

*If yes, describe how the changes affect overall risk to subjects. Include in the response how risks will be minimized in order to protect subjects' rights and welfare.*

#### **SECTION 4: Amendment Submission**

To request an amendment, email Form 5: Amendment Request to the PSU Human Research Protection Program at [psuirb@pdx.edu](mailto:psuirb@pdx.edu) with the following updated/new materials attached



(check all that apply):

- Human Research Protocol (Form 1, Form 2 or Form 3, as applicable)
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- Consent Materials
- Instruments / Data Collection Tools
- Data Use Agreement(s) or other documentation of permission
- IRB Authorization Agreement Request Form
- Other; describe:

**Appendix D****Preliminary deductive codes**

<b>Conceptions of Success</b>
Success as high school graduation
Success as locally identified or created construct
Success as individually defined
Success placeholder (for emergent codes related to conceptions of success)
Visible manifestation of success
Working towards success
Barriers to success
Intrinsic reasons for success
Extrinsic reasons for success
<b>Conceptions of Power</b>
Relationships between AE staff/students/state/national entities governed by power over thinking
Relationships between AE staff/students/state/national entities governed by assisted empowerment
Relationships between AE staff/students/state/national entities governed by mutual empowerment
Relationships between AE staff/students/state/national entities governed by balance of power
Relationships placeholder (for emergent codes related to relationships and power)
AE staff power – self
AE staff power– colleagues
Student(s) power

Parent(s) power
Federal/state entity power
<b>Conceptions of Reality</b>
Reality as a miracle to be explored
Reality as a problem to be solved
Reality placeholder (for emergent codes related to conceptions of reality)
Assertion about nature of reality, society or individual
Assertion of importance or value
<b>Parent Codes</b>
Agency
Social Structure

**Appendix E**

**Descriptions of the various phases of the present analysis**

Analysis Phase	Data	What I (researcher) did	Impact on my (researcher) thinking
1. Applied preliminary codes	All 31 transcripts	Applied inductive and preliminary deductive (see Appendix D) codes.	502 distinct preliminary codes
2. Consolidated preliminary codes	Most common preliminary codes directly pertaining to how students and staff described success	<p>Identified interconnections between codes.</p> <p>Focused on codes directly connected to distinct conceptions of success.</p> <p>Refined definitions of codes.</p> <p>Constructed simple models depicting relationships between codes.</p>	Refined to 22 secondary codes
3. Peer Debriefed with Dissertation Chair	5 transcripts	<p>Dissertations chair and I applied 22 secondary codes to 5 transcripts by August 11th, 2023.</p> <p>We compared and discussed our coding of these five transcripts.</p>	<p>Emphasized focus on data pertinent to research question.</p> <p>Clarified distinction between success outcomes and context</p>

<p>4. Applied secondary codes</p>	<p>All 31 transcripts</p>	<p>Applied 22 secondary deductive codes to all transcripts.</p> <p>Returned to questions that clarified how I defined specific codes.</p>	<p>Refined to 21 tertiary codes</p>
<p>5. Made Models</p>	<p>Tertiary codes</p>	<p>Constructed models that depicted how codes (e.g. individual reflection and mutually valued relationship) related to each other.</p> <p>Shared and discussed models with Dissertation Chair on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023</p>	<p>3 models</p> <p>Preliminary theme descriptions</p> <p>Focused subsequent analysis on relationship between AE student and staff relationships and how students navigate novel experiences.</p> <p>Clarified need to refine how I discuss layers of success outcomes.</p>
<p>6. Coded and analyzed connections between relationships and interactions with novel experiences</p>	<p>Fragments pertaining to relationships and novel experiences from all 31 transcripts</p>	<p>Applied single code to all 31 transcripts.</p> <p>Organized, read, and re-read all pertinent fragments.</p> <p>Sorted similar fragments into categories.</p>	<p>Learned that most staff and all youth described interactions relationships as supportive to interacting with and learning from novel experiences. This contributed to my second draft of theme descriptions.</p>

<p>7. Clarified success indicators</p>	<p>All data fragments pertaining to success indicators</p>	<p>Applied descriptive statistics to focus subsequent analysis on the most prominent success indicators.</p> <p>Organized, read, and re-read data fragments.</p> <p>Constructed model that depicted how success indicators connected (e.g. need more detail from these notes)</p>	<p>Described the distinctions that students and staff were making between different layers of success as between individual and common conceptions of success; on daily, actionable steps and wider vision. Previous descriptions leaned on language from other life contexts and were less clear.</p> <p>Clarified that students and staff mainly focused on what they perceived success to be, rather than what they did not view as success. In earlier stages of analysis, I had located a few strong examples of students defining success and avoiding some of their previous experiences, but this interaction with data helped me to see this as a limited approach.</p>
<p>8. Explored relationships between AE stakeholders</p>	<p>All data fragments pertaining to relationships</p>	<p>Applied descriptive statistics to focus subsequent analysis on the most prominent relationships.</p> <p>Organized, read, and re-read data fragments.</p> <p>Constructed model that</p>	<p>Identified specific ways students and staff went about building their relationships, and the way they describe the quality thereof.</p> <p>Clarified that students predominantly reflected on their own relationships with others, and staff considered student, school-wide and their own personal relationships.</p>



