

ABSTRACT

PERKINS, JANET ROBERTS. An Exploratory Qualitative Case Study of Transition Plans and the Reintegration Process to the Traditional Education Settings from Alternative Learning Programs/Schools. (Under the direction of Dr. Lisa Bass).

Children are being pushed out of the schoolhouse at an alarming rate due to exclusionary discipline practices. The Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) published the exclusionary school discipline data report for public schools, charter schools, alternative schools, juvenile justice facilities, and special education facilities in all 50 states, D.C., and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico (Office for Civil Rights, 2021). The most recent biennial report from the 2017-2018 school year identified that from preschool -12th Grade, students missed a total of 11,205,792 school days due to out-of-school suspensions, and 101,652 expelled from public schools (U.S. Education Department, 2021).

Exclusionary discipline practices remove students from traditional educational settings, either within the school or to outside placements, and remain widely used despite over 30 years of research showing they are ineffective at changing behavior (Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Fabelo et al., 2011; Metze, 2012; Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b). Disciplinary reassignment to an ALPS is one of the most severe forms, second only to expulsion (Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b).

Research on students' transition from ALPS back to the student's traditional education setting is limited (Kelchner et al., 2017). The researcher utilized a qualitative research method to identify the perceptions of the participants. Five students and six school staff members completed a structured interview process discussing transition plans developed at the ALPS and reintegration process to the traditional education setting. The results of the investigation demonstrated that there is a need for formalized transition plans and consistent support and communication across educational settings.

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An Exploratory Qualitative Case Study of Transition Plans and the Reintegration Process to the
Traditional Education Settings from Alternative Learning Programs/Schools

by
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Jimmie and Myre Sidberry. You were always there for me and supported me in whatever I ventured to do. I am blessed and proud to have you as my parents. You were and will continue to be my rock. Ma, I know you were in heaven cheering me on, and Dad, I stuck to the plan and made it. I want you to know that this journey would not have been possible without your love, prayers and support.

To my husband, Tony Perkins, my unwavering motivator, my constant inspiration, I heard you Hon, I got it done. Your belief in me has been my driving force. I love you and thank you for never giving up on me.

To my children, James, Robert and Alicia, my greatest accomplishments in life. You three have been my guiding force throughout my adult life. You never let me forget the importance of an education and never give up on my dreams. You have your own dreams to accomplish now, so I say to you, never give up, keep God first and you will accomplish all that He has created you to accomplish.

Finally, to my grandchildren, RJ, Kherrington, Kingsleigh, and Khourtlynn, as I watch you grow, know that I am so very proud of you all. Always remember that if Grandma Honey can do it, you can, too. Thank you, Carol and Keisha, for being great mothers to my grandchildren.

BIOGRAPHY

Janet Perkins currently serves as the founding principal of Connections Academy, an alternative middle school for at risk students in the North Carolina Public School System. Her career began in 1990 as a bus monitor and teacher assistant while attending Shaw University at night as a CAPE student. After graduating from Shaw with a degree in Liberal Studies, she went on to enroll in North Carolina State University as a teacher's fellow, graduating in 1993 with a Master's in Special Education. Janet served as a special education teacher for fourteen years for students with behavior and emotional disabilities. In 2005, she graduated from North Carolina State University with a Master's in School Administration. She served as an assistant principal in a comprehensive middle school for thirteen years and later at an alternative middle and high school for three years before becoming principal at Connections Academy in 2016.

A native of New York, Janet always knew that she wanted to teach and to help students that needed additional support and guidance through the educational system. She is strong advocate for this population of students and is a driving force in her district ensuring that their voices are heard and understood. She doesn't see them as at risk but as at promise. Janet's motto is, *"If I can help somebody as I travel along the way, then my living shall not be in vain."* This guiding principle is reflected in every aspect of her career, from her early days as a bus monitor to her current role as principal. Through her dedication, she has touched the lives of many young people, helping them realize their potential and forge a path toward a brighter future.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Children are being pushed out of the schoolhouse at an alarming rate due to exclusionary discipline practices. The Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) publishes the exclusionary school discipline data report for public schools, charter schools, alternative schools, juvenile justice facilities, and special education facilities in all 50 states, D.C., and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2021). The most recent biennial report from the 2017-2018 school year identified that from preschool through 12th Grade, students missed a total of 11,205,792 school days due to out-of-school suspensions, and 101,652 students were expelled from public schools (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2021). Of those students who were transferred to Alternative Schools, African American students accounted for 42.9% while only making up 15.1% of the total population of students (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2021). In the 2021-2022 school year, The Consolidated Data Report, published by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, documented 216,530 in-school suspensions, 4,000 alternative learning placements, 217,928 short-term suspensions, 693 long-term suspensions, 48 expulsions, and 9,788 students enrolled in Alternative Learning Programs and Schools (ALPS), regardless of the reason for the assignment (NCDPI, 2023). It is alarming to witness that the American school system, representing such a diverse student population, would disproportionately allow disciplinary practices and policies to remove marginalized student groups from the educational setting. This exploratory qualitative case study explored the transition plans and reintegration process for students to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. This study sought to examine the development of ALPS's transition plans and the reintegration process through the perspectives of the students, school administrators, counselors, and teachers.

Exclusionary Discipline Practices and Zero-Tolerance Policies

Exclusionary discipline practices refer to any disciplinary measures in schools that remove or exclude students from their traditional education setting. These practices include removal from the classrooms to other designated placements within the school building, such as alternative learning centers (ALC) and in-school suspensions (ISS). Outside placements consist of out-of-school suspensions (OSS) and disciplinary placements to ALPS or expulsion (Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b); the latter are considered more severe. The superintendent or the superintendent designee must approve disciplinary placements or expulsion.

Over 30 years of research support that exclusionary discipline practices are the least effective approach to correcting and changing students' behavior. However, these practices and consequences are the most widely used by school administrators nationwide (Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Fabelo et al., 2011; Metze, 2012). According to Skiba (2014, p. 27), "there is not any evidence that suspensions improve student behavior." On the contrary, the overreliance on these exclusionary disciplinary practices has not improved student behaviors but has increased negative behaviors (Robinett, 2012). Recidivism results from repeated suspensions and, according to research, "these students are prone to recidivate with more egregious acts of negative behaviors" (Cobb-Clark et al., 2015). This increased sense of urgency and an increased emphasis on providing safe schools have led school policymakers and school leaders to push for severe consequences for disciplinary infractions, remove students perceived as problematic from school, and include more exclusionary discipline practices as a part of their disciplinary matrix.

The zero-tolerance policy emerged in the 1990s as a dominating response to school discipline. This policy mandated "the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive, that are applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating

circumstances, or situational context.” (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2006, p. 3). Exclusionary discipline practices largely stem from the implementation of zero-tolerance policies. To foster a safe and orderly learning environment, educators often believe that removing disruptive students will discourage others from similar actions and improve the school climate (Ewing, 2000). These practices remove students from the learning environment for various lengths of time, and they may include disciplinary reassignments to an ALPS. When students are assigned to an ALPS, these reassignments usually result in an extended time away from the traditional education setting, ranging from nine weeks to the entire school year. Students expelled from school are removed from the school system for 365 days. Unfortunately, using these policies often has lifelong negative implications for a student's trajectory.

Disciplinary Reassignment

Disciplinary reassignment to an ALPS is regarded as one of the most extreme forms of exclusionary discipline, second only to expulsion (Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b). There are various kinds of alternative education institutions, ranging from those that emphasize discipline to those that emphasize academics (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). According to Vanderhaar et al. (2014), there are two types of alternative schools: one for those who struggle academically and are close to not completing school and the other for disruptive and dangerous behaviors. The second category is typically known as an alternative disciplinary reassignment, a program chosen for students by the superintendent's designee, and parental choice is, thereby, not an option. Raywig (1994), in her research, identifies three types of alternative schools. Type I alternatives are designed to be challenging and fulfilling, often resembling magnet schools, and are usually popular among students and parents as they are schools of choice. Type II alternative schools,

these schools serve as a final option for students before expulsion. Students with severe disruptive behaviors are assigned to these schools for longer-term placements without an option to choose otherwise. Research shows that these schools yield few benefits, as they do not significantly impact dropout rates, referral rates, suspension, or exclusion (Thompson, 2014). Finally, Type III schools offer specialized alternatives for students needing extra support, whether for academic remediation, social and emotional well-being, with a focus on social skills and overall mental health, or a combination of both. The assumption is that after these students have completed the program, they can return to their traditional education setting. The focus on Type II alternative schools in this study is pertinent because these schools often involve extended removals from traditional education settings to ALPS. The limited benefits of Type II schools highlighted by Thompson (2014) underscore the importance of effective transition plans and reintegration processes.

Unfavorable Outcomes/Disproportionality

Removing students from the learning environment disrupts their education, creating academic gaps and hindering their progress (American Psychological Association, 2006; Kim et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2009). There is a direct link between instructional time reduction and adverse educational outcomes (Skiba et al., 2014; Welsh & Little, 2018a). Studies have found a strong correlation between frequent use of exclusionary discipline practices and lower academic performance, including higher rates of academic failure and decreased achievement (Cooper, 2015; Skiba et al., 2014; Spencer, 2016; Welsh & Little, 2018a), higher dropout rates (Arcia, 2006; Ou & Reynolds, 2008), and an increased risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Mittleman, 2018). These practices ultimately lead

to a negative shift in students' life trajectories, with long-term consequences for the students and their families.

The Committee for Children (2021) defines disproportionality as “the over- or under-representation of a group of students that exceeds expectations for that group or differs substantially from the representation of other students in the same category.” There is a clear connection between disproportionality and exclusionary discipline practices in schools today, particularly in the disproportionate rates at which marginalized students are subjected to disciplinary actions that remove them from the classroom. These practices cause students to miss out on critical learning opportunities. Several studies (Curran, 2016; Girvan et al., 2017; Welch & Payne, 2010) and research by the United States Government Accountability Office (2018) confirm that students of color, boys, and students with disabilities are at a higher risk of facing exclusionary discipline. This pattern is consistent across various school types, regardless of factors like poverty rates or students' grade levels (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018).

Welsh and Little (2018a, 2018b) shows that the student groups most at-risk of being assigned to ALPS due to exclusionary practices from zero-tolerance policies and code of conduct violations are African American and Hispanic males, students with disabilities, and students from low socioeconomic status. Zero-tolerance policies have been attached to violations of specific school board policies that have disproportionately removed Black and Hispanic students (Gregory & Evans, 2020; Heitzeg, 2009; Losen et al., 2015).

In a review of *Discipline, Achievement, & Race: Is Zero Tolerance the Answer?*, Saenz (2007) asserts that "it is students of color (especially African Americans and Latina/os), impoverished students, males, and those in special education who are disproportionately

overrepresented among students punished through such policies" and that "when middle-class white students find themselves in trouble, they tend to receive the most lenient punishment (e.g., in-school suspension)." In North Carolina, one county reported that Black and Hispanic students made up roughly 40% of the county's total enrollment; however, they accounted for 56% of overall suspensions in the 2017-2018 school year and 74% in the 2018-2019 school year (NCDPI, 2023). White suspension data remained nearly 20% of all, despite Whites accounting for approximately 46% of the county's total enrollment (NCDPI, 2023). These findings not only represent conditions in North Carolina, but findings are similar across the states.

Statement of the Problem

Limited research addresses the development of ALPS's transition plans and the reintegration process. There is an adverse effect on student success when plans are not in place to support this transition for re-entry. Research indicates that placements into Alternative Learning Programs and Schools (ALPS) often fail to produce lasting improvements in academic and behavioral outcomes for students upon their return to traditional education settings. While these programs may offer short-term support, they frequently do not result in meaningful, long-term changes. For instance, Hemphill et al. (2014) found that alternative placements often do not address students' ongoing academic and behavioral challenges after reintegration. Similarly, Raffaele-Mendez (2003) observed that students struggled with behavioral issues and underachievement post-placement, and Skiba and Knesting (2001) pointed to structural and systemic issues within alternative and traditional schools that hinder long-term success. Collectively, these studies highlight the need for more comprehensive support and transitional planning to ensure students can thrive when returning to mainstream education environments. Transition plans should address these concerns before re-entry so that traditional education

settings will know how to address the student's needs and be aware of the needed support. Recidivism increases when student needs are not adequately addressed or identified before returning to the traditional education setting. Students who experience repeated placements in ALPS face several negative consequences, including increased disruptive behavior and declining academic performance (Gregory et al., 2010; Marchbanks et al., 2015). These placements can lead to school disengagement, a greater likelihood of repeating a grade, or dropping out of school altogether (Arcia, 2006; Ou & Reynolds, 2008). Additionally, students are at a heightened risk of future involvement with the juvenile justice system (Carver & Lewis, 2010). These findings strongly suggest a great need for an exploratory case study to explore the development of transition plans by the ALPS and the reintegration process through the perspectives of the students, school administrators, counselors, and teachers.

Study Purpose

This exploratory qualitative case study aimed to examine and understand students' experiences in the reintegration process from ALPS into the traditional education setting through the perspectives of school administrators, counselors, teachers, and students. This study examined transition plans developed for students at the ALPS and their function in supporting the student's transition. Through an in-depth analysis of the study's schools, this study identifies the support and structures provided through successful transition plans and the reintegration process.

The semi-structured interviews collected the perceptions of administrators, counselors, teachers, and students who have experienced or observed students' transition to traditional education settings from ALPS. Field notes documented interactions and reflections throughout the research process. Additionally, the researcher conducted a document analysis of materials

from the state's Department of Public Instruction, the school district, and the schools that participated in the study. This information provided evidence to support the research questions of this study.

Study Significance

This study is significant because it provides valuable insights into the specific support students need as they transition from an ALPS to a traditional education setting from the perspectives of administrators, counselors, teachers, and students. Further research is essential to understand these needs better and address them. Research shows that students attending an ALPS experience higher rate of dropouts, lower achievement scores, recidivism, juvenile delinquency, and lack of productive citizenship.

The researcher sought to increase knowledge about the development of student learning and behavioral opportunities in traditional education settings for students who have formerly been part of discipline cycles. I have done this by gaining the perceptions of those involved: administration, counselors, teachers, and students. This research will inform individual schools, entire school districts, and policymakers on how to build effective reintegration plans from the ALPS to the traditional educational school setting.

Research Question

The research questions will center around the transition components needed for student reintegration into the traditional educational setting. Much of the research focuses on entry into the ALPS; however, limited research exists about the reintegration of students into the traditional educational setting. The research questions structure the study around the phenomenon of the transition process by eliciting and considering first-hand accounts from those who are part of it. The central question will guide the research, along with accompanying sub-questions:

1. What are the administrators, counselors, teachers, and students' perceptions of the transition plans and the reintegration process back into the traditional education setting from the ALPS?
 - a. What do students feel is required to help them transition?
 - b. What do administrators feel is required to help students transition?
 - c. What do teachers feel is required to help students transition?
 - d. What do counselors feel is required to help students transition?

Overview of Approach

This exploratory qualitative case study explored the transition plan developed for students at the ALPS and the reintegration process into the traditional education settings of ALPS. Qualitative methods gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions of this transition (Merriam, 2015). Creswell (2013) explains that case study research involves investigating a "real-life, contemporary bounded system" or case over some time, using detailed and in-depth data collection from various sources of information (p. 97). Qualitative research methods were selected to fully understand the students' reintegration experience and examine the reintegration process in its natural environment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Students who have attended ALPS and returned to the traditional education setting and staff members involved in transitioning from the ALPS to the traditional education setting can provide a better understanding and meaning of this lived experience. The next section will discuss the limitations of this study.

Limitations

Limitations are the issues that can arise in a research study that is out of the researcher's control (Slavin, 2007). The main limitation of this exploratory qualitative case study is common

to most qualitative studies. The research findings depend upon the study participants' honest and open responses. All staff participants were employees of the school districts of the study, which may have limited their responses if they were apprehensive about sharing their accurate perceptions for fear of retaliation. Students' perceptions are not always the most reliable research participants. The following section will discuss the delimitations of this study.

Delimitations

Delimitations are purposefully placed boundaries within the study by a researcher (Slavin, 2007). I have identified the following as delimitations for this study. The sample size in the study was limited to one ALPS and one primary feeder school within the same district. The student sample was limited to five students from the same school district. I recognized that while there were other significant people who support students within the school, I chose to limit participants to administrators, counselors, teachers, and students because I believe that their perspectives would effectively address the research questions. This study was only conducted in one school district within the southern region of the United States. Finally, the timeframe for this study was limited to one school semester. The following section will review the definitions of terms used in this study.

Definition of Terms

In this section, I present the following definitions of key terms to ensure that readers are operating from a shared understanding throughout this dissertation:

- Exclusionary Practices/Discipline: any school disciplinary action that removes or excludes students from their usual educational setting (Welsh & Little, 2018b).
- Alternative Learning Programs: serves as an alternative education setting for students temporarily removed from their regular instructional settings for disciplinary

- purposes. These programs are usually within an existing school (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).
- **Alternative Learning Schools:** serves as an alternative education setting for students temporarily removed from their regular instructional settings for disciplinary purposes. These programs usually exist on their campus (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).
 - **Zero Tolerance Policy:** The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2006) defines zero-tolerance policy as "a school or district policy that mandates predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offenses that are applied regardless of the seriousness of the behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context" (p. 852). Other factors not considered in this policy are the disciplinary history or age of the student involved in the policy violation (Stader, 2004).
 - **School to Prison Pipeline:** a term widely used by advocates, researchers, and policymakers to describe the relationship between school disciplinary practices and increased risk of juvenile justice contact (Gagnon et al., 2016, p. 3).
 - **Reentry or Reintegration:** Reentry or reintegration refers to the transitional process of exiting an alternative learning program/school and undergoing the educational and psychosocial adjustment of re-enrolling and reacclimating into the traditional education setting after a prolonged absence (Altschuler & Armstrong, 2002; Goldkind, 2011).

The next section will consist of the researcher's positionality statement.

Positionality Statement

Before delving into this research, it is essential to reflect on the personal and professional experiences that led this researcher to recognize the significance of the issue and the need for further investigation. With 33 years of experience in public education, all within the same school district in the southern United States, I have witnessed the impact of exclusionary discipline practices firsthand. In particular, marginalized students face significant challenges as they attempt to reintegrate into traditional educational settings after transitioning from an Alternative Learning Program/School.

I have observed this phenomenon as a classroom teacher, an assistant school principal at a comprehensive middle school, and an Alternative Learning School principal. This study correlates with my adult life and career. I began in the education field as a special education teacher assistant and bus monitor at an elementary school. At the time, I was a single African American mother of two sons and received public assistance because of low wages. The classroom and where I resided were the same. The disparities of our youth were prevalent at the schoolhouse and in my community. At school, disengaged students were academically lower functioning, and their behaviors impeded their learning, causing them to be removed from the classroom and the schoolhouse. I watched these students fall further and further behind academically. In the community, parents were at work, trying to provide for their families, and education was not a priority in all homes. As their children were suspended from school, they were left at home alone until their suspension or expulsion was completed. These children usually did not have assistance with completed assignments (if any were given) with the fidelity needed to understand concepts and skills taught without a teacher. Research shows that students frequently subjected to exclusionary discipline are at a higher risk of dropping out of school, not

graduating on time, and becoming involved in the juvenile justice system, a pattern often referred to as the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Gagnon et al., 2016, p. 3).

Lack of access to education resulting from exclusionary discipline practices, particularly among marginalized groups, such as Black/African American students, male students, and students with disabilities, significantly increases the likelihood of these children becoming part of the school-to-prison pipeline. My sons could have easily been a part of the statistics of African American males removed from the school system through suspensions and teacher biases of African American males, but fortunately, they were not. As I watched my neighbor's children reenter the schools from which they were suspended, they were not motivated to return to their schools due to the adverse treatment they received when they returned and the lack of positive advocacy from their parents, possibly due to their frustrations or lack of knowledge. This vicious cycle I saw daily within the school and my community fueled me to make a difference. I furthered my education by working at the school during the day and attending college at night, sons in tow. After graduation, I became a special education teacher and, later, an administrator in a comprehensive middle school. I currently hold the position of principal of an Alternative Learning School that serves students who have been disciplinary reassigned due to board policy violations and zero tolerance exclusionary practices. The disparity continues to reign as our marginalized students go unnoticed and underserved. The struggle is an accurate term to describe my students' experiences. I fight daily to educate my students and parents on the importance of education and advocacy to ensure that student's needs are met within the schoolhouse, both academically and behaviorally. The following section will summarize this chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the issues and challenges with fair and acceptable school discipline, reasons for an increase in the number of schools and districts adopting zero-tolerance policies, and how alternative schools are being used more to manage students perceived to be or have behavioral problems. I provided the research problem, purpose for the study, and research questions. The definitions provided will help the reader understand key terms for this study. The remainder of this study will include a review of related literature to familiarize the reader with prior research on this topic and how it relates to this research study, a chapter on the research methodology to provide a roadmap to the study, a data analysis chapter so readers of this study and other researchers might understand my research process, and a conclusion that ties the study together and provides implications for further research, policy development, and practice. The next chapter discusses the literature reviewed to support this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides a background for and supports this study on developing transition plans from the ALPS and the reintegration process for re-entry to the traditional education setting. This literature review described the relevant research for this study in four sections. The first section will highlight critical factors contributing to students' disciplinary reassignments to ALPS. This research focused on school discipline, exclusionary practices, zero-tolerance policy, and school culture, emphasizing educator's perceptions. The second section identified the adverse effects of these practices and perceptions and the disproportionality of marginalized student groups. The third section reviewed the alternative school model, focusing on ALPS placements and the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon due to exclusionary practices. The literature review will conclude with an in-depth study of the reintegration process into the traditional education setting after a disciplinary reassignment to an ALPS, the purpose of the transition plan, and its function for re-entry. First, I introduce the theoretical framework used for this research study, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977, 1986) is the foundation for this qualitative case study, which examines the interaction between students and their school environments. The study aims to understand the transition plans developed for students returning to traditional education settings from ALPS and the reintegration process involved. This theoretical framework enables the researcher to present participants' perspectives on this process through personal experiences (Creswell, 2015). The framework illustrates the relationship between human development, learning, and the educational environment, showing how

individuals develop within their social contexts (Stanger, 2011). According to Bronfenbrenner (1976), human development is shaped by multiple environmental systems, with his ecological systems theory (EST) consisting of five interconnected layers: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem refers to the individual's immediate surroundings where direct interactions occur, such as with family, school, and friends. The mesosystem involves the relationships between these microsystems, like the connection between a child's home life and school environment. The exosystem includes broader social systems indirectly impacting the individual, such as parental workplaces or school policies. The macrosystem represents the wider cultural and societal framework, encompassing laws, values, and cultural norms. Finally, the chronosystem accounts for the dimension of time, capturing the influence of life transitions and socio-historical events on an individual's development over time. This study only focused on the first three layers: the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem.

These systems influence a child's physical and mental growth based on interactions within and between them. When these systems work in harmony, students generally experience positive outcomes in their environment; when they do not, adverse effects can result. Factors such as exclusionary discipline practices, zero-tolerance policies, and negative interactions within the school environment, including with teachers and administrators, as well as school culture, play critical roles in shaping a student's trajectory. This study uses Bronfenbrenner's framework to explore the concepts of transitions and reintegration in the educational system and how environmental factors influence student behavior and outcomes. This qualitative study will focus on three specific systems within the framework: the microsystem, the mesosystem, and the exosystem.

School Discipline

As state legislation indicates, all schools must establish and maintain a safe and orderly environment. Discipline policies and practices implemented are to govern and monitor student behavior, ensuring a safe and orderly school environment. The National Center of Safe Supportive Learning Environment (2023) defines school discipline as “the rules and strategies applied in a school to manage student behavior and practices to encourage self-discipline.” How can self-discipline be taught when, as a nation, schools rely heavily on exclusionary practices and zero-tolerance policies, which remove students from the learning environment and do not provide them the opportunity to correct, practice, and change those undesirable behaviors (Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Fabelo et al., 2011; Metze, 2012)? According to Kajs (2006), discipline serves three functions: maintaining school safety, preserving the school's decorum, and developing character. Exclusionary practices and zero-tolerance policies have been widely used to maintain school safety and protect the school's decorum by simply removing students from the school setting. Over 30 years of research support that exclusionary discipline practices and zero-tolerance policies are the least practical approaches to correcting and changing students' behavior. However, these practices and consequences are the most widely used by school administrators nationwide (Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Fabelo et al., 2011; Metze, 2012). With this mode of practice, how can student character be developed when suspensions remove the opportunity to correct and practice those desired behaviors, and the relationship between the student and the teacher is no longer conducive to learning new behaviors?

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, focusing on the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem, provides a framework for understanding the impact of school discipline policies on students. At the microsystem level, exclusionary practices and zero-tolerance policies disrupt

teacher-student relationships and remove students from the learning environment, hindering their ability to develop positive behaviors. These disciplinary practices can strain home-school relationships in the mesosystem, leading to inconsistent messaging and increased student stress. At the exosystem level, broader policies and administrative decisions often prioritize safety and order over student development, perpetuating ineffective punitive measures. Collectively, these systemic influences contribute to a disciplined approach that fails to support student growth and positive behavior change.

School Culture - Teacher Perceptions

For all students to achieve academically, the classroom setting should consist of classroom management systems governed by rules and procedures to manage student learning and behaviors. Students are removed from the classroom when behaviors disrupt the learning environment, such as talking out, refusing to follow directions, or being rude or disrespectful. Academic achievement and student success can only be realized in an environment free from disruptive behaviors (Bulut & Topdemir, 2018). In disruptive environments, teachers cannot teach and students struggle to learn, leading to the removal of disruptive students from the classroom.

Teachers' perceptions of students within the classroom are crucial when creating an environment conducive to learning. Students who do not fit into the "norm of the school" are deemed dangerous or troublemakers (Bowditch, 1993; Casella, 2003) and therefore pushed out. This perception, and the thought that teachers must always maintain control of student behavior, typically involves removal of students from low socioeconomic status and minority students with academic deficiencies (Skiba et al., 2002). These perceptions create a negative interaction

between the student and the teacher within the classroom and can further perpetuate negative biases.

In a study by Booker and Mitchell (2011), the researchers examined how student factors such as ethnicity, gender, grade level, and special education status related to placements in Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEP) for mandatory versus discretionary offenses, the latter often based on teachers' perceptions. Data from 269 secondary students were collected using the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) and analyzed through descriptive statistics to create a general profile. The study found that 80% of students were placed in DAEPs for discretionary reasons. It also revealed significant differences in placements across ethnicities, genders, and grade levels, with African American and Hispanic students more likely than White students to be assigned to DAEPs for discretionary reasons. Boys were found to be twice as likely as girls to return to a DAEP after their first placement, and high school students had higher recidivism rates compared to middle school students. These findings highlight persistent disparities across student demographics in DAEP placements and outcomes, pointing to the critical role of teacher perceptions in fostering a school culture where all students feel respected and valued. The fact that a disproportionate number of African American and Hispanic students are more frequently placed in DAEPs for discretionary offenses compared to their White peers reveals underlying biases that contribute to unequal treatment in disciplinary practices. Moreover, the higher recidivism rates among boys and high school students indicate that once placed in a DAEP, certain groups face increased challenges in reintegrating into the traditional education setting, which can perpetuate a cycle of exclusion and further hinder their academic and social development.

Negative perceptions of school climates are associated with exclusionary discipline practices (Skiba et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2008). How students and staff perceive the overall learning environment of the school is critical for students to grow academically and behaviorally. Gregory et al. (2011) analyzed the relationship between suspension rates and school practices in 199 schools. Their findings revealed that schools with the lowest levels of student support and academic expectations were linked to the highest suspension rates, with a significant disparity in suspension rates between Black and white students. Black students reported more negative perceptions of school climate, citing more instances of racism and giving lower ratings of racial fairness compared to their white peers.

According to Kennedy-Lewis (2014), disciplinary reassignments to alternative schools are more favorable than expulsion. This choice is valid, particularly in states where expelled students are not entitled to educational services. The research shows that most students sent to these schools are there for minor infractions or behaviors deemed inappropriate based on subjective teacher judgments. Three-quarters of U.S. school districts report that a student's placement in an alternative school is primarily determined by the recommendation of educators from the comprehensive school, making educators' perceptions and reasoning for these placements crucial (Carver & Lewis, 2010).

When examining educators' views on the purpose of alternative schools, Kelly (1993, p. 67) identified two contrasting perspectives, with some teachers viewing alternative schools as a "safety valve," removing disruptive students from the traditional classroom to ensure a better learning environment for others, and others seeing these schools as a "safety net," providing support for students who would otherwise fall through the cracks of the traditional system. These

divergent views, combined with students' perceptions of racial unfairness in schools, highlight the persistent challenges in achieving equity and fairness within the educational system.

Educators' contrasting views on the role of alternative schools are significant to school culture and teacher perception, as they reveal the challenges in achieving fairness and equity in education. Research shows that differing perceptions can shape how students, especially marginalized groups, are treated within the system. For instance, Gregory et al. (2011) found that schools with lower expectations and support systems had higher suspension rates, with Black students disproportionately affected. These subjective judgments, often based on teacher perceptions, can reinforce exclusionary discipline practices that disproportionately impact students of color (Girvan et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2014). Moreover, Booker and Mitchell (2011) highlighted that African American and Hispanic student are more likely to be referred to disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEPs) for discretionary reasons than their white peers, reflecting the influence of subjective teacher perceptions.

This divergence between viewing alternative schools as either a "safety valve" for the traditional classroom or a "safety net" for struggling students (Kelly, 1993, p. 67) reinforces these disparities, contributing to racial inequities and unfair treatment in schools. Studies like those by Monahan et al. (2014) and the United States Government Accountability Office (2018) further confirm that marginalized students, including students of color, boys, and students with disabilities, are more likely to experience exclusionary discipline. Balancing these contrasting views is crucial to building an inclusive school culture that promotes equity, ensuring all students receive the resources and support they need to thrive. By aligning educational practices with research-based approaches focusing on equity, schools can mitigate the harmful effects of exclusionary discipline and provide more supportive environments for all students.

Understanding the significance of a teacher's perception and the overall school culture is crucial when examining transition plans and students' reintegration into traditional educational settings. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1976) offers a framework to understand how these interactions and cultural elements influence an individual's development. The theory highlights how various environmental factors, including the immediate school environment, shape students' experiences and growth.

At the microsystem level, teacher-student relationships play a pivotal role. Teachers' perceptions of students can profoundly impact their interactions; for example, negative perceptions or biases can lead to lower expectations, reduced support, and diminished encouragement, ultimately undermining a student's motivation and self-esteem (Rubie-Davies, 2010). Additionally, peer interactions are affected by the school culture. In a hostile environment with bullying or social exclusion, students perceived as problematic by teachers may face further alienation from their peers, exacerbating their challenges within the school setting (Hymel & Swearer, 2015).

Exclusionary Disciplinary Practices

Exclusionary disciplinary practices, implemented in response to various behavioral infractions, remove students from the educational environment. These practices include time-outs, in-school suspensions, alternative learning centers, out-of-school suspensions, disciplinary reassignments to ALPS, and expulsion (Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b). These practices are part of a school discipline plan to address behaviors by punishing negative behaviors to promote appropriate behaviors (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). It is crucial and necessary for school leaders to do what is needed to ensure a positive learning environment and maintain the safety of

the school community. However, the research shows these practices are harsh and unfairly distributed among students.

Exclusionary disciplinary practices gained prominence in the early 1990s, primarily driven by adopting zero-tolerance policies in response to concerns about school violence. These policies resulted in the removal of students from school for a wide range of violations, from severe offenses like violent behavior, possession of weapons, and drug-related issues to minor infractions such as dress code violations, disruptive behavior, or truancy—offenses that previously would not have led to such severe consequences (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba, 2014; Skiba et al., 2000). The increasing reliance on exclusionary discipline to address both major and minor infractions has led to a growing number of students being placed in disciplinary alternative schools, where they are required to spend time away from traditional education settings and often meet specific criteria before being allowed to return (Aron, 2006; Carver & Lewis, 2010).

Research indicates that when students are excluded from school and removed from the classroom, they are more likely to engage in further misbehavior and face additional suspensions (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Raffaele-Mendez, 2003). Academically, when students are removed from their learning environment, this causes significant disruption and interference with the learning process (American Psychological Association, 2006; Kim et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2009). Research shows that exclusionary practices, such as expulsions and suspensions, have been associated with lower academic achievement and a shift in the affected students' life trajectories (Cooper, 2015; Skiba & Rausch, 2004; Skiba et al., 2014; Spencer, 2016; Welsh & Little, 2018b), school dropout (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; American Psychological Association, 2006), and involvement in the juvenile justice system (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; Fabelo et al., 2011; Mittleman, 2018).

Exclusionary discipline practices have disproportionately impacted specific student groups, including African American and Latino students, male students, students with disabilities, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This unequal treatment is frequently cited as a contributing factor to the school-to-prison pipeline. Minority students, in particular, experience higher rates and harsher forms of suspension than their peers, highlighting the inequities within these disciplinary actions (Balfanz et al., 2015; Welsh & Little, 2018a; White, 2019).

In a study conducted by Anderson and Ritter (2017), they examined the disciplinary interactions and the consequences of all K-12 students in a single state within the U.S. over seven years. This study connected the individual student characteristics to specific behavior infractions and the resulting consequences using demographic and disciplinary data from all schools between the 2008-09 and 2014-15 school years. Demographic data included race, grade, special education status, limited English proficiency status, and free and reduced lunch (FRL) eligibility. Discipline data included indicators for 19 infraction types and 13 consequences, the infraction date, and the consequence's length. The initial part of the study reviewed descriptive analyses that focused on the frequency of infractions and consequence types for different subgroups of students. Next, logistic regression determined the disparities in the likelihood of exclusionary discipline, controlling for the type of infraction committed, the infraction history of the student, and the student's grade level. Findings from this study yielded two conclusions. First, Black students are significantly more likely than their White peers to receive exclusionary discipline for similar infractions, with Black students facing nearly three times the rate of in-school and out-of-school suspensions. This disparity is attributed mainly to differing disciplinary practices at schools attended by non-White students. Second, students from low socioeconomic

backgrounds (FRL-eligible) also face disproportionately higher rates of exclusionary discipline, being nearly three times more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions compared to non-FRL students. These findings highlight systemic inequities in disciplinary practices based on race and socioeconomic status.

This study supports the fact that Black students and students of low socioeconomic status are more likely to receive an exclusionary disciplinary infraction than their white peers. In the next section, I will discuss the zero-tolerance policy and its effects on exclusionary practices.

Zero Tolerance Policy

The U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (1998) defines zero tolerance rules as "school district policies that mandate predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offenses" (p. 6). The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2006) further added to this definition that the predetermined consequences are to be applied regardless of the seriousness of the behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context" (p. 852). Other factors not considered in this policy are the disciplinary history or age of the student involved in the policy violation (Stader, 2004).

In 1982, social scientists Kelling and Wilson published an article about the zero-tolerance theory entitled "The Broken Window Theory of Crime." In this article, the authors state,

Social psychologists and police officers tend to agree that if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken. This is as true in nice neighborhoods as in rundown ones. Window-breaking does not necessarily occur on a large scale because determined window-breakers inhabit some areas, whereas window-lovers populate others; rather, one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing. (Kelling & Wilson, 1982, p. 3)

This theory argues that neglecting to address visible signs of violent behavior, such as crime, antisocial actions, and public disorder, leads to an increase in further misconduct and disorder, potentially escalating to more severe criminal activities. This hypothesis is a metaphor for any visible signs of disorder in an unmaintained environment. Addressing minor issues can substantially affect individuals' perceptions of their surroundings, particularly concerning their sense of safety (Psychology Today, 2019). From this analogy, school systems implemented the zero-tolerance philosophy that has shaped the practices used to discipline students.

Zero-tolerance policies are implemented to support school districts in maintaining safety and keeping violent behaviors out of the school. The original intent of these policies was to reduce problematic behaviors at a societal level. Still, they have since expanded to include "order-maintenance enforcement for less serious public order offenses" (Reisig & Kane, 2014, p. 1). These policies ensure that consequences are applied to all violations, no matter how small.

Zero tolerance policies mandate a fixed punishment, regardless of individual culpability, mitigating factors, or prior history. This predetermined consequence is consistently enforced, whether the offense is minor or severe, preventing authorities from using discretion or adjusting penalties based on specific circumstances. However, despite their widespread implementation to address violent behavior in schools, there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies (Rowe & Benersky, 2002). Advocates of zero-tolerance policies claim they ensure fairness in school discipline by treating all students equally without considering factors like gender, ethnicity, or cultural background. However, opponents argue that these policies are overly harsh, often "alienating" and "criminalizing children," and may actually "worsen misbehavior" rather than correct it (Fries & DeMitchell, 2007; Henault, 2001).

School safety programs became prevalent during the early 1970s when the nation focused on youth crime (i.e., school violence, weapons, gangs, and drug use). The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (JJDP A) was established at the local and state levels to address these issues. The goal was to prevent delinquency and to improve the juvenile justice system. This national youth prevention law, administered by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), authorized programs to address youth crime and drug use in schools (Brock et al., 2018). In the 1980s, under the Reagan administration, growing concerns over school safety prompted school districts nationwide to implement zero-tolerance policies. Originally aimed at addressing serious threats like guns, weapons, drugs, and gang-related activities, these policies quickly broadened to include mandatory suspensions and expulsions for less severe infractions such as disruptive behavior, smoking, and dress code violations. However, the justification for these policies was later called into question, as the feared surge in school violence that prompted their adoption did not materialize. This expansion of zero-tolerance measures has since been criticized for its inflexibility and its disproportionate impact on marginalized student populations, contributing to long-term adverse outcomes like the school-to-prison pipeline.