		depicted relationship between AE stakeholders (e.g. need more detail from these notes)	This insight laid the foundation for paying attention to which relationships students and staff described in subsequent analysis.
9. Interconnected analysis of novel experiences, success indicators and relationships (6-8)	Organized groupings of data fragments I had built in phases 7-9	Organized, read, and re-read data fragments.  Applied descriptive statistics to focus subsequent analysis on the most prominent categories.  Constructed model to depicted relationship between categories more pertinent to success definition and pursuit.  Shared and discussed redrafted themes with Dissertation Chair on October 17 <sup>th</sup> , 2023.	Tightened up wording of emerging themes, and became clearer on how conceptions of success, the pursuit of success and relationships overlapped and how I could discuss them as distinct themes.
10. Clarified structure of analysis	Third theme descriptions and groupings of codes underlying them	Shared preliminary themes with committee member on November 9 <sup>th</sup> , 2023.	Clarified my understanding of the analytic steps I had taken and allowed me to re-organize my results into what became my first full draft of results.

<p>11. Considered how I conceptualized power in my analysis</p>	<p>Fourth theme descriptions and groupings of codes underlying them</p>	<p>Created table of who AE students and staff took as the active agent of making individual effort and/or receiving support.</p> <p>Constructed descriptive statistics on whose quotes I used in early drafts of results.</p>	<p>Affirmed that I had indeed centered student perspectives.</p> <p>Highlighted some additional questions about exploring relationships beyond those between students and staff. This added onto my analysis of how students and staff described relationships.</p>
<p>12. Redrafted results, discussion, and implications chapters</p>	<p>Previous draft of results, discussion, and implications, as well as associated data fragments.</p>	<p>Received and responded to committee member feedback on my preliminary draft of results, discussion, and implications.</p> <p>Returned to study aims and research questions.</p>	<p>Unraveled themes I had previously interwoven in constructed models. By returning to my research question and aims, I was able to organize and articulate my results, discussion, and implications in terms of my two research questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do AE students and staff define success?</li> <li>• How do AE students and staff work towards their conceptions of success?</li> </ul> <p>And aims:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect between extant perspectives of success in research and practice.</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Establish a foundation for a new way to discuss success across distinct perspectives.</li></ul>
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**Appendix F**

**Factors Students and Staff Described to Facilitate the Formation and Sustaining of Relationships Within the Smaller Environment of AE.**

Factors	Description	Examples
Effort to form and foster relationships	From the very beginning of student and staff interactions with AE, both parties are conscious that they need to make effort to connect with and support others.	<p>[T]he second I got here they actually - so normally you do the parent conferences and stuff - Normally, [teachers] just talk to my parent... This time they actually talked to me. They [drew] me into the conversation and made sure I was paying attention... They treated me like an adult, not like a child. (Geoff)</p> <p>[M]aintaining these relationships with people is always the hardest... There's effort that needs to be put in. And I will put in my effort. But if I do not receive effort, then I'm not going to put in effort, and I don't really have remorse for dropping people... as friends. But I never really had to because I have a really good group of friends (Aislynn)</p>
Communication of care	AE students and staff communicated their care for students. This communication shifted how some students perceived human nature and the role of AE staff.	<p>When I came here... I realized people can actually be nice and want to help you with seemingly nothing in return. They literally just want- their prize is seeing you succeed... I don't really see bad people anymore. I just see people... who can do awful things. But its's... the choice. It's self-control. It's the... we want to learn how to have that, I guess... So everybody needs help... We're biologically built for community. And that's what school has shown me. (Kate)</p> <p>Well, at first I went to [teacher's name]'s cohort, and at first I was... very... shy. But like, in my cohort, it's kind of like a small like little family kind of, because we got to know everyone and meet each other, because we like always make</p>

		<p>jokes and stuff with each other, and everything like that. It got more close. And then I realized, oh, I can have a really close relationship with my fellow students and my teacher. Cause [the teacher] would make warmups that would make you think... And you would like actually go into deep conversations about it, and let everyone speak their mind... and it kind of brought the class more together, because once everyone like knew what everyone was thinking. Like, oh, yeah, I agree with that! Or I disagree with that, but like it's fine - it's fine to disagree. (Liz)</p>
<p>Forming new assumptions about students and staff</p>	<p>Due to their opportunities to get to know each other better via a smaller environment, students and staff become aware of and shift their assumptions about each other, school, and wider concepts (e.g. human nature)</p>	<p>And the [Traditional high school] wasn't very like, they didn't want to help me really with anything. Especially with when we were online. They thought it was like a free vacation to go do stuff. I mean, there was this one math teacher, and he was always gone... And then when I came [to School A, staff] were more... wanting to see me succeed. They are more helping me and explaining stuff more thoroughly to me. (Isaac)</p> <p>We can get to know students and create that sense of like you are family when you're here. That, I think, is huge for them. Some of these kids leave here, and don't feel that connection. So, knowing that the next day they can come back here and get a little bit more of that, I think it is really what makes them successful. (Amy)</p> <p>This is not where this is not a bad kid's school. These kids are, for the most part, are not, they're not bad kids. They have problems, yes. But they are so neat. And you can tell when you sit down and talk to them, how how much that they want to do in their life. And it's just a matter if you need to give them that opportunity to be in in a program that will meet their needs. (Jill).</p>