The Safe Schools Act and the Gun Free Act were established under President Clinton in 1993. The Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) utilized the zero-tolerance theory to address behaviors that resulted in unsafe schools and removing students from schools to ensure that learning environments would be safe and orderly (Cortez & Cortez, 2009). This act required local school districts receiving government funds to implement a “zero tolerance” policy. This policy mandated a minimum one-year expulsion for any student found bringing a gun, knife, or other weapon to school (Brock et al., 2018). This act was designed to deter dangerous behaviors and ensure school safety; this strict measure left little room for discretion, often resulting in severe

consequences for students regardless of the context or intent behind the violation. The GFSA is not a zero-tolerance law because mitigating circumstances can be considered when assigning discipline; however, many school districts apply extreme consequences when violated (Stader, 2004).

Also during the 1990s, the "War on Drugs" became a significant focus of the nation. This federal drug policy took a zero-tolerance stance to raise awareness that certain behaviors would not be permissible (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Again, this zero-tolerance philosophy emerged as a dominating response to school discipline, mandating the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive, regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context (American Psychological Association, 2006). The underlying belief was that removing students who exhibited disruptive behaviors would discourage others from engaging in similar conduct (Ewing, 2000) and foster a more positive and orderly environment for the remaining students (Public Agenda, 2004). This approach aimed to create a safer, more focused learning atmosphere by eliminating potential distractions, though it often failed to address the root causes of the disruptive behaviors. Federal zero-tolerance policies mandate removing or expelling students from the general student population to maintain a safe learning environment (Kennedy-Lewis, 2012). The U.S. Department of Education has historically relied on punitive disciplinary measures, such as suspensions, as a primary response to a wide range of student behaviors (Lui, 2013). These policies are intended to promote school safety, but critics argue that they often disproportionately affect marginalized students and fail to address the root causes of disruptive behavior.

Hoffman (2014) conducted a quasi-experimental study to examine the disciplinary outcomes following the expansion of zero-tolerance policies in a mid-sized urban school district.

The district, with a student population of over 24,000—comprising 50% White, 24% Black, 15% Hispanic, and 10% Asian students—adopted a stricter zero-tolerance approach to reduce subjectivity in policy enforcement. Hoffman collected data on six years of expulsion and suspension, three years before and after the policy change, and compared it to data from neighboring districts without policy alterations. Hoffman used a difference-in-difference analysis; the study revealed that the expanded zero-tolerance policies disproportionately impacted African-American students. An additional 70 Black students were recommended for expulsion annually, and the suspension gap between Black and White students widened. These findings highlight the negative impact of zero-tolerance policies, as they not only increase disciplinary actions but also exacerbate racial disparities, particularly affecting marginalized groups.

From the beginning, zero tolerance has been applied in diverse ways to various school situations, usually responding to public concern, frustration, or fear. Skiba et al. (2000) argue that the fear of random violence is "clearly the prime motivator for adopting zero-tolerance approaches to school discipline" (p.337). The next session will discuss the adverse outcomes and disproportionality of marginalized students as a result of zero-tolerance policies.

Adverse Outcomes of Exclusionary Practices

Removing students from the learning environment interferes with and disrupts their learning, resulting in academic gaps (American Psychological Association, 2006; Kim et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2009). Loss of instructional time directly contributes to poor educational outcomes, with significant evidence suggesting that exclusionary discipline practices correlate with diminished academic achievement and increased academic failure (Skiba et al., 2014; Welsh & Little, 2018a). High rates of exclusionary discipline are associated with lower academic

performance and achievement (Cooper, 2015; Skiba et al., 2014; Spencer, 2016; Welsh & Little, 2018a).

Furthermore, these practices contribute to a range of adverse outcomes, including elevated high school dropout rates (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; DeRidder, 1990; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), frequent school removals, and an increased likelihood of involvement with the juvenile justice system (Chobot & Garibaldi, 1982; Mittleman, 2018). Students subjected to exclusionary discipline also face more significant risks of grade retention (Safer, 1986) and illegal substance use (Schwartz & Wirtz, 1990). The compounded effect of these adverse outcomes disrupts students' immediate educational experiences. It leads to a detrimental shift in their vocational and educational trajectories, often carrying lifelong repercussions for the students and their families.

Disproportionality of Disciplinary Actions Among Marginalized Students

Data at the national, state, district, and building levels have shown for more than 25 years that students of color experience suspensions at rates two to three times higher than other students. They also experience office referrals, corporal punishment, and expulsion from schools at higher rates than other students (Skiba et al., 2002). These exclusionary practices send an alarming number of Black and Hispanic males out of school doors, resulting in an over-representation in alternative settings (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). In one large school district in the south, while Black and Hispanic students make up roughly 40% of the county's total enrollment, they accounted for 56% of overall suspensions in the 2017-2018 school year and 74% in the 2018-2019 school year (NCDPI, 2023). White suspensions remained close to 20% of all, despite Whites accounting for approximately 46% of the county's total enrollment. Since the coronavirus

pandemic forced students to attend school virtually, suspension data from the 2020-2021 school year was not included (NCDPI, 2023).

There has been an increase in overall suspensions for all student populations. Still, the rate of out-of-school suspensions for African-American and Latino students is higher and has increased more sharply than those imposed on White students (Gastic, 2017). The supposition that African American and Latino students are more likely to receive harsher consequences than their White counterparts has been convincingly substantiated (Gastic, 2017; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Kauffman et al., 1987; Raffaele-Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2011), and more than 30 years of research has produced documentation that concretely illustrates the racial, social, and economic implications that result from out of school suspensions and expulsions (Skiba et al., 2011).

Welsh and Little (2018a, 2018b) further points out that the most at-risk student groups usually assigned to alternative schools are African American and Hispanic males, students with disabilities, and students from low socioeconomic status. Numerous researchers have explored the connection between zero-tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline practices and how these measures have contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline in the United States (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Mowen & Brent, 2016). These policies disproportionately affect marginalized student populations, particularly students of color, by increasing their likelihood of suspension, expulsion, and eventual involvement in the juvenile justice system. Although there are more constructive alternatives to handling student misbehavior, exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions dominate disciplinary measures in K-12 education, both at local and national levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). This reliance on punitive discipline

disrupts students' academic progress and fosters a cycle of disengagement, further entrenching at-risk students in adverse outcomes.

Skiba et al. (2014) observed that the overrepresentation of African American students in out-of-school suspensions has steadily worsened since the 1973 Office for Civil Rights data collection. This trend highlights a growing racial disparity in disciplinary actions over the decades. According to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (2021), African American students are now approximately three and a half times more likely to be suspended compared to their White peers. This disproportionate suspension rate suggests that African American students continue to face harsher disciplinary measures for similar infractions, exacerbating educational inequities. The persistent racial gap not only reflects biases in school discipline but also contributes to long-term academic and social disadvantages for African American students, including higher dropout rates and increased contact with the juvenile justice system. This systemic issue calls for reevaluating school disciplinary policies and a greater emphasis on equity-driven approaches. The next section will discuss the racial disparities of the Alternative Learning Program/Schools Placement.

Racial Disparities in ALPS Placements

The persistent disparities in discipline based on race/ethnicity and student poverty over recent years (Coleman & Slate, 2016; Curtiss & Slate, 2015; Hilbert & Slate, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014) highlight a significant issue with exclusionary disciplinary practices. Black students in public schools have consistently faced more frequent disciplinary actions, including suspensions, expulsions, and office referrals, than their peers (Skiba et al., 2011). These findings show that Black students are disproportionately subjected to harsher punishments (Coleman & Slate, 2016; Hilbert & Slate, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014).

Research has demonstrated that these disparities have serious long-term consequences. Exclusionary discipline methods, particularly suspensions and expulsions, result in higher student retention rates, increased dropout rates, and a greater likelihood of incarceration for Black students (Boneshefski & Runge, 2014). These punitive approaches continue to harm young men and boys of color disproportionately (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), contributing to what is known as the school-to-prison pipeline.

Moreover, more than 30 years of research have documented the racial, social, and economic implications of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Gastic, 2017; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Raffaele-Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2011). Studies consistently reveal that Black and Latino students face harsher consequences than their White counterparts, regardless of the offense (Skiba et al., 2011). This unequal treatment reinforces patterns of social inequity and limits opportunities for students from marginalized communities.

The next section will discuss the Alternative Learning Program/Schools.

Alternative Learning Programs/Schools (ALPS)

According to research, alternative schools have a long history in the United States. They initially emerged in the 1960s, and through time, their design and purpose have changed from a broad to a narrower focus (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Vogell, 2017; Young, 1990). According to Hadderman (2002), Koetke (1999), and Lange and Sletten (2002), alternative schools were initially developed to give pupils greater freedom of choice than regular schools, evolving into a "magnet concept" specializing in different learning themes. Alternative schools' objectives shifted from "a more progressive and open approach to a more conservative and remedial one" in the 1980s, according to Young (1990, p. 20). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention emphasized and named the alternative school environment as a vital means of

reducing juvenile crime (Barber, 1980; Cox, 1999). Educational leaders also identified alternative schools to offer a learning environment for students who were not making enough progress in the usual educational setting while maintaining the security of the traditional education setting and lowering juvenile delinquency.

It soon became necessary for alternative schools to adjust their organizational structure and focus on assisting disruptive children, dropout risk students, and students who had been suspended or expelled from school (Hill, 2007; Lehr et al., 2009). Since disciplinary violations and their repercussions have become the main criteria for admission, alternative schools have come to be seen as behavioral management facilities (Lehr & Lange, 2003). The aim or function of alternative schools needs to be clarified from state to state as different states and school districts frequently define and set their own standards (Jimenez et al., 2018; Lehr & Lange, 2003).

Disciplinary reassignment to an ALPS is considered one of the most severe forms of exclusionary discipline, second only to expulsion (Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b). Alternative education institutions vary widely, from those that prioritize discipline to those focused primarily on academics (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Vanderhaar et al. (2014) categorized alternative schools into two main types: one designed for students struggling academically and at risk of not completing school and another for those exhibiting disruptive or dangerous behaviors. The latter, known as alternative disciplinary reassignment, is typically not a parental choice but a program mandated by a superintendent's designee. Raywig (1994) expands on this by identifying three types of alternative schools. Type I schools are designed to be engaging and challenging, often resembling magnet schools, and are popular among students and parents as they offer a choice. Type II schools, on the other hand, serve as a last resort for students with severe behavioral

issues, where students are assigned to long-term placements without the option of choice. Research indicates that Type II schools often fail to provide significant benefits, with little impact on reducing dropout rates, referrals, suspensions, or exclusions (Thompson, 2014). Lastly, Type III schools focus on remediation or rehabilitation, targeting students' academic and social/emotional needs, with the expectation that they will return to their traditional education setting upon completion. This study's focus on Type II alternative schools is critical, as these schools involve extended removals from traditional education settings. The limited effectiveness of Type II schools, as noted by Thompson (2014), highlights the importance of developing robust transition plans and reintegration processes for students.

The purpose of disciplinary alternative education programs is to serve students for a specific time frame with the understanding that they would return to the traditional school setting, typically at the beginning of the following calendar school year. Transitioning from the ALPS to the traditional education setting with the needed support is critical for students' academic and behavioral success. Research is needed on effective transition plans from ALPS to traditional educational settings. This lack of research can be due to not having a clear definition of disciplinary alternative education programs from state to state, not having clearly identified academic and behavioral expectations while students are enrolled, and what supports are needed for students when they transition back to the traditional education setting; or it could be that these students have already been identified as uneducable and their fate has already been decided. There must be a definitive alignment between ALPS and the traditional education setting to support student's transition from one educational setting to another. These disproportionate numbers of exclusionary discipline practices have also led to the unfair treatment of particular student groups (e.g., African American and Latino students, male

students, students with disabilities, and students from low socioeconomic status). The research supports the fact that exclusionary disciplinary practices enforced by zero-tolerance policies and teacher's perceptions are pushing our marginalized students into the ALPS and eventually through the school-to-prison pipeline. In the following section, I will discuss the laws about ALPS from one southern state in the United States.

North Carolina Laws Governing Alternative Learning Programs or Schools

Legislation General Statute 115C-12 outlines the powers and duties of the State Board of Education, providing a framework for transferring students between traditional and alternative schools, including Alternative Learning Programs and Schools (ALPS). However, this statute does not specify detailed transfer procedures, intentionally leaving room for flexibility. This design acknowledges students' varied needs and circumstances, allowing local education agencies (LEAs) and schools to create and apply transfer processes tailored to individual situations.

Additionally, General Statute 115C-47 grants local boards of education the authority to establish Alternative Learning Programs and develop related policies and guidelines. This statute underscores the responsibility of alternative schools within this framework, further emphasizing the need for adaptable and context-specific transfer procedures.

By not imposing rigid guidelines, the legislation supports a personalized approach to student transfers, accommodating students' diverse needs and enabling schools to implement the most appropriate processes for their specific contexts.

School-to-Prison-Pipeline

The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that 50 million children attend elementary, middle, and high school daily. Unfortunately, many students who enroll in public

schools do not effectively complete their high school education. Instead, some students, especially students of color, end up involved with the juvenile justice system, which may later lead to involvement in the criminal justice system (Mallet, 2016). The school-to-prison pipeline (Mallet, 2016) refers to the flow of pupils from the educational system into the juvenile courts and, ultimately, the criminal justice system. Researchers contend that implementing zero-tolerance rules and exclusionary discipline practices within schools contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline (Mallet, 2016; Skiba et al., 2000). Black students are more commonly suspended from school, physically arrested, and removed from the classroom setting for arbitrary offenses like "talking back" or "having an attitude" or are penalized for their looks in every state. In addition to depriving children of their access to an education, these administrative acts also set them on the path toward the criminal court system. Black people make up 13% of the population in the United States and about 40% of all inmates in state and federal prisons (Carson, 2020). Black students have experienced multiple expulsions from school due to various disciplinary issues. They often encounter the criminal justice system, where they become a part of more dismal statistics.

Two nationwide reports about the discrepancies in discipline in public preschool and pre-kindergarten settings were issued by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (U.S. DOE OCR) in 2014 and 2016. Significant differences in age, ethnicity, and gender are highlighted in these papers. Black children enroll in preschool at a rate of 19% but are suspended from school at a rate of 47%, according to OCR data, which is 3.6 times higher than that of White children (U.S. DOE OCR, 2016). Data also revealed that male students represent 78% of preschool children suspended but only 54% of preschool enrollment (U.S. DOE OCR, 2016). Black boys make up 19% of preschool attendance but account for 45% of male suspensions,

while Black girls make up 20% of preschool enrollment but 54% of suspensions for females (U.S. DOE OCR, 2016). More recently, the Center for American Progress states that roughly 17,000 preschoolers have been expelled once and that at least 50,000 preschoolers have been suspended at least once in public and private settings (Malik, 2017). Researchers and policy experts assert that there is now a "preschool to prison pipeline" resulting from both studies. The effects of this phenomenon include a decrease in the advantages of high-quality early childhood education, an increase in academic achievement gaps, and an increased risk of unfavorable short- and long-term outcomes. The next section discusses the reintegration transition plan.

Reintegration to the Traditional Education Setting

Like any other educational transition, student reintegration into the traditional education setting from the ALPS is critical. However, research on students' transition from alternative education back to the student's traditional education setting is limited (Kelchner et al., 2017). The few studies that do address this topic indicate that students may encounter various challenges during this transition. These challenges often stem from differences in how the schools and educators within them respond to students and their needs. Kelchner et al. (2017) explain that "students transitioning from an alternative school setting to a traditional one often struggle with readjusting to larger class sizes and receiving less individualized academic support. These students are frequently behind in their studies because the courses in the traditional education setting are more advanced than those at the alternative schools.

Moreover, these students are often labeled as "at-risk" because they have attended an alternative school, regardless of their academic potential. This situation and a sense of disconnection from the traditional education setting and its staff can negatively impact their academic performance, as students generally perform better when they feel connected to and

cared for by their school community (Kelchner et al., 2017, pp. 170–171). Despite the extensive processes involved in placing students in alternative education programs, there is minimal support for transitioning back to the traditional education setting. The transition can be challenging, and students who struggle to reintegrate often end up returning to the alternative school, being expelled, or dropping out. Therefore, support for students transitioning back to their home schools is crucial, as those who have attended an alternative school are more than twice as likely to drop out compared to their peers who have not been placed in an alternative setting (Kelchner et al., 2017).

Alternative education students undergo two transitions. The first happens when they move from a traditional education setting to an ALPS. The second transition occurs when they return from the ALPS to the traditional education setting. Students typically transition back to the traditional setting once their assignment is complete, though the specific transition process can differ between schools. According to Gurantz (2010), reintegration into the traditional education setting can be difficult for students. In this study, he recorded the results of 418 students who transitioned from the ALPS to the traditional education setting. Of those students, 59% finished the remainder of the school year in the traditional education setting, 17% did not find success at the traditional education setting and returned to the ALPs, and finally, 24% dropped out of school.

In their case study, *"I am Not Bad": Alternative School Students, Stigma, and Identity Politics*, McNulty and Roseboro (2009) carried out an ethnographic field study over four months, gathering observational field data and student interviews of students who attended an alternative school and later transferred back to their traditional educational setting. It comprised nine students who went to a public, alternative school in the southeast part of the country that served

children in grades 6 through 12. These students were expelled or suspended from their regular educational environment. The findings of this study showed that when students from the alternative school returned to their traditional educational setting, they felt "stigmatized" by the faculty. Due to their prior behavioral problems and placement in an alternate school, they were labeled as "deviants." Students felt that the administration, teachers, and resource officers treated them differently. They believed they were being "picked on, summoned to the office without justification, and watched constantly." Students who experienced such treatment frequently reverted to bad habits or eventually quit school. Due to their placement at an alternative school, these pupils are referred to as "spoiled images" by Goffman (1963). When pupils returned to their typical educational environment, staff did not provide them equal opportunities. Despite the rise in enrollment in alternative schools, there is little data to support staff training or standards for forming relationships with kids as they transition from an alternative school to a traditional educational setting.

This case study explored the reintegration of students from an alternative school back into a traditional educational setting. The study found that these students felt stigmatized and labeled by faculty due to their past behavioral issues and alternative school placement. This stigmatization led to unfair treatment and unjustified discipline, which hindered their reintegration, and as a result, many students struggled to adjust.

Kennedy (2019) sought to understand the contextual factors influencing educators' decisions to place students in disciplinary alternative schools and to explore students' experiences as they reintegrated into traditional schools after such placements. The study highlights how zero-tolerance policies and safety concerns disproportionately affect students of color, leading to their placement in alternative schools and the problems that they encounter

upon returning to the traditional education setting. The researchers argue that institutional racism, subjective interpretations of behavior, and dehumanizing attitudes contribute significantly to the challenges these students face when returning to comprehensive schools. The researchers used a qualitative case study approach to explore these issues, combining interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis with a theoretical framework grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT).

The study involved nine African American secondary students interviewed before leaving the disciplinary alternative education program (DAEP), after their initial return to a traditional school, and after completing a transition semester. In addition to interviewing the students, the researchers gathered perspectives from administrators and teachers at the DAEP and the comprehensive schools. Classroom observations and document analysis, including student work and records, were conducted to provide further context. The findings revealed that students perceived and experienced bias and discrimination in their DAEP placements, with subjectivity playing a significant role in discipline referrals and decisions about their return to traditional schools. Moreover, students faced educational barriers, including inadequate teaching and unsupportive school placements, which hindered their post-placement performance.

The researchers also uncovered the complex dynamics of visibility and invisibility that students navigated in their return to traditional schools, characterized by heightened surveillance and a need to remain unnoticed. Importantly, the study found that the presence of African American teachers and administrators did not necessarily lead to better outcomes for students, as these educators also exhibited deficit perspectives and upheld beliefs that overlooked systemic inequalities. Kennedy (2019) contribute a vital perspective to the discourse on re-entry after DAEP placement by centering students' voices. They underscore the need to address the

systemic issues that complicate these students' educational journeys and highlight the human-centered approach to their study.

Kennedy (2019) examined the reintegration practices of students transitioning from DAEP to traditional schools, revealing significant challenges and systemic issues. The study found that reintegration processes were often hindered by biases and subjective decision-making from educators, leading to inconsistent and unfair treatment of returning students, particularly those of color. The next section will summarize Chapter 2.

Summary

This literature review consists of three sections. The first section discusses research identifying ways students are removed from the classroom through school discipline, teacher perceptions, exclusionary discipline practices, and the zero-tolerance policy. The following section discusses the results of students removed from school. These sections are unfavorable outcomes, the disproportionality of marginalized students, the disproportionality of ALPS, and the school-to-prison pipeline. The final section discusses the transition plans and the reintegration process. The following chapter will discuss the methodology used for this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodology used in this study. It contains detailed explanations of the study's design, the research questions used to guide it, site selections, sampling procedures, data collection methods, data analysis, research validity and reliability, subjectivity statement, ethical considerations, and study limitations. The central question below guided the research, along with the accompanying sub-questions:

1. What are the administrators, counselors, teachers, and students' perceptions of the transition plans and the reintegration process back into the traditional education setting from the ALPS?
 - a. What do students feel is required to help them transition?
 - b. What do administrators feel is required to help students transition?
 - c. What do teachers feel is required to help students transition?
 - d. What do counselors feel is required to help students transition?

This study included the perceptions and voices of students who had transitioned and are currently enrolled in the traditional education setting. Teachers, counselors, and administrators from the alternative school and traditional education settings who were a part of developing transition plans and the transition process also shared their lived experiences. From this exploratory qualitative case study, we identified the supports and barriers of the current transition processes used in these educational settings. This research will allow the researcher to understand the process better, share discoveries made, and recommend further studies to strengthen and support the reintegration process. The following section will explain the research design chosen for this study.

Research Design

The research approach taken for this study was an exploratory qualitative case study. This research method allowed me to gain an understanding of the process for the development of transition plans and the reintegration process to the traditional education setting from the alternative school ALPS within its real-life context. This method is beneficial when the boundaries between the process and context are not evident, as in developing transition plans and implementing the reintegration process. The goal was to explore the subject in detail, gather rich qualitative data, and generate insights that might not be possible with quantitative methods (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

Qualitative methods gain a deeper understanding of people's perceptions of a particular process or event (Merriam, 2015). These methods explore and understand a specific issue or process through the lens of the participant's lived experiences, thoughts, and perceptions. Qualitative methods are instrumental when exploring complex, context-dependent events or behaviors, as they seek to capture the depth of the human experience that cannot be fully quantified. Patton (2015) highlights that qualitative research enables the collection of rich, narrative data that provides insights into how individuals make meaning of their experiences. By focusing on participants' perspectives, qualitative methods uncover patterns, themes, and processes that reflect the complexity of social life, making it a vital approach for understanding the nuances of real-world contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A case study is an appropriate method based on the conditions presented in this study. Yin (2009) proposed three conditions for the use of a case study. First, the purpose must be to answer "how" or "why" questions, allowing the researcher to investigate complex processes, such as understanding the development of transition plans and implementing the reintegration

process into traditional education settings. Second, when the investigator has little control over the process, as is often the case in natural educational environments, a case study allows for an in-depth exploration of the situation without the need to manipulate variables. Finally, a case study is particularly valuable when studying a contemporary issue within a real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the issue and its context are unclear. In this study, there is no clear understanding or procedure between the development of transition plans and their implementation in the real-life context of student reintegration, further justifying the use of this method.

According to Creswell (2013), in case study research, the researcher explores a "real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (p. 97). This study will include interviews, field notes, and data collection from the state Department of Public Instruction, the school's district website, and the websites of the schools participating.

Qualitative research methods were selected to fully understand students' transition plans and reintegration experience and examine the reintegration process in its natural environment, from the ALPS to the traditional education setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Students who have attended ALPS and returned to the traditional education setting, along with staff members involved in the development of the transition plan and involved in the transition process from the ALPS to the traditional education setting, can provide a better understanding and meaning of this lived experience. Merriam (2015, p. 5) describes qualitative research as "an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible." Quantitative research would not have been the most appropriate method to explore this phenomenon because this type

of study typically uses manipulation of variables and statistical analysis to predict and interpret data instead of the participant's authentic voice of the lived experience (Heppner et al., 2015). The methods used in qualitative research will allow for exploration and understanding from the participants' perspectives.

Exploratory case studies are an approach within qualitative methods. This type of research involves a systematic and in-depth examination of a particular case or process to gain a deeper understanding or generate hypotheses for further research. Exploratory inquiry is an appropriate beginning point of research when very little is known about the nature of the phenomenon (Patton, 1990, p. 193). It allows the researcher to gather data and observe the emergence of patterns that naturally unfold in the real-world setting (Patton, 1990). According to Creswell et al. (2006), qualitative researchers seek to understand the rich structure of knowledge that results from learning from participants through in-person meetings, investing time in the field, and exploring to gather specific interpretations. The following section will discuss the research questions that will guide the study.

Research Questions

The following research questions structure the study around the transition plans and reintegration process, drawing insights from those who have participated in and experienced this process, transitioning to a traditional education setting from an ALPS:

1. What are the administrators, counselors, teachers, and students' perceptions of the transition plans and the reintegration process back into the traditional education setting from the ALPS?
 - a. What do students feel is required to help them transition?
 - b. What do administrators feel is required to help students transition?

- c. What do teachers feel is required to help students transition?
- d. What do counselors feel is required to help students transition?

The following section describes the participants' selection process and the site where the study will be conducted.

Sample Selection & Site Selection

This research study utilized purposeful sampling, selecting participants and the site based on their potential to provide valuable insights into the research question and central focus (Creswell et al., 2006). Before selecting the participants and identifying potential schools, permission to conduct this study within the given district was obtained according to IRB requirements. The researcher notified the Department of Research and Accountability within the selected district to identify the proper procedures to complete. Staff member participants from the ALPS should be familiar with and have worked with students on transition plans. Staff participants from the traditional education setting should have been involved in the reintegration process and have worked directly with students who have gone through this process. Staff members will include teachers, counselors, and administrators from both schools. For student participants, the student has to have attended the alternative school selected for this study for at least one semester before returning to the traditional education setting, have experienced the reintegration process, and were currently attending the traditional school at the time of this study. The student should have had at least one full quarter in attendance prior to data collection and be in good academic standing with minimal discipline referrals and attendance issues. Permission from the staff members, parents, and students will be obtained according to IRB guidelines.

The researcher reviewed enrollment data from the ALPS and identified the best candidate for the study. After identifying the high school to participate in this study, all potential faculty

candidates were contacted via email or telephone and asked to participate. The desired ALPS site needed to be located on a campus separate from the traditional education setting with its own administrative team and staff. Student enrollment needed to consist of at least fifty students or more. Once the ALPS and traditional education setting teams were identified, all participants were asked to participate in this study with full disclosure of the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and its significance.

This research study was conducted virtually, with the researcher as the primary data collection instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants will be interviewed online, focusing on their experiences with the traditional education settings and the ALPS transition process. Virtual interviews were chosen to ensure convenience for participants, allowing for a comfortable and familiar environment while aiming to gather in-depth insights into their reintegration experiences. Guba (1978) describes "naturalistic inquiry" as a discovery-oriented approach, which, in this case, involved me minimizing control over the virtual setting and allowing outcomes to emerge naturally from participants' experiences. I familiarized myself with each educational environment by reviewing school websites, virtual resources, and relevant information from staff. Students were interviewed virtually at designated times. This study interviewed five students who had transitioned back into a traditional educational setting from ALPS and the staff members involved in their reintegration process. Hearing their voices explain their lived experiences through virtual interviews provided valuable insights and a greater understanding of the transition process in this context. The following section will outline the virtual data collection process.

Data Collection Procedures

This section includes a detailed description of the data collection methods I used for this research. For this study, I used the qualitative methods of interviews, field notes, and document analysis. Combining these methods allowed for data triangulation to get a full, rich description of the phenomenon in question. Before the implementation of the research study, the interview protocol was reviewed by selected committee members, which consisted of college professors, the senior director of the Office of Student Due Process, two alternative school administrators, and two regular school administrators within the chosen school district for assessment of the questions about the purpose of the study. These individuals tested the interview protocol for appropriateness of length and clarity of the questions. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts, ensuring they were correctly recorded and transcribed.

Interviews

Interviews are considered the most important method for data gathering in qualitative studies (Liles, 2003). Before the individual interviews, participants received an emailed demographic survey requesting background information. This information allowed me to have the information needed for coding purposes and to become familiar with the participants. Interviews were conducted with individuals identified following the criterion sampling method. The interview sessions consisted of each participant's individual taped sessions, with their permission. Semi-structured questions were designed to create open conversations with the participants, encouraging them to provide the details the researcher needed to address the research questions (Patton, 1990). By using open-ended questions, participants were able to use their own words and definitions. The plan was to tape each interview and transcribe the information after each meeting. Data was organized by topics to identify appropriate themes

from the findings. The researcher aimed to generate data and provide insight into each participant's experiences in transitioning from the ALPS to the traditional educational setting. As the researcher, I hoped to gain a deep understanding and insight into the participant's perspectives.

Purposive sampling was utilized to identify student participants for this study. The criteria for selecting student participants was as follows:

- students must have attended the alternative school chosen for this study for at least one semester before returning to the traditional education setting,
- students must have experienced the reintegration process,
- they must currently be attending the traditional education setting,
- they should have had at least one full academic quarter in attendance before the start of data collection, and
- they should pass most classes with minimal discipline referrals and attendance issues.

Five students, along with the principals, counselors, and teachers from the ALPS and traditional schools, were interviewed. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes for students and about an hour for administrators, counselors, and teachers participating in the study. Interviews took place via Zoom after a brief telephone conversation and completion of a demographic survey. I recorded the interviews, listened to the recordings, and took notes immediately following each interview.

Transcript

I recorded each participant's Zoom meeting interview and made transcripts of the recording. With the transcripts, I then reviewed the recorded interview to verify the accuracy of the transcript, making corrections where necessary. Patton (1990) developed the content analysis

framework to analyze data collection. This framework consists of a systematic method of analyzing qualitative data collection. The first component of this method consists of thoroughly and repeatedly reading the transcripts to identify recurring themes. Second, I used inductive and deductive coding to apply codes to the themes, allowing information to be grouped and categorized. Next, data triangulation is used to ensure the findings' validity and enhance the research's credibility. The final step consisted of interpreting the data to gain insight and draw conclusions from the data. This data analysis focused on the research questions used to guide this work and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model as the theoretical framework lens.

Field Notes

The second data-gathering technique was using the researcher's field notes that were gathered before and after the interviews and outside interactions with the participants via phone. The interview and telephone conversations were intended to understand how each school operated and how the participants interacted within these environments. Merriam (2015) noted that each participant's experience has its rhythm and flow; with an established relationship, the participants should be willing to share their experiences fully. Using field notes, I was able to better track interactions, reflections during the research process, and documentation that might otherwise have been forgotten over time (Patton, 1990).

Document Analysis

The third data-gathering technique was the collection of artifacts about the school district, the schools, and the students that participated in the study. I was able to obtain public demographic information published through their websites and the Department of Public Instruction of that state for the study schools. This information included enrollment, transportation, personnel, student-teacher ratio, programs/activities, sources of assistance, and

program purposes. The researcher obtained students' data through demographic surveys. Students provided information on their grades, attendance, and opinions on their behavioral status. A document analysis of the state's Department of Public Instruction, the school district, and the schools participating in the research provides information on existing documents. This information provided additional evidence to support the research questions of this study.

This study employed a comprehensive approach, including interviews, field notes, and data collection from the state Department of Public Instruction, the school's district website, and the websites of the participating schools. The following section will discuss this study's data analysis approach.

Overview of Data Analysis

I systematically applied Braun & Clarke's (2012) six-step thematic analysis to analyze the data collected in this study. After conducting interviews, I transcribed each session using Zoom recordings and thoroughly reviewed the transcriptions for errors, immersing myself in the data to better understand participants' responses. This systematic approach set the foundation for identifying patterns and making interpretations, ensuring the validity of the study.

Next, I used Microsoft Word to highlight keywords and phrases frequently mentioned by participants. This information was then transferred into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for further organization and color-coding, refining the data around specific concepts related to the research questions.

Bronfenbrenner's theoretical model guided initial coding: At the microsystem level, I focused on phrases relating to students' direct interactions in the school environment, such as relationships with teachers and peers. I identified codes related to connections between home and school or peer dynamics at the mesosystem level. Lastly, at the exosystem level, I focused on

school policies and procedures that affected transition and reintegration. I manually organized these codes into thematic categories, allowing for a systematic analysis of recurring patterns.

Following Saldaña's (2021) coding techniques, I applied the first coding cycle using a deductive approach, where codes were derived from the research questions and critical variables relevant to the study. I reviewed the interview transcripts, survey responses, field notes, and other research materials, organizing the data into categories related to the research focus. I used manual coding to categorize key concepts from the data into functional chunks, and this information was organized into a collection table for easier management.

The second cycle involved inductive coding to identify emerging patterns. Through pattern coding, I condensed the data from the first cycle into smaller categories, themes, or constructs, allowing for deeper insights. This manual process enabled the identification of key themes and patterns within the data.

Throughout the data analysis process, I employed the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), allowing me to compare data across different sources continuously. This iterative process enabled a deeper understanding of the case, providing new insights as the data was continually re-examined.

All data—including notes, recordings, transcriptions, and consent forms—were securely stored in a filing system using a locked cabinet, color-coded markers, and folders. This manual data management process ensured that the analysis remained comprehensive and structured. Following Yin's (2010) approach to data collection, I synthesized the information gathered from various resources to answer the study's research questions, ensuring that the process remained rigorous and detailed throughout.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

A significant issue in qualitative research is the trustworthiness or credibility of the data. To safeguard the trustworthiness and rigor of this study, I employed the guidelines as required by the qualitative study research method. Ethical consideration consists of maintaining the confidentiality of participants. For this, pseudonyms were used to identify study participants and the schools where they are employed. A copy of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for studies involving human subjects will be included in this study. Credibility involves establishing that the results of qualitative research are believable from the perspective of study participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer several methods to address this issue and I employed the following methods described by Lincoln and Guba to increase the credibility of the data: triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Multiple data sources were used: interviews, follow-up interviews (when needed), intensive case studies, observations, and document analysis. Data check was through triangulation; interview data corroborated against transcripts, and coding software. Member checking consisted of allowing participants to provide feedback on the findings. Participants were allowed to check the accuracy of their responses and the researcher's interpretations throughout the interview. In addition, participants received a copy of the interview transcripts to verify accuracy and to further elaborate on their responses if they desired to do so during the interview. Peer debriefing consisted of discussing the aspects of the study with another colleague. Other methods described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to establish trustworthiness include dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Dependability is synonymous with reliability, as it refers to decisions made by the researcher during an inquiry. Dependability concerns whether the same results would be obtained if the same inquiry was conducted twice. Confirmability is equivalent to internal validity and ensures the data supports

the study's findings. It refers to the degree to which others can confirm or corroborate the results.

Transferability refers to applying the results of one situation to other similar situations.

Transferability can be enhanced through thick descriptions of sufficient detail and precision. A

thick description of the data is necessary to allow someone interested in making a transfer to

conclude whether or not the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other settings.

The next section will discuss the limitations of this study's approach.

Limitations of Approach

Several possible factors limited the study. The sample size in the study was limited to one ALPS and one primary feeder school within the same district. The student sample was limited to five students from the same school district. All of the students in this study only served a semester at the ALPS. Only two of the five participants had extreme behavior issues that were severely affecting their performance in school. All staff participants were employees of the school districts and this may have limited their responses, as they may hesitate sharing their accurate perceptions for fear of retaliation. The identification of the ALPS may have also limited the study in that ALPS differed in philosophy and organization, making them more readily recognized. Finally, the limited timeframe in which this study was conducted. The next section summarizes the methodology of this study.

Summary

This chapter described the methodology I used for this study. It includes detailed explanations related to the study's design, research questions used to guide it, site selections, sampling procedures, data collection methods, an overview of my data analysis process, research validity and reliability, subjectivity statement, ethical considerations, and study limitations. In the following chapter, I will discuss my findings.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative case study was to learn about the transition plans and reintegration process for students to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. This study gathered the perspectives of students, administrators, teachers, and counselors from the traditional education setting and the ALPS involved in developing transition plans and the transition process. The findings described in this chapter consist of themes identified as results of interviews with students, administrators, counselors, and teachers from the traditional education setting and the ALPS. I collected demographic data from each participant to establish background information. Field notes were used to keep track of interactions, reflections during the research process, and documentation. I also collected data from the Department of Public Instruction from that state, the school district, and the participating schools' websites. The findings reflected areas of support and weakness from the traditional education setting and the ALPS regarding student transition plans and the reintegration process. This chapter will consist of a summary of methods used to conduct this study, a profile of each participant, research findings, and a chapter summary.

Summary of Methods

Within the context of this research, qualitative investigation offered participants a platform to express their significant experiences using their language. The study allowed participants to articulate their viewpoints, beliefs, and understandings through interview sessions. Professional educators serving in schools and students attending schools within this district participated in the study, sharing their insights and perspectives in response to open-ended interview questions, each linked to a specific research sub-question.

The research question inquired: What are the administrators, counselors, teachers, and students' perceptions of the transition plans and the reintegration process back into the traditional education setting from the ALPS? The research was deepened through four sub-questions, each designed to explore the central question within a more specific context:

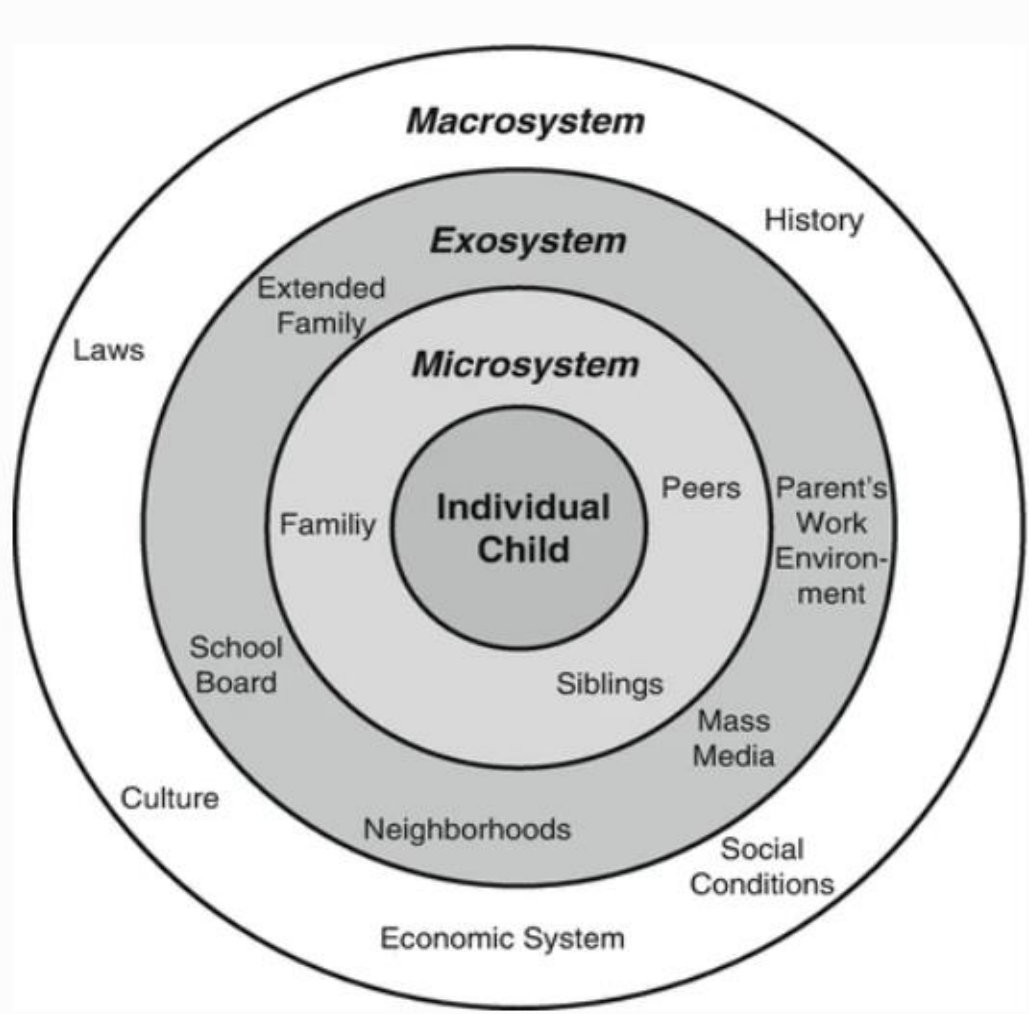
- a. What do students feel is required to help them transition?
- b. What do administrators feel is required to help students transition?
- c. What do teachers feel is required to help students transition?
- d. What do counselors feel is required to help students transition?

Following each interview, I transcribed the session utilizing a commercially available transcription tool incorporated into the Zoom suite hosted by North Carolina State University. Subsequently, I carefully reviewed and rectified any transcription errors emerging from the automated transcript generation. This was followed by crafting an initial interpretation of the data gleaned from each participant. In the subsequent stages, a thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data in line with the methodological framework of Braun and Clarke (2012). This analytical process encompassed the steps of acquainting myself with the data, coding, preliminary theme formulation, refining themes, finalizing themes, and generating the ultimate report. The data was analyzed using the Microsoft Excel program and a manual color-coded system. Using the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development, questions fell into three of the five systems of this model: the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem. The microsystem, the innermost level of this model, focuses on the individual's immediate environment and the direct interactions with family, peer relationships, and the school environment. Most interview questions fell in this category (about 50%). The mesosystem, the level next to the microsystem, focuses on the connections between the

individual's peer groups and the relationship between the school and the community. About 35% of the questions were in this area. Moving one level above the mesosystem is the exosystem; this level is where policies and issues affect the community. Local government policies, such as school policies, procedures, and community expectations, are carried out in this arena. About 15% of the questions fell into this category.

Figure 4.1

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development



Participant Profiles

The study involved 11 participants who were purposely selected. Five participants were high school students who had attended the ALPS and have since returned to the traditional education setting. Three of the participants were school staff members from the traditional education setting, and three were school staff members from the ALPS (administration, counselor, and teacher). Before conducting research, the participants were emailed instructions to review the informed consent document, sign it, return it, and schedule an interview date. Each participant was given an online sign-up link to collect pre-screening demographic information, including years of experience (total and at the current school), position, gender, and ethnicity of staff members. Student demographic information included gender, age, grade, length of stay at the alternative school, length of time since returning to their traditional education setting, description of themselves as students, and identified strengths and areas that needed improvement. A schedule was created based on the availability of the participants.

The focal group of this research study consisted of educators employed by a school district in the southeast region of the United States. This school district is described as a single, large, diverse, metropolitan public school unit. The educators selected were from the same traditional education setting and the same ALPS. The students who participated were each from different high schools throughout this district.

Participants met the following eligibility criteria: staff members selected from the ALPS were familiar with and had worked with students in transition plans. Staff members from the traditional education setting have participated in the reintegration process and have worked directly with students who have gone through the reintegration process. Staff members included a teacher, counselor, and administrator from each school. For student participants, the student

had attended the ALPS for at least one semester before returning to the traditional education setting, had experienced the reintegration process, and were currently attending the traditional school at the time of this study. The student should have had at least one full quarter in attendance before the start of data collection and should be in good academic standing with minimal discipline referrals and attendance issues. Permission from the staff members, parents, and students was obtained according to IRB guidelines.

Participant Profiles - Students

Paul is an eighteen-year-old African American male student in the twelfth grade. He is expected to graduate from the traditional education setting in 2024. Beyond graduation, Paul sees himself continuing his education at the local community college and then matriculating to a four-year college to major in accounting, marketing, or engineering.

During the interview, Paul described himself academically as a capable student who can complete the assignments given to him; however, Paul admits that his grades and attendance can be better. Behaviorally, Paul admits to having anger issues, that he is easily upset when things don't go his way or when others pick on his peers. Upon returning to the traditional education setting, Paul plans to focus on staying to himself, staying away from others, keeping his mouth shut, and not getting involved in things that don't concern him. Paul considers his strengths to be playing sports and working with little children. Paul indicated an area of improvement for him would be time management. He admits to waiting until the last minute to complete assignments or turn them in, which has caused his grades to go down. Paul attended the alternative learning school for the first semester of his junior year. He has returned to his traditional education setting for his senior year.

Fredia is a seventeen-year-old African American female in the 10th grade. *Fredia* identified herself as in the middle; she can be a good student, but at times, she can be seen as a bad student. Academically, she doesn't consider herself a good student. She is currently not doing well in her class but is being supported by her teachers to improve her grades in two required classes for grade promotion through state-approved online courses. Behaviorally, *Fredia* admitted to getting into trouble because "people are making her angry," which makes her want to fight them. She also admitted to becoming confrontational with staff when she felt that she was wronged. *Fredia* has served one semester at the alternative learning school and is considering returning to this setting.

Calvin is a sixteen-year-old African American male in the 11th grade. *Calvin* described himself as a student who excels in most subjects. He is passing all of his classes with As and Bs. Behaviorally, *Calvin* saw himself as a well-behaved student most of the time, indicating that he had never gotten in trouble besides the incident that caused him to be reassigned to the alternative learning school for a semester. *Calvin* stated that his attendance is very good, and he rarely misses school. During the interview, *Calvin* identified his strengths as being athletic, easy to catch on to newly taught materials, being perceptive and intuitive, and having good common sense. An area that *Calvin* said he needs to work on was controlling his boredom. *Calvin* said that boredom leaves room for all types of things to happen. *Calvin* was assigned to the alternative learning school for one semester.

Triana is a sixteen-year-old Hispanic female in the 10th grade. She saw herself as a dedicated student most of her school days. *Triana* said that her grades are decent academically, but she needs to continue working on them. Behaviorally, *Triana* believed she was doing much better since returning from the alternative learning school. She indicated that

since she has returned to the traditional education setting, she has a sense of clarity and peace of mind. She has limited her communication circle to a few associates. Triana sees herself as a leader; people are attracted to her, and she keeps it “real” with her peers by telling the truth. Behaviorally, Triana admitted to getting irritated quickly, causing her to get into physical altercations, and she needed to work on not allowing others to “get to her.” Triana has attended the alternative learning school for one semester and has been back in the traditional education setting for one school year.

Owen is a sixteen-year-old African American male in the 9th grade. Owen said he is not the best student but not the worst; he is somewhere in between. Academically, Owen knew that he needed to work on his grades. He said he likes math and is good at it, but his grades do not reflect this. Areas of improvement would be his science and ELA (language arts) classes. Owen's attendance is a problem because of the daily late arrival of the bus, which causes him to miss his first period. Behaviorally, Owen said that he doesn't get into a lot of trouble, but he can “handle his own” when needed. Owen says he will not allow others to pick on him. Owen was assigned one semester at the alternative learning school in the fall. He has since returned to the traditional education setting and has completed his freshman year.

Table 4.1

Student Participant Demographics

Name	Ethnicity	Gender	Grade	Age	Length at ALPS	Length of Return to TES
Paul	African American	M	12th	18	9 weeks	1 semester
Fredia	African American	F	10th	17	18 weeks	½ semester
Calvin	African American	M	11th	16	16 weeks	1 semester
Triana	Hispanic	F	10th	16	18 weeks	2 semesters

Owen	African American	M	9th	16	18 weeks	1 semester
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Participant Profiles - Staff Members

Traditional School Teacher

Ms. Brown is an African American female teacher at the local traditional high school. She has worked in education for thirteen years, the first ten of which were spent in special education, and she has been teaching English at the high school for the last three years. Ms. Brown shares a strong desire for the success of her students. She sees their struggles and admits that her job is not easy. She indicates that many of her students are challenged on various levels. They face academic challenges, emotional obstacles, and self-identity issues and need much support.

Alternative School Teacher

Ms. Smith is a White female teacher at the alternative learning school. She has worked in education for nineteen years. Before teaching math, she was an engineer and later pursued a master's in math. She has been at the alternative learning school for the last four years. Ms. Smith enjoys working at the alternative school and the program's layout. The structure allows them to work with students in the classroom and small groups in person. She believes this structure helps build relationships that motivate students positively, both academically and behaviorally. However, Ms. Smith also realizes that there are not enough teachers at her school, and at times, she does not have the time to do everything she is required to do.

Traditional School Counselor

Ms. Johnson is a first-year counselor in the traditional education setting and enjoys her role. However, with many students, ensuring that her responsibilities are carried out as expected can be difficult. She has observed that students who transition back need extra support. She tries to meet with these students one-on-one, but sometimes, her schedule doesn't permit her. Ms.

Johnson realizes that having a safe place for her students to go to and share with her is very important. She sees the need for these students to have more support in terms of counseling.

Alternative School Counselor

Mr. Longhorn has served as a counselor for twenty-one years in various districts within the state. He has been at the alternative learning school for nine years as the transition counselor for the northern site. Mr. Longhorn's responsibilities include orienting the students upon arrival and reviewing historical and current grades to ensure their schedules are similar to those of their base schools. Mr. Longhorn prides himself on building positive relationships with each student entering his site. He believes informing parents of their child's actions is critical to student success.

Traditional Education Principal

Principal Moore is a White male educator who has worked in education for twenty-eight years. He has been a science teacher, coach, assistant principal, and principal. He has also been principal at one of the local high schools for twelve years. As a principal in this school district, he serves in various capacities beyond his school and has hosted several pilot programs at his high school. Principal Moore is adamant about providing a learning environment that is conducive to all learners. He has frequently spoken about identifying schools or programs for students who cannot successfully navigate the large comprehensive high schools. He believes that when we continue to place them back into the same environment after serving time in the alternative setting, we only set them up for failure.

Alternative School Principal

Principal Andrews is a White female educator who has worked in education for eighteen years. She has served as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal at the elementary, middle,

and high school levels. Principal Andrews has served as the principal of the alternative learning school for seven years. Under her leadership, she has added another site to her program, providing 250 additional seats. She has implemented restorative practices to support transitions back to the traditional education setting.

Table 4.2

Staff Participant Demographics

Name	Role	Ethnicity	Gender	Location	Years of Experience
Principal Andrews	Principal	White	F	Alternative	16
Mr. Longhorn	Counselor	White	M	Alternative	21
Ms. Smith	Teacher	White	F	Alternative	19
Principal Moore	Principal	White	M	Traditional	28
Ms. Johnson	Counselor	White	F	Traditional	1
Ms. Brown	Teacher	African American	F	Traditional	13

Research Questions

In this section, the research question and sub-research questions are reviewed. Answers to the research questions are presented based on themes from participant responses to interview questions. Direct quotes are presented along with general concepts and perceptions presented by participants. Though most research questions had themes that addressed the posed area of interest, some outliers existed, and those opposing views were also explored. Quotes were attributable to individual participants and are presented in their own words. Any redaction is limited to information that would breach confidentiality. The participants are referred to by their pseudonyms, along with some demographic details.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 sought to gather perceptions of participating students and staff members regarding their perceptions of the transition plans and the reintegration process back into the traditional education setting from the ALPS. Before asking interview questions, I reviewed the definition of transition plans and the reintegration process with each participant for them to gain an understanding of the research question. I asked participants open-ended interview questions to gather their perspectives on this research study. A complete list of interview questions is in Appendices A-G. By asking interview questions to inform the research question, I sought to determine to what degree participants understood transition plans and reintegration processes as deemed by legislation, and how these plans and processes worked at the traditional education setting and ALPS. Three major themes emerged from the participant responses related to the research question: What are the administrators, counselors, teachers, and student's perceptions of the transition plans and the reintegration process back into the traditional education setting from the ALPS? These themes helped me form an answer to this research query. First, all participants had a basic understanding of transition plans developed for students and the reintegration process, even though it varied between staff and student groups. Second, most participants believed academic and social interaction was vital for student success. Third, participants reported that support systems and perceptions of support were critical in developing transition plans and effective reintegration processes. Table 4.3 summarizes the themes and their definitions.

Table 4.3*Definitions of Identified Themes*

Theme	Definition
Transition Process and Procedures	Reintegrating students from the ALPS into the traditional education setting. Specifically, the electronic enrollment of students to generate grades and schedules
Academic and Social Integration	Students' challenges and successes in adjusting academically and socially to the traditional education setting include interacting with peers and teachers.
Support Systems and Perceptions of Support	It consists of identified roles and support systems that facilitate the transition plan and reintegration process, emphasizing the perceptions of the support provided.

Transition Process and Procedures

The first interview question sought to determine the level of understanding participants had about transition plans and processes for reintegration. This theme was defined as detailed steps for reintegrating students from the ALPS into the traditional education setting. Specifically, they involved coordination between schools and the involvement and collaboration of administrators, counselors, teachers, and students. The answers to this question ranged from a basic understanding of these plans and processes in which the participant identified it broadly as the concept of students leaving one school and entering another to the more elaborate dialog of defining guidelines and procedures and, finally, having very little understanding of the concepts. Ms. Smith, a white female 19-year veteran in the traditional education setting, responded, "In my experience with students returning to my class, there is not much of a process specifically designed for them. I was only notified that they would be returning." When asked to elaborate, Smith responded,

When I get my classroom roster with the student's name, the system flags the ones that have 504 plans and IEPs, so we are prepared for them, but students returning from the alternative schools are not flagged so, as a result, we are not prepared for them.

However, when speaking with principals, the traditional school principal stated,

We do not broadcast across the school that these kids are coming back because we do not want to slap a label on them as troublemakers because they are from the alternative school. We do not want teachers predetermining students; you do not want to put a target on their back.

The responses were more affirmative with the alternative school staff. The responses covered the process from when a student arrives and when they transition back to the traditional education setting; it was one streamless process. According to the alternative school counselor, Mr. Longhorn, a white male with 21 years of experience with various districts within the state, responded to this question,

We must understand the whole student; we examine their grades and behavior history.

We meet with the traditional education school counselor and any other team attached to the student. We build relationships with the students on the first day of their arrival to determine what is needed academically and behaviorally.

The alternative school teacher, Ms. Smith, further elaborated on this, emphasizing the importance of the role of the counselor and how her role as a teacher extends the counselor's work within the classroom. Ms. Smith explained,

We teach academics and support students Monday through Thursday, but we focus on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) on Friday. We meet in small groups and work with the

counselors to teach social skills to the students. The students greatly benefit from these exercises.

The students were the most unsure of all participant groups about transition plans or reintegration processes. Students and most staff clearly understood that their assignment to the ALPS was a temporary reassignment and that they would return to the traditional education setting when the reassignment was complete. However, responses varied among the students about transition plans and reintegration processes back to the traditional education setting. When asked about it, Calvin, the 16-year-old African American male, said,

We should have had better communication with my base school because when I came back, it seemed like they did not even have me in the records or knew that I was coming back. I had to go home for an extra day and come back the next day to start.

Fredia, a 17-year-old African American female, said, "They just gave me my schedule and told me to go to my class. I just figured everything out for myself." However, Triana, a 16-year-old Hispanic female, 10th grader, seems to have settled in well, indicating that "I didn't have a problem returning to my base school. I think how they did it was good." When asked if there were any written plans, students were unaware of any written plans the ALPS had created. However, students could identify activities at the ALPS that focused on the transition plans. Friday cohorts were sessions held on the ALPS campus. These sessions focused on developing plans for the student's return, and the students were able to elaborate on the activities. Moreover, the experiences shared by Fredia and Triana further emphasize the need for individualized support during the reintegration process. Fredia's experience of being handed a schedule with no further guidance suggests that some students might be left to navigate the complex process of reintegration on their own, which can be overwhelming, particularly for those who already feel

marginalized or disconnected from the traditional school environment. On the other hand, Triana's relatively smooth transition indicates that when the process is handled with care and attention, students can reintegrate successfully. This contrast suggests that a more standardized yet flexible approach to transition planning that includes clear communication, written plans, and ongoing support could help ensure that all students have a positive and successful return to their traditional schools.

The responses to this interview question revealed a significant disparity in the understanding and implementing transition plans and reintegration processes between traditional and alternative school staff. While some participants had only a basic or limited understanding of these processes, others provided more detailed descriptions, particularly those from the alternative school. Traditional school staff, like Ms. Smith, expressed concerns about the need for more specific processes for students returning from alternative placements, highlighting the absence of system flags or preparations similar to those for students with 504 plans or IEPs. On the other hand, alternative school staff demonstrated a more comprehensive and structured approach, emphasizing the importance of understanding the whole student, building relationships, and integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into their curriculum. This contrast underscores the need for more consistent and coordinated efforts between traditional and alternative schools to ensure a smoother and more supportive student reintegration process.

Academic and Social Integration

The second theme that emerged from the data was academic and social integration. This theme identified students' challenges and successes in adjusting academically and socially to the traditional education setting, including their interactions with peers and teachers. This theme reveals that the resources and support systems available to students are critical in helping them

academically and socially adjust. Additional academic assistance and opportunities for academic recovery are essential for catching up on missed work and allowing students to earn credit for classes they previously failed. This plays a significant role in integrating students into the traditional education setting. Achieving academic success is essential for every student, as their primary goal is to graduate from high school. Students highlighted the role of academic support in helping them navigate challenges and stay on track for graduation. Many students acknowledged the importance of the resources provided at the alternative school, such as additional academic support and opportunities for academic recovery. These resources were often crucial in helping them catch up or improve their grades. When asked how students were doing with their school work, their realistic assessments of their academic performance demonstrated their awareness of the need to remain focused and utilize the available support. This awareness and the corresponding support systems are vital in motivating students to persevere through challenges and strive toward their ultimate goal of graduating from high school. When discussing their academic progress, Paul said, "I am doing okay; my grades could be better, but I am passing most of my classes and staying away from trouble." Owen, a 16-year-old African American male, states, "I do well in my classes, passing all except for the first period due to transportation issues." Academically, students found that at the alternative school, in addition to working on their current course of study, they had opportunities to work on credit recovery, which led to graduation. Fredia said, "I am going to get my work done and ask the teacher for help when I need it; I cannot fail." Fredia's determination to seek help from her teacher reflects the proactive mindset encouraged by the support systems, emphasizing the collaborative effort between students and staff to ensure academic success.

Social adjustment refers to the process by which students adapt to the social environment of the traditional education setting. This adjustment includes how they interact with their peers and teachers, form relationships, fit into social groups, navigate social norms, and manage any social challenges they might encounter, such as making new friends, dealing with peer pressure, or adjusting to different social dynamics compared to their previous educational environment. Social adjustment also encompasses how comfortable and connected students feel within the school community and how well they integrate into the school's social fabric.

Teachers observed attendance as an adjustment problem when returning to the traditional education setting but are unsure if it contributed to negative peer interactions or school avoidance. Ms. Brown, the traditional education teacher, noted, "I emailed the student and stated that I was checking on him because he missed three days of school; he was there the next day. He seems like he is grappling with a lot of emotional stuff." This statement suggests that attendance issues may be linked to students' deeper emotional or psychological struggles during reintegration. These struggles could stem from a range of factors, including feelings of isolation, anxiety about fitting in with peers, or unresolved issues from their time at the alternative school. Ms. Smith, the alternative school teacher, stated, "Students need support because they are sometimes surrounded by other peers that are not good influences. They are tempted and cannot support themselves, making it difficult." Ms. Johnson, the traditional education counselor, also noted attendance as a challenge, stating, "Getting them to come back regularly is a big problem when they return; they will choose to skip classes or not come at all." Without support, the challenges of resisting peer pressure and maintaining positive behavior can become overwhelming, potentially leading to academic and social adjustment setbacks.

Success in social integration is closely tied to the sense of belonging that students experience when returning to a traditional school setting. Longhorn emphasizes the importance of "welcoming students back," highlighting the need to feel accepted and valued in the school community. This sense of belonging is crucial for social integration, as it helps them positively connect with peers and staff. For instance, Fredia noted that her administrators play an active role in her success, "they help me stay out of trouble by checking on me and encouraging me to stay focused." These actions reinforce her sense of being supported and included. Similarly, Triana mentioned, "My administrators greet me in the morning, and that makes me feel good and appreciated." Statements like this also contribute to her feeling of belonging.

The support provided through the alternative school's Friday Cohort circle time also plays a significant role in social integration. This time allows students to address and work through the situations and problems that led to their suspension, equipping them with the skills to handle similar situations more effectively. Owen said, "They helped me problem-solve. We discussed how to work out situations, so if I were in that situation again, I would know how to handle it differently." Owen's experience problem-solving during these sessions illustrates how such interventions can enhance social integration by teaching students how to navigate social challenges and build better relationships. These efforts help students feel more connected and integrated into the school community, which is essential for their overall success.

Unfortunately, some students did not have positive interactions with staff and peers. One student, Paul, felt that some of his teachers did not like him and that he had been treated differently since his return. Paul said, "Since I returned from suspension, teachers don't like me. I get blamed for things I did not do, and I can't get up without being threatened with being sent to the office." The two female students described instances of negative interactions with other

female students. Freida said, "I am trying to make it, but it gets tough at times; these girls just want to start drama with me, and I am trying to control my anger." Triana said, "When I returned to my base school, I had an issue with one of the girls I fought with; we had to go to the office for a peer mediation."

This theme, academic and social integration, highlights students' challenges and successes in adjusting to the traditional education setting after attending an alternative school. Academic and social support plays a crucial role in this process, helping students catch up on missed work, participate in credit recovery opportunities, and adapt to the social environment of their new school. Positive interactions with peers and staff and a sense of belonging are crucial for successful integration. However, some students struggle with negative interactions, emotional challenges, and attendance issues, which can hinder their adjustment.

Support Systems and Perceptions of Support

The third theme from the data is the support systems and perceptions of support. This theme includes identified roles and support systems that facilitate the transition plan and reintegration processes, focusing on the perceptions of the support provided. The participants recognized systems of support as any additional accommodations, adaptations, and intervention strategies in place to aid students in successful transitions. These systems came from human resources and academic or behavioral support systems. Principal Moore, a key figure in this process, explains, "When students return to us, we set up an intake meeting with myself, the counselor, and grad coaches; we call this our Alpha Team and meet with the student to explain how we will support them academically and behaviorally." Principal Andrews, the alternative school principal, also plays a crucial role, stating, "support on my side is our counselors, they

meet with the traditional school counselor and share the students' progress while enrolled at the ALPS."

Teachers focused on academic and moral support for students. Ms. Smith explained the process of records and grade reviews when a student is enrolled in the alternative school, when students come in, we review their grades and cipher through the materials they have covered in the traditional school. We develop plans for course completion as well as academic recovery. We try to set them up for success and make them feel like they still have a chance.

Ms. Brown, an African American teacher of 13 years, focused her support on the student's well-being:

I communicated with the parent, understanding his fears and what he was going through, and I was able to motivate and encourage him. When he was absent, I called his parents to check on him. Together, we were able to get him through.

Surprisingly, both the traditional and alternative teachers said an additional resource needed was communication between the two schools, which would help them better support the students. This observation emphasizes the importance of a connected and collaborative educational community.

In addition to the need for better communication between traditional and alternative schools, teachers also recognized the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment that fosters students' sense of belonging and motivation. Ms. Brown mentioned that building trust and establishing a rapport with students beyond academic support was crucial, which helped them open up about their challenges and feel more connected to the school community.

By addressing students' academic and emotional needs, teachers created a more holistic support system that encouraged students to stay engaged with their education and work towards their goals. This comprehensive approach helped students academically and contributed to their overall personal growth and resilience, highlighting teachers' critical role in guiding students through difficult transitions.

Counselor support is centered around community support and communicating with counselors and parents in the traditional education setting. Mr. Longhorn says, "As counselors, we worked with the traditional school counselors to make sure the students' classes were correct and informed them if there were any problems the students were experiencing; that was a part of the transition meeting." Ms. Johnson noted, "We check on the student's grades, reach out to the parents to see if anything changed in the home environment or if there were any issues or concerns we needed to be aware of."

In addition to coordinating with traditional school counselors and maintaining communication with parents, the counselors at ALPS also emphasized the importance of ongoing support for students even after they returned to their base schools. Longhorn mentioned that follow-up meetings were arranged to monitor the student's progress and address emerging issues. These meetings were crucial in ensuring that the transition was not just a one-time event but a continuous process of adjustment and support. By maintaining this connection, counselors could intervene early if a student started to struggle, providing timely assistance and helping to prevent potential setbacks in the student's reintegration into the traditional school environment. This approach reflects a holistic view of student support, recognizing that successful reintegration requires attention to academic placement and the emotional and social aspects of the student's lives.

The students' perception of support systems is a crucial aspect. They focused on people who helped them overcome difficult situations or academic struggles, including school faculty, family members, and peers. They also identified activities that helped them understand their behavioral challenges or provided them with guidance for the future. Activities they identified that supported them were social skill lessons, restorative practices, and career development sessions. Most of the support students referenced was the support they received at the ALPS.

Fredia said,

I will go there on Fridays, and they helped us get our work out. The teachers really are trying to help you; they'll be like, do you need help? They help me with my assignments.

They also talk with me about my anxiety attacks.

Calvin said, "The teachers care about your learning and success and what you do after high school. There were multiple times my teacher gave me different career options and how to go about obtaining those career options."

The variability in student experiences highlights a critical issue in the transition process: the inconsistency in how reintegration plans are communicated and implemented. While the Friday cohort sessions at ALPS were intended to prepare students for their return, the lack of a formal, written transition plan that was clearly communicated to both students and their traditional education setting has led to confusion and gaps in support. However, this lack of communication for students like Calvin resulted in significant administrative hurdles, such as not being recognized in the base school's system upon his return. This delayed his reintegration and likely caused unnecessary stress and frustration, potentially impacting his academic performance and overall well-being.

Summary of Research Question 1

The study examined participants' understanding and implementation of transition plans and reintegration processes for students returning to traditional education settings from Alternative Learning Programs (ALPS). Findings revealed significant disparities in how traditional and alternative school staff perceived and executed these processes.

Traditional school staff often had a limited understanding of specific reintegration procedures, with some educators noting that they were not adequately prepared for returning students from ALPS. For instance, students returning from alternative schools were not flagged in the system, unlike those with 504 plans or IEPs, leading to a lack of preparation and support for these students. Administrators expressed concerns about labeling students as troublemakers, which may contribute to the lack of a formal process for reintegration.

In contrast, staff at the alternative school described a more structured and supportive approach, emphasizing the importance of understanding the whole student, building relationships, and integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into the curriculum. This approach involved detailed coordination between ALPS and traditional school counselors, though communication gaps still existed.

Students' experiences varied widely, highlighting the inconsistency in the communication and implementation of transition plans. Some students, like Fredia and Calvin, faced challenges due to the lack of clear guidance and support upon returning to their traditional schools, while others, like Triana, experienced smoother transitions which can be attributed to the structured re-entry support the school provided for her. The study underscores the need for a more standardized yet flexible approach to transition planning that includes clear communication, written plans, and ongoing support to ensure successful reintegration for all students.

The study also identified the critical role of academic and social support systems in helping students adjust to the traditional school environment. Teachers and counselors emphasized the importance of holistic support that addresses both academic needs and emotional well-being. However, the lack of communication between traditional and alternative schools emerged as a significant barrier to providing consistent and effective support. The study suggests that improved coordination and collaboration between these institutions are essential for fostering a supportive and inclusive environment that facilitates successful reintegration for students returning from ALPS.

Research Sub-Question A

Research Sub-Question A sought to gather perceptions of participating students regarding the transition plans and reintegration processes to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. Before asking interview questions, I defined the terms transition plan and reintegration process to each participant. For the participants to gain an understanding of the sub-question, the researcher asked participants five open-ended interview questions related to transition plans and the reintegration process. The complete list of interview questions can be found in Appendix G.

During the interview data coding and analysis, four themes emerged from participant responses to interview questions. These themes helped me to form an answer to this research query. First, students saw the need for emotional and behavioral support from those around them. Second, academic engagement and performance became prevalent as they related to students' goals toward graduation. Third, multiple students reported social dynamics, their role in the school setting, and how these dynamics influence students' academic and behavioral school performance. Fourth, students identified the need for personal development and student self-

perception. Interaction among staff and peers at the school level can significantly influence student's self-perception and personal growth.

Emotional and Behavior Support

The first theme, emotional and behavior support, produced an overwhelming response from students, indicating that direct interactions with teachers, counselors, and peers greatly impacted how they manage their emotions and behaviors. Freida indicated that “Girls can be messy and cause drama. This causes me stress, and I lose my temper, but I get help from my sister, friends, and counselor. I have a plan to keep my anger under control.” However, negative perceptions of unwillingness or noncaring attributes were also observed. When asked if students felt that people were working for or against them in the traditional education setting, two students felt that people were working against them. Calvin described it as a “gray zone; they're not working against me, but they are not working for me. They care about me, obviously, but after getting their work done, not much matters to them.”

Supportive relationships within these groups can provide students with the strategies and reinforcement needed to handle stress and develop positive behavior patterns for direct interactions with teachers, counselors, and peers. The availability of immediate support systems such as school counselors, teachers, and administrative staff directly impacts students' experience and outcomes. These components can provide critical academic guidance, emotional support, and personal development resources. However, the reaction of other students reveals that some students perceive a lack of genuine support and engagement from educators in the school setting. While there is an acknowledgment that teachers care, students feel that this concern is secondary to the teachers' tasks, leading to a sense of neglect. One student feels that

the support is indifferent, while another believes that since returning from suspension, they are being unfairly targeted and not given the necessary assistance to succeed.

Academic Engagement and Performance

Transitioning from an ALPS to a traditional education setting can be challenging for students, and understanding the critical roles that the classroom setting, teacher interactions, and peer influence play in shaping academic engagement is essential for creating effective transition plans and reintegration processes. Most of the students in this study indicated they were good students in their classwork. They understood the importance of participating in their curricular activities to complete graduation requirements. Fredia says, "Now that I am back, I will focus on my work and ask for help when needed. The teacher helps with assignments and gives good advice." Triana said, "My media teacher checks in on me, and we have many conversations." However, once returning to the traditional education setting, one student noticed that the relationship between them and the teacher differed. Paul said, "Since I have returned from my suspension, they have not been trying to work with me. I get blamed or written up for everything I do."

The theme emphasizes students' difficulties transitioning from an ALPS to a traditional education setting. It highlights students being supported by their teachers by providing extra academic support and advice for appropriately handling situations. It also highlights the importance of the classroom environment, teacher interactions, and peer influence in maintaining academic engagement during this transition. Although many students recognize the need to focus on their work and seek help when necessary, the shift back to a traditional setting can strain relationships with teachers, sometimes leading to feelings of alienation or lack of support.

Social Dynamics

Peer groups and school staff significantly shape the third theme, social dynamics within a school setting. These interactions influence a student's sense of belonging, social skills, and overall school experience. Positive peer interactions and supportive relationships with school staff can foster a welcoming environment that enhances a student's social development and connection to the school community. Conversely, negative interactions or lack of support can lead to feelings of isolation, hinder social skill development, and create a challenging school experience. The student interviews showed that some struggled with developing and maintaining positive peer and teacher relationships. Freida voiced many negative interactions with peers, and they were the cause of her removal from school and lack of motivation to attend school. Freida described these peers as "messy and full of drama; they just want to fight and get me angry." She also identified teachers as "getting into her business and being petty."

Two students chose a very difficult strategy for high school students to maintain: isolation. Owen says, "I just keep to myself and do not talk to many people." While Paul's response also included staff, he said, "I stay away from teachers and students, I do my work, and stay out of trouble. I want to graduate."

The third theme, social dynamics, highlights the significant impact of peer groups and school staff on a student's sense of belonging, social skills, and overall school experience. Positive interactions with peers and supportive relationships with staff contribute to a welcoming and conducive environment for social development. However, negative experiences or lack of support can lead to feelings of isolation, hinder social skill development, and create a challenging school experience. Interviews with students revealed that some struggled to maintain positive relationships with peers and teachers, leading to a lack of motivation and school avoidance.

Some students resorted to isolating themselves as a coping strategy to avoid negative interactions, which can be challenging to sustain in a high school environment.

Personal Development and Self-Perception

Social dynamics is closely related to the final theme, personal development and self-perception, which relates to interactions with teachers, peers, and other school personnel and plays a crucial role in shaping a student's self-concept and identity. Positive interactions within the school environment can reinforce a student's self-esteem, encourage personal growth, and contribute to a strong sense of identity. The question centered around how students identified their progress, and students were very positive. Frieda said, "I made good progress in getting to know more about myself." Regarding behavior, Calvin says, "I feel like I have gotten better control of being in emotional control and remaining calm. It is not easy for me, but I am getting them."

Conversely, negative interactions or lack of support can damage a student's self-perception, leading to lower self-esteem and hindered personal development. Some students felt victimized by teachers. Paul noted, "Some teachers do not like me since I have been back." Triana stated, "I had teachers working against me." From participants' responses, we can see that as students navigate the complexities of their social environment, the quality of their relationships with peers and teachers can either support or undermine their personal growth and self-confidence, making these interactions pivotal in their overall development.

Sub-Question A of the research aimed to collect students' perceptions of what they felt was needed to help them transition. To delve into this subquestion, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants. I posed five distinct questions, each followed by an inquiry about their importance to the concepts discussed in those questions. The complete interview questions

are in Appendix G. These interviews were conducted to gauge the extent to which participants comprehended the transition plans and reintegration process for students to the traditional education setting from the ALPS.

Sub-Research Question B

Sub-Research Question B was designed to determine the perceptions of participating administrators regarding the support needed when transitioning students to the traditional education setting from the ALPS, specifically looking at transition plans and the reintegration process. I asked the participants five open-ended questions, each with a specific purpose to inform the research sub-question related to their perceptions regarding transition plans and reintegration processes. These questions were carefully crafted to focus on the administrator's perceptions of what they think is needed for students to transition back to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. The full list of interview questions can be found in Appendices A and D.

During the interview data coding and analysis, two significant themes emerged. These themes helped to form an answer to this research query. The first theme, communication links and collaboration acknowledged the importance of ensuring effective communication and collaboration between schools, parents, staff, and administrators. The second theme, transition process and procedures, highlighted the importance of establishing clear and coordinated steps for transitioning students.

Communication Links & Collaboration

The first theme, communication links and collaboration acknowledged the importance of ensuring effective communication and collaboration between schools, parents, staff, and administrators. In the traditional education setting, the principal expresses the importance of

communication between the parents, staff, and students. "Parents are key; they are the link to the home and the driving force in our students' lives. They are pivotal, especially when students are experiencing trouble; we work as a team to get them back on track." Communication with staff is strategic; Principal Moore said, "You have to be mindful when communicating about students that return; we do not want to put labels on them; we want them to have a fair chance." With this sentiment, he also said, "with the right communication, students will succeed in school, especially in the classroom with the right opportunity."

As observed by both principals, communication is needed between the alternative school and the traditional education setting. Principal Moore stated, "We need more communication about the students, like the progress they are making or the decisions we make when referring students when they are not successful here when they return." Principal Andrews said, "Communication in the traditional education setting is minimal; We only communicate when we need something, but other than that, we do what we need to do here."

Communication is also essential at the alternative school. Principal Andrews states, "We constantly communicate with our students as we prepare them for their return." She explained that students are not sure of what to expect, so "we walk them through the process, step by step." Principal Andrews says, "We focus on the student so much that I think parents' communication is limited. We keep them informed with what they need to know, but I believe we need to do more."

Transition Process and Procedures

The second theme, transition process and procedures, highlighted the importance of establishing clear and coordinated steps for transitioning students. Even though each principal noted that they did not work together in transition, it was essential to have a systematic way of

transitioning the student. Principals saw their role as facilitators over the transition process, ensuring that those working with the students knew what their role was to ensure that students knew what was expected of them upon their return. Principal Moore identified himself as one of the team members who works with students as they return to the traditional education setting. He says, "The counselor, grad coach, and administrator work with students having difficulties academically or behaviorally to determine what kind of support they need." He described the support as "checking in on the student or providing a quiet space to work in, away from distractions." At times, they try to replicate the support they were given when enrolled in the alternative setting by placing them in one of the intensive programs at their school, referred to as the ALC model. However, Principal Moore says, "The kids will not stay in this classroom all day while their friends are freely walking around."

Both principals acknowledge that when a student is enrolled in their school, there is no communication between them until the transition. Principal Andrews says, "When it is time for the student to return, we meet with the traditional schools to review each student's progress." Principal Moore said, "Once the child is transferred to the alternative school, we lose access to their records; we do not receive any information until the student returns." The only exception noted by both principals was graduation. Principal Moore said, "I do get updates during graduation time about which students are graduating so we can plan to attend." Principal Andrews said, "Our counselors reach out to each traditional counselor and inform them of those students that have met the graduation requirements."

The section emphasizes the importance of having clear and coordinated procedures for transitioning students between schools. Even though principals did not collaborate directly during the transition process, they recognized the need for a systematic approach. Principals

viewed themselves as facilitators, ensuring that staff working with returning students understood their roles and expectations. Support for students, such as providing a quiet workspace or replicating support from alternative settings, was crucial. However, communication between schools during a student's time in an alternative setting could have been improved, except for updates around graduation.

Sub-Research Question C

Sub-Research Question C was designed to determine the perceptions of participating teachers regarding the support needed when transitioning students to the traditional education setting from ALPS through transition plans and the reintegration process. I asked the participants six open-ended questions, each with a specific purpose to inform the research sub-question related to their perceptions regarding transition plans and reintegration processes. These questions were carefully crafted to focus on the teacher's perceptions of what they thought was needed for students to transition back to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. The complete list of interview questions is located in Appendices C and F.

During the interview data coding and analysis, two themes emerged from participant responses to interview questions. These themes helped me form an answer to this research query. The first theme was academic engagement and performance. The classroom setting and interaction with teachers play crucial roles in shaping students' academic engagement. The second theme was teacher-student relationships. Interaction between the teacher and the student is commensurate with student outcomes.

Academic Engagement and Performance

The first theme was academic engagement and performance, emphasizing the classroom setting, teacher interaction, and the overall learning environment and how it plays a crucial role

in shaping students' academic engagement. Ms. Smith at the alternative school places a great emphasis on student's grades and the importance of providing opportunities for credit recovery, "we review the student's academic history upon entry, we provide opportunities for students to complete their required course work and participate in credit recovery." This gives the students a reason to "work to the best of their ability while also knowing that their teacher is there to assist when needed." When students struggle academically, they tend not to be engaged as they should; however, Ms. Smith noted, "We try to set them up for success by focusing on earning the credits that they need towards graduation promotion." Ms. Brown, in the traditional education setting, indicated that "it is important that students know that they are expected to complete their assignments and that I am there to ensure that they understand these assignments and will support them in any way I possibly can." She has observed that some returning students struggle with this expectation but says, "I monitor these students closely through regular check-ins during the class period."

Teacher-Student Relationships

The second theme was teacher-student relationships, highlighting that the quality of interactions between teachers and students significantly impacts student outcomes. Ms. Brown said, "I make sure that students feel welcome in my classroom and that I expect them to succeed as much as any other student." She explained that the classroom teacher's role is to "make an effort to understand where the student is coming from, and give them a fresh start, not prejudging them."

Ms. Smith also indicated the importance of building relationships with her students. She noted that students need "some type of relationship with someone in the school, and the teacher should be one of those people."

Sub-Research Question C explored teachers' perceptions of the support needed for students transitioning from ALPS to traditional education settings. Through interviews with six open-ended questions, two key themes emerged. The first theme, academic engagement and performance, highlighted the critical role of the classroom environment, teacher interaction, and opportunities for credit recovery in shaping students' academic success. Teachers emphasized the importance of setting clear expectations and closely monitoring students to support their academic progress. The second theme, teacher-student relationships, underscored the significant impact of positive, supportive interactions between teachers and students on student outcomes. Teachers stressed the importance of building solid relationships with students, giving them a fresh start, and ensuring they feel welcomed and understood in the classroom.

Sub-Research Question D

Sub-Research Question D was designed to determine the perceptions of participating counselors regarding the support needed when transitioning students to the traditional education setting from the ALPS, specifically through transition plans and the reintegration process. I asked the participants six open-ended questions, each with a specific purpose related to uncovering their perceptions regarding transition plans and reintegration processes. These questions were carefully crafted to focus on the counselor's perceptions of what they thought was needed for students to transition back to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. The complete list of interview questions can be found in Appendices B and E.

During the interview data coding and analysis, three themes emerged from the participant's responses to interview questions. These themes provided crucial insights that helped the researcher form an answer to the research query. The first theme was direct communication and information sharing with all major stakeholders, highlighting the importance of clear and

consistent dialogue among students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The second theme focused on the counselor's role in transition planning, emphasizing the counselor's role in guiding students through the reintegration process and ensuring they have the necessary support. Finally, the third evolving theme was seeking and providing support for students. This underscored the need for a robust support system that addresses academic and emotional needs, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting successful reintegration into the traditional school environment. These themes collectively offered a comprehensive understanding of the factors critical to supporting students during their transition.

Direct Communication and Information Sharing

The first theme, direct communication and information sharing, emerged as a crucial element in each school's operations. Counselors emphasized the importance of direct communication and information sharing with students, parents, teachers, and administrators. It was intriguing to learn that while counselors did not directly communicate with each other in the student's transition planning and reintegration process, they acknowledged the critical role of direct communication and information sharing in the students' journey.

Ms. Johnson described direct communication and information sharing with the students as "meeting with the student to create a schedule and to check in with them during their first week back." Ms. Johnson scheduled individual conferences to "review the student's graduation plan and make sure they were doing well individually and mentally; to see how they are dealing with the process." These interactions with the students provided the student with a plan of support academically and behaviorally upon their return to the traditional education setting,

Mr. Longhorn, the alternative school counselor, shared how students attend orientations when assigned to the alternative school: "The purpose of the orientations is to meet with the students and their parents, begin building positive relationships, and gather any needed information." Once the student enrolls, Mr. Longhorn shared that "we hold weekly small groups to work on restorative practices." Such practices as orientations and small groups allowed the counselor to participate in direct communication and information-sharing processes within his setting.

From these responses, it was evident that the processes in place consisted of direct communication and information sharing within each counselor's schools, which was important for the student but not as a part of a formal process between the two schools. Mr. Longhorn noted, "There is almost no interaction with the traditional school counselor at the beginning, but when they transition back, we incorporate check-ins for the students and will meet with the counselor if they would like to." Ms. Johnson indicated that since she has been in her position, she has not contacted the ALPS counselor.

The first themes, direct communication and information sharing, emerged as vital aspects of each school's operations, particularly in supporting students through transition planning and reintegration. While counselors at the traditional and alternative schools did not directly communicate with each other, they recognized the importance of maintaining strong communication channels within their respective schools.

Counselor's Role in Transition Planning

Counselors play a critical role in the transition process and are identified as the key players. When developing transition plans and supporting students in reintegration, counselors are not in direct contact with each other. During these interviews, counselors shared their role in

the transition planning and reintegration process. Ms. Johnson identified her role in the transition process as "providing as much support as needed to the student, focusing not only on academic and graduation requirements but also on the student's side, to make sure they are doing well individually and mentally." When asked what transition plans, accommodations, or intervention strategies are in place for students who return to the traditional education setting, Ms. Johnson's response was,

I meet with my Intervention teacher, who already has a relationship with the student, and talk about the student and keep them on our watch list to make sure they are doing well in their classes, with their grades, and to make sure the student is attending school.

Mr. Longhorn, the alternative school counselor, indicated that he creates student transition plans. Before students return to the traditional education setting, "I work very diligently with social, emotional learning skills, truancy, and goal setting. We discuss what they want to avoid in the future and why it is important." Mr. Longhorn indicated that he does not write a transition plan for the students; it is more of a conversation. The technical aspects of transferring grades and creating their schedule are done electronically.

From this query, we learned that counselors are essential in students' transition and reintegration process, though they typically do not communicate directly with each other. Their roles involve supporting students academically, mentally, and emotionally as they return to traditional educational settings.

Seeking and Providing Support

With this line of questioning, counselors expressed the importance of seeking and supporting students as a crucial factor in the transition process. The responses from the counselors identified collaboration with support systems for students as vital, emphasizing that

working with teachers, intervention specialists, and other stakeholders is essential to ensure a smooth and successful reintegration of students into the traditional educational setting. This collaboration helps to monitor the student's academic progress, emotional well-being, and overall adjustment, making the transition more effective and supportive.

Ms. Johnson identified the Alpha Team at her school as the primary source of support and the parent for student reintegration. She stated, “We (referring to the Alpha Team) meet and discuss the student and identify the support they would need. This team monitors the students to see if they are failing or have attendance issues.” She also identified a family outreach coordinator who assists families that do not speak English and an intervention team that provides academic support. Meeting with students one-on-one is also a part of Ms. Johnson's support.

At the alternative school, Mr. Longhorn noted that when students return to the traditional education setting, they offer to meet with the student and the counselor to conduct a back-to-school meeting. However, this meeting is optional, and most students choose to skip these meetings. This meeting is a part of the restorative practices they learn about while attending the ALPS. Mr. Longhorn said, “We hope the students will either write a letter or have a restorative practice conference or circle. Writing a letter or attending a conference helps transition; the student is admitting or taking responsibility for their actions.”

Sub-research question D explored counselors' perceptions regarding the support needed for students transitioning from the ALPS to traditional educational settings. Through interviews with six open-ended questions, the research identified three key themes: the importance of direct communication and information sharing, the counselor's role in transition planning, and the necessity of seeking and providing support systems for students in the transition process.

Chapter Summary

The research examined the perceptions of counselors, teachers, administrators, and students regarding the transition process from ALPS back to the traditional education setting. The study identified critical themes through interviews, highlighting the importance of direct communication, the roles of educators, and support systems in facilitating successful reintegration. For counselors, the focus was on maintaining clear and consistent communication with all stakeholders, guiding students through personalized transition plans, and ensuring support systems addressing academic and emotional needs. Administrators emphasized effective communication and collaboration between schools, parents, and staff, while teachers highlighted the crucial impact of academic engagement and positive teacher-student relationships on student outcomes. Students' experiences varied, with some recognizing the support provided, particularly regarding emotional and behavioral guidance, while others noted challenges in social dynamics and perceived support. The study underscores the importance of coordinated efforts and individualized support in ensuring a smooth and successful transition for students returning to traditional school environments from ALPS.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings of this study and provide valuable recommendations for future application of the results. The opening section revisits and summarizes the study's purpose (Creswell, 2014). A summary of findings was provided and organized according to the research question and sub-research questions. This was followed by a discussion of the findings in which research results relevant to the research question and sub questions are re elaborated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theoretical framework that underpinned the study were then carefully reviewed and assessed for their applicability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Delimitations and limitations of the research were acknowledged. Subsequent sections offered recommendations for policy, practice, and future research from the study's outcomes (Patton, 2002). Finally, the chapter culminates with a summary, effectively concluding this dissertation.

Study Purpose

The study aimed to investigate the perspective of administrators, teachers, counselors, and students regarding their understanding of transition plans and reintegration processes to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. It was conducted in a diverse suburban school system in the southeastern United States; five students and six educators engaged as participants. The research followed Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-step thematic analysis procedure to analyze interview transcripts. Participants were asked to reflect on how the transition plans and reintegration processes impacted a student's educational trajectory based on their experiences.

Summary of Findings

The exploratory nature of this research enabled a thorough exploration of both the overarching research question concerning students' and educators' viewpoints on transition plans

and reintegration processes for students to the traditional education setting from the ALPS and the subsidiary research questions that provided context. Within the framework of this research, qualitative investigation provided participants with a platform to convey their significant experiences using their own words (Siedman, 2013). The study allowed participants to articulate their viewpoints, beliefs, and insights during interview sessions. Current school administrators, counselors, and teachers participated in the study. Students who have attended the traditional education setting and ALPS offered their valuable insights, beliefs, and perspectives in response to open-ended interview questions, each of which was tied to a specific sub-question within the research.

The research question was: *What are the administrators, counselors, teachers, and students' perceptions of the transition plans and the reintegration processes back into the traditional education setting from the ALPS?* To delve deeper into this research, I developed four sub-questions, each tailored to explore the central question within a more specific context:

- a. What do students feel is required to help them transition?
- b. What do administrators feel is required to help students transition?
- c. What do counselors feel is required to help students transition?
- d. What do teachers feel is required to help students transition?

Following each interview, I transcribed the session utilizing a transcription tool incorporated in the Zoom suite hosted by North Carolina State University. Subsequently, I reviewed and rectified transcription errors emerging from the automated transcript generation (O'Malley & Pina, 2018). This was followed by crafting an initial interpretation of the data gleaned from each participant. In the subsequent stages, a thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data in line with the methodological framework of Braun and Clarke (2012). This

analytical process encompassed the steps of acquainting myself with the data, coding, preliminary theme formulation, refining themes, finalizing themes, and generating the ultimate report (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Many themes emerged. The following paragraphs are categorized based on the research question and specific research sub-questions they helped inform.

The Research Question explored the perceptions of participating school administrators, counselors, teachers, and students regarding the transition plans and reintegration processes for students returning to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. The responses to interview questions yielded several interesting themes and findings (Yin, 2014).

Research Sub-Question A

Research Sub-Question A aimed to collect participating students' perceptions regarding the transition plans and reintegration processes to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. I conducted semi-structured interviews with student participants to delve into this sub-question. I posed five distinct questions, each followed by an inquiry about what students felt was required to transition to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. The complete set of interview questions is in Appendix G. These interviews were conducted to gauge how student participants comprehended the transition plans and reintegration process developed for their return (Creswell, 2014).

Research Sub-Question A aimed to gather students' perceptions of the transition and reintegration process to a traditional education setting from the ALPS. I explored students' experiences and identified four key themes: the need for emotional and behavioral support, the challenges of maintaining academic engagement and performance, the impact of social dynamics on school experience, and the role of personal development and self-perception (Seidman, 2013). These themes highlighted the importance of supportive relationships with teachers, counselors,

and peers in managing the transition while revealing areas where students felt neglected or unsupported, which could ultimately affect their academic and social reintegration (Patton, 2002).

Research Sub-Question B

Research Sub-Question B sought to understand what administrators felt support was required when transitioning students to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the administrators to delve into this sub-question. I posed five distinct questions, each followed by an inquiry about what administrators felt was needed to help students successfully transition to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. The complete set of interview questions is in Appendices A and D. These interviews were conducted to gauge how administrators comprehended the transition plans and reintegration process developed for students' return (Yin, 2014).

This section underscores the need for clear and coordinated procedures in transitioning students between schools. Although principals did not directly collaborate during the transition process, they acknowledged the necessity of a systematic approach. Principals saw their role as facilitators, ensuring staff working with returning students understood their roles and expectations. Providing support, such as a quiet workspace or replicating assistance from alternative settings, was essential. However, school communication was lacking during a student's time in an alternative setting, except for graduation-related updates (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Research Sub-Question C

Research Sub-Question C sought to understand what teachers felt support was required when transitioning students to the traditional education setting from the ALPS, specifically

through transition plans and the reintegration process. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the administrators to delve into this sub-question. I posed six distinct questions, each followed by an inquiry about what teachers felt was needed to help students successfully transition to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. The complete set of interview questions is in Appendices C and F. These interviews were conducted to gauge how teachers understood the transition plans and reintegration process developed for students' transition (Creswell, 2014).

Sub-Research Question C sought to understand teachers' perceptions of the support necessary for students transitioning to traditional educational settings from ALPS. Interviews with six open-ended questions revealed two central themes. The first theme, academic engagement and performance, emphasized the importance of the classroom environment, teacher-student interactions, and opportunities for credit recovery in fostering students' academic success (Seidman, 2013). Teachers highlighted the need for clear expectations and vigilant monitoring to aid students' academic progress. The second theme, teacher-student relationships, highlighted the crucial role of positive, supportive interactions in influencing student outcomes (Patton, 2002). Teachers stressed the importance of establishing solid relationships with students, offering them a fresh start, and ensuring they feel welcomed and understood in the classroom.

Research Sub-Question D

The final research question, Sub-Research Question D, was designed to evaluate the perceptions of participating counselors regarding the necessary support for students transitioning from ALPS to a traditional education setting, focusing on transition plans and the reintegration process. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the administrators to delve into this sub-question. I posed six questions, each followed by an inquiry about what counselors felt was

needed to help students successfully transition to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. The complete set of interview questions is in Appendices B and E. These interviews assessed how counselors understood the transition plans and reintegration process developed for students' transition (Yin, 2014).

Sub-research question D examined counselors' perceptions of the support required for students transitioning from the ALPS to traditional educational settings. Interviews with six open-ended questions revealed three key themes: the critical role of direct communication and information sharing, the counselor's involvement in transition planning, and the importance of establishing and providing support systems for students during the transition process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Discussion of Findings

The study's research questions were informed by participants' responses to interview questions using thematic analysis. The following discussion of research findings is broken down by the research question and the four research sub-questions. The findings are reviewed in each instance to ascertain their alignment with existing research. Similarities and differences are discussed, and novel findings are addressed. Finally, I offer broader perspectives on the findings that arise from my analysis of the pertinent body of knowledge and my application of the theoretical framework (Creswell, 2014).

Research Question

The research question focused on understanding participants' perceptions of transition plans and the reintegration process for students transitioning from ALPS to the traditional education setting. Three key themes emerged from the findings: participants' understanding of

transition plans, the challenges of academic and social integration, and the critical role of support systems in the reintegration process (Kennedy et al., 2019).

The legislation discussed, particularly General Statute 115C-12 and General Statute 115C-47, provides a framework for transferring students between traditional schools and Alternative Learning Programs and Schools (ALPS). These statutes emphasize flexibility, allowing local education agencies (LEAs) and schools to develop transfer processes as they deemed appropriate. However, the findings of this study suggest that this flexibility, while well-intentioned, may contribute to some of the challenges observed in the reintegration process (Risler & O'Rourke, 2009).

Despite these alignments, this study identified some key differences from previous research. One significant difference was the need for formal, written transition plans that were communicated to students and traditional school staff. While existing literature often emphasizes the need for structured reintegration plans (Risler & O'Rourke, 2009), this study found that such plans needed to be more consistently implemented, with some students reporting little to no guidance upon their return to traditional schools. For example, students like Calvin and Fredia experienced administrative challenges, such as not being recognized in the school system upon their return or being handed a schedule without further support (Cole & Cohen, 2013). These experiences suggest that the practical application of transition plans could be improved, contrasting with the more idealized processes often discussed in the literature.

The findings of this study reinforce the importance of academic and social integration, as highlighted by prior research. Kennedy (2019) and others have noted that students returning from alternative schools often face significant challenges in readjusting to traditional schools' academic demands and social dynamics. This study similarly found that academic support, such

as credit recovery opportunities and individualized academic assistance, plays a critical role in helping students catch up and stay on track for graduation (ASCA, 2017). Additionally, the importance of social integration was underscored, with students reporting that feeling a sense of belonging and receiving emotional support from staff and peers were vital to their successful reintegration (Cole & Cohen, 2013).

Legislation that allows for adaptability in transfer processes can be beneficial in tailoring academic and social support to individual student needs. However, the findings indicate that this flexibility has sometimes translated into inconsistencies of support systems at schools. . For instance, while the ALPS implemented practices like the Friday Cohort sessions to help students with social and emotional learning, the lack of a formalized, mandatory structure across all schools means that students may experience varying levels of support depending on the specific practices of their school. This variability can lead to disparities in how well students can reintegrate academically and socially into traditional schools (Kennedy et al., 2019).

The study also highlighted the effectiveness of restorative practices, such as those implemented during the Friday Cohort sessions at ALPS. These practices helped students address past behavioral issues and build better social skills, aligning with existing research on restorative justice practices in schools (Gonzalez, 2018).

Another difference was the observed gap in communication between traditional and alternative schools. While prior studies have called for seamless collaboration between institutions to support student reintegration, this study found that communication between counselors at ALPS and traditional schools was often minimal or nonexistent. For instance, the alternative school counselor, Mr. Longhorn, noted that there needed to be more interaction with traditional school counselors at the start of the transition process, highlighting a significant gap

in collaborative efforts that could better support students during their reintegration (Risler & O'Rourke, 2009).

This study also highlighted some novel findings concerning the variability in student experiences during reintegration. While some students, like Triana, reported a relatively smooth transition, others faced significant challenges, such as administrative delays and a lack of support, which exacerbated their difficulties adjusting to the traditional school environment. This inconsistency in experiences suggests that the effectiveness of reintegration processes may vary widely depending on the specific practices and resources available at different schools. Moreover, the study uncovered that while restorative practices were beneficial for some students, these interventions were often optional, leading to inconsistent participation and varying levels of success in social integration (Gonzalez, 2018).

The similarities between this study's findings and previous research likely stem from a shared recognition of the fundamental challenges associated with reintegrating students from alternative education settings into traditional schools. The need for academic and emotional support and clear communication are universally acknowledged as critical components of successful reintegration. However, the differences observed in this study, particularly the lack of formal transition plans and communication gaps, may be explained by practical challenges within schools. For example, resource limitations, varying levels of staff training, and differing school priorities can lead to inconsistencies in how transition plans are developed and implemented (Kennedy et al., 2019). The novel findings regarding the variability in student experiences suggest that while the theoretical framework for effective reintegration is well-established, its practical execution may be uneven, depending on the specific context and resources of the schools involved.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of a more standardized and coordinated approach to reintegration, emphasizing the need for clear, written transition plans, consistent communication between alternative and traditional schools, and the implementation of mandatory support practices. These steps could help ensure that all students, regardless of their specific circumstances, receive the guidance and support they need to reintegrate into the traditional education setting.

Sub-Research Question D

The research conducted for Sub-Research Question D aimed to explore school counselors' perceptions regarding the support required to transition students from Alternative Learning Programs (ALPS) back to traditional education settings. The study identified three key themes: direct communication and information sharing, the counselor's role in transition planning, and seeking and providing student support systems. These findings align with and expand upon existing literature, offering confirmation and new insights into reintegration.

Direct Communication and Information Sharing:

The first theme highlighted the importance of clear and consistent communication among all stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and administrators. This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the need for transparent communication to facilitate smooth transitions (Risler & O'Rourke, 2009). However, the study revealed a gap in communication between counselors at alternative and traditional schools, suggesting that while internal communication within each school is prioritized, cross-institutional collaboration needs to be improved (Gonzalez, 2018). This difference from existing literature points to a potential area for improvement, where direct communication between counselors at both schools could enhance the transition process.

Counselor's Role in Transition Planning:

The second theme underscored the critical role of counselors in guiding students through the reintegration process. This aligns with the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) stance on the proactive and collaborative role counselors should play in student development (ASCA, 2017). The study reaffirmed the importance of counselors providing academic, mental, and emotional support, consistent with existing research (Cole & Cohen, 2013). However, a novel finding emerged regarding the need for more direct collaboration between counselors at different schools. While counselors are essential in supporting students, the absence of coordinated efforts between ALPS and traditional school counselors suggests that a more integrated approach could better address students' needs during the transition.

Seeking and Providing Support:

The final theme focused on the necessity of support systems for students during their reintegration. The findings align with existing literature emphasizing the importance of comprehensive support networks involving teachers, intervention specialists, and other stakeholders (Cole & Cohen, 2013). A notable similarity was the emphasis on restorative practices and one-on-one interactions, which are effective in previous studies (Gonzalez, 2018). However, the study also identified that while support mechanisms are in place, their implementation is sometimes optional, leading to inconsistent student participation. This difference suggests that making these support processes mandatory could improve their effectiveness and ensure that all students receive the necessary assistance.

In conclusion, the study's findings underscore the importance of direct communication, the proactive role of counselors, and the need for comprehensive support systems in the reintegration process. The alignment with previous research highlights the ongoing relevance of

these factors. At the same time, differences and novel insights, such as the lack of cross-institutional communication and optional participation in support activities, suggest areas where existing practices could be enhanced to support better students transitioning from ALPS to traditional schools.

Reflections on Theoretical Framework

This research study was grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST), which provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted and dynamic processes involved in reintegrating students from ALPS into traditional education settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model emphasizes the complex interplay between individual characteristics and various environmental contexts that influence human development, making it particularly relevant for examining the reintegration process in an educational context.

The Role of Bronfenbrenner's Theory in the Study

Bronfenbrenner's EST posits that an individual's development is shaped by the interactions between different environmental systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). For the focus of this study, I used the first three levels of Bronfenbrenner's theory: microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem. In the context of this study, the theory was instrumental in framing the research questions, guiding the development of the interview protocols, and organizing the data analysis into critical themes related to transition plans, academic and social integration, and support systems. At this level, the microsystem focuses on the immediate environments of the students, such as interactions with teachers, peers, and family members. The study examined how these direct interactions influenced students' sense of school belonging, academic engagement, and behavioral adjustment

upon their return to traditional schools. At this level, the mesosystem level explored the interrelationships between different microsystems, such as the connection between ALPS and traditional schools. The study investigated how these systems' communication and collaboration (or lack thereof) affected reintegration. Finally, although students do not directly interact with the exosystem, the exosystem includes external environments that indirectly influence their experiences, such as district policies and administrative decisions. The study considered how policies related to transition planning and restorative practices impacted student outcomes (Huang et al., 2021).

Application of the Framework

Bronfenbrenner's theory was essential in formulating research questions that addressed the multiple layers of influence on the reintegration process. The questions were designed to explore not only the direct experiences of students within their immediate environments (microsystem) but also the interactions between different settings (mesosystem) and the broader contextual factors (exosystem) that influence these experiences.

The interview protocols were developed with Bronfenbrenner's framework, ensuring that questions addressed the various systems at play. For instance, questions about teacher-student relationships and peer dynamics were rooted in the microsystem, while inquiries about communication between ALPS and traditional schools targeted the mesosystem. Additionally, the study's focus on policies and practices reflected examining the exosystem influences on the reintegration process (Lee & DeAngelis, 2020).

Critique and Recommendations

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was a theoretical framework for this study, offering a lens to examine the complexities of student reintegration. The theory's emphasis on the

interconnectedness of different environmental systems was particularly useful in highlighting the multiple factors contributing to the reintegration process's success or failure.

However, the study's findings suggest that future research could benefit from a more nuanced application of the mesosystem, particularly in exploring how specific interactions between ALPS and traditional schools (e.g., joint transition planning shared support resources) could be enhanced to better support students (O'Conner & McCart, 2018).

Conclusion

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provided a valuable framework for understanding the complex and multi-layered process of reintegrating students from ALPS into traditional schools. The theory's focus on the interaction between different environmental systems allowed for a comprehensive examination of the factors influencing student outcomes. While the theory guided this research well, future studies might explore specific system interactions and the timing of life events in greater depth, potentially refining the application of EST in educational research (Miller et al., 2019). The findings from this study contribute to the ongoing refinement of Bronfenbrenner's theory, particularly in its application to understanding students' educational experiences in alternative learning environments.

Limitations

I identified three limitations of the current study, which focused on transition plans and the reintegration process to the traditional education setting from the ALPS. First, the current study was limited to one public school district in one state in the southeastern region of the United States. Only one high school of 31 within the district participated in this study. A more significant representation from the high schools would have added a better understanding

of how the reintegration processes are performed at more schools to identify commonalities and differences in alignment with legislative requirements.

The second limitation was that the student participants represented only five of the 31 high schools within the school district, of which only one of these students was from the high school that participated in the study. The only input the researcher obtained about transition plans and reintegration processes was through the student's perception and not from the staff members of those high schools that had student participants. Having the student and their high school participate together will provide a more comprehensive understanding of reintegration.

The final limitation is the researcher's role as an alternative school principal in the district of study. The researcher is currently employed by the school district and a colleague of the participants in the current study. As a result, the researcher acknowledges the potential for bias to influence the study's results. Future researchers may consider choosing a district or districts of study in which the researcher is not currently employed.

Delimitations

For this study, I identified several vital delimitations. First, the sample size was restricted to one ALPS and its primary feeder school within the same district. This feeder school was one of 31 in the district. Another delimitation was the limited number of student participants in this study, a student sample of five participants from this district. While acknowledging that other individuals play essential roles in supporting students, the researcher has focused solely on administrators, counselors, teachers, and students, as their perspectives are the most relevant to the research questions. This study was conducted in a single school district in the southern region of the United States, and the research was limited to one school semester. Finally, the focus on reviewing only North Carolina legislation related to student transition plans and reintegration processes from ALPS (Alternative Learning Programs and Schools) to traditional education

settings for this study. This geographic and legal scope limits the generalizability of the findings to North Carolina, excluding federal or other state-level policies and practices that may also impact such transitions.

Implications of the Study for Policy and Practice

Implication for Policy

Students of color are removed from the traditional education setting at an alarming rate due to exclusionary discipline practices (Skiba et al., 2014). Some students who are removed are reassigned to ALPS for a set amount of time determined by an appointed discipline review committee. Upon returning to the traditional education setting, legislation stipulates that ALPS develop a transition plan but falls short of identifying specific guidelines. This research identifies three implications for policy to support students' transitions.

This research revealed significant variability in how transition plans were communicated and implemented across schools. This suggests a need for policy reform that mandates the development of formal, written transition plans for students moving from ALPS to traditional schools (Cooper, 2015). These plans should be standardized across districts to ensure consistency yet flexible enough to accommodate individual student needs. By creating a policy that requires written transition plans, schools can provide more straightforward guidance and support for students, reducing administrative challenges and ensuring a smoother reintegration process.

Another study finding highlights a communication gap between ALPS and traditional schools. Each staff member, regardless of their role, indicated that there was a lack of communication. Policy initiatives should establish communication protocols that facilitate collaboration between the two settings (Welsh & Little, 2018). These protocols could include

regular meetings between counselors, shared access to student records, and coordinated planning sessions to address academic and behavioral needs. This would ensure that all involved parties are informed and prepared to support students during their transition, ultimately improving student outcomes and hopefully reducing student suspensions.

Finally, the variability in support systems, such as the optional nature of restorative practices, indicates a need for policies that make certain support activities mandatory (Fabelo et al., 2011). This could involve integrating restorative practices into the regular curriculum or requiring schools to provide social-emotional learning (SEL) sessions, such as those seen in the Friday Cohort model. By making these practices mandatory, schools can ensure that all students receive the necessary support, leading to more consistent and effective reintegration experiences.

Implication for Practice

I identified five implications for practice development and implementation of formal transition plans, strengthening communication channels, professional development for educators on bias and stigmatization, personalized academic and behavior support, and professional development for restorative practices.

First, schools should prioritize the creation of detailed, written transition plans for each student returning from ALPS. These plans should include specific steps for academic support, social integration, and ongoing monitoring (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013). Educators should be trained on how to develop and implement these plans, ensuring they are tailored to meet the individual needs of each student. This approach will help mitigate students' challenges, such as being unrecognized in school systems or receiving insufficient guidance upon their return.

Second, schools need to establish stronger communication channels between ALPS and traditional school counselors, teachers, and administrators. Regular meetings, shared databases, and joint transition teams can enhance the flow of information and ensure that all relevant parties are aware of the student's needs and progress (Mittleman, 2018b). This coordinated effort will help create a more supportive environment for students, making their transition smoother and more effective.

Third, to combat the stigmatization identified in the study, educators should receive training on supporting students returning from ALPS without bias or preconceived notions. This training should focus on fostering an inclusive classroom environment where all students feel valued and supported (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). Educators should be encouraged to view returning students as individuals with potential rather than as "troublemakers," which will help reduce the negative impacts of stigmatization on student reintegration.

Finally, given the diverse needs of students returning from ALPS, schools should implement personalized academic and behavioral support strategies. This could include individualized tutoring, mentoring programs, and access to credit recovery opportunities. By providing targeted support based on each student's unique circumstances, schools can better help students catch up academically and adjust socially, leading to more successful reintegration outcomes.

This study's findings suggest that while successful reintegration principles are well understood, policy and practice reforms are needed to ensure these principles are effectively implemented. Standardizing transition plans, enhancing communication, expanding mandatory support systems, and addressing stigmatization through educator training and professional development on restorative practices are critical steps toward improving the reintegration process

for students transitioning from ALPS to traditional education settings. These reforms will help create a more equitable and supportive educational environment, ultimately leading to better student outcomes.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings from this study, I recommend the following recommendations for future research. Future research studies should be conducted to explore the impact of standardized, written transition plans on the reintegration outcomes of students returning from ALPS. Specifically, studies could examine how these plans influence academic performance, social integration, and student well-being. Second, further research should be conducted to examine the role of communication in student reintegration. Given the identified gaps in communication between ALPS and traditional schools from this research study, future research should investigate the specific types of communication that most effectively support student transitions. Third, future research should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of credit recovery programs. Given the emphasis on credit recovery as a critical component of successful reintegration, future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of these programs in helping students meet graduation requirements. Research could explore the various models of credit recovery, comparing their impact on different student populations, particularly those transitioning from ALPS. Finally, the legislation's focus on flexibility could be re-examined to encourage more standardized practices that ensure all students receive consistent support during their transition from ALPS to traditional schools. By maintaining flexibility but incorporating more specific guidelines or minimum standards for communication, transition planning, and support systems, the legislation could help address some of the challenges identified in this study. This practice would not only improve the consistency of the reintegration process but also

ensure that all students, regardless of their circumstances or the school they attend, have access to the resources and support necessary for successful reintegration.

For future study, it would be important to explore the role the district plays in developing and implementing transition plans, as well as facilitating the reintegration process for students returning to traditional educational settings. This includes examining the district's policies, resources, and coordination with schools to ensure a seamless transition, particularly for students who have been in alternative or special programs. Understanding the district's involvement could provide insights into how well these plans are aligned with individual student needs and how effectively they prepare students for success in their new environments. Finally, for future research, it would be valuable to explore the disconnect between the preparation of traditional school staff for students returning from alternative school settings and the concerns raised by school leadership about labeling and stigmatizing these students. Specifically, the study could investigate how the lack of specific notification and preparation for teachers affects the reintegration process and student outcomes. Additionally, research could examine the balance between protecting students from labels and ensuring educators are equipped to support their unique needs. This could lead to a deeper understanding of how schools can develop processes that both support students' transitions and avoid reinforcing negative perceptions.

Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative case study investigated the transition plans developed by ALPS and the reintegration process of students transitioning from ALPS to the traditional education setting from the perspectives of administrators, counselors, teachers, and students. Research has shown that students attending ALPS as a result of exclusionary discipline practices are more likely to experience higher dropout rates, lower academic achievement, recidivism,

difficulties in becoming productive members of society (Cooper, 2015; Skiba et al., 2014; Spencer, 2016; Welsh & Little, 2018a), and are identified as juvenile delinquents (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; Balfanz et al., 2015; Fabelo et al., 2011; Mittleman, 2018). These adverse outcomes highlight the critical need for targeted interventions and support systems to ensure a successful transition back to traditional education settings. This study is particularly significant because it will provide valuable insights into the specific support students need during this transition, as seen through the participants' perspectives. By focusing on developing more effective transition plans and reintegration processes, the study aimed to address these adverse effects. The proposed strategies include written transition plans, communication between the traditional education setting and the ALPS, and student support systems during this process, which could reduce dropout rates, improve academic achievement, and foster positive behavioral outcomes. Ultimately, these findings could contribute to more informed policies and practices that ensure students returning from ALPS are better equipped for academic and social success, leading to more positive long-term outcomes for students and their communities.

This research was a comprehensive and collaborative effort involving students and professional educators from the traditional education setting and the ALPS. Administrators, counselors, teachers, and students participated in this study, ensuring diverse perspectives. Interviews and data were collected electronically, with interviews held through the NCSU Zoom suite and public information obtained through DPI and the district website. This study consisted of 11 participants: five students from different high schools within the district, one administrator, counselor, teacher from the traditional education setting, and one administrator, counselor, and teacher from the ALPS.

This study aligns with existing literature, highlighting the importance of structured transition plans, effective communication, and comprehensive support systems for students reintegrating from ALPS into traditional education settings. The findings underscore the challenges of academic and social integration and the variability in student experiences, which are influenced by the specific practices and resources available at different schools. Notably, the study reveals gaps in communication between ALPS and traditional schools and the inconsistent implementation of restorative practices, suggesting that a more standardized and coordinated approach could enhance the reintegration process. Overall, the research validates existing literature while identifying areas for improvement, particularly in formalizing transition plans and ensuring consistent support across institutions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Guides - Alternative School Staff Interview Questions

Interview Protocol

Study: Student Reintegration: The Procedural Responsibilities of the ALPS

Time of Interview:

Date:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee: **PRINCIPAL/ADMINISTRATOR** (Briefly describe the study)

Questions:

1. What is the mission of the ALPS?
2. How are you informed about the students assigned to the ALPS?
3. Is there communication between you and the base school principal?
4. Describe the reintegration process for students from the ALPS to the traditional education setting.
5. What is the role of the administrator in the transition process?
6. Do you receive transition plans for returning students?
7. Who develops the student's transition plan?
8. What do students struggle the most with upon their return?
9. Have traditional school administrators communicated with you about the student? If so, in what way.
10. What training have you provided your staff on working with students who have attended ALPS?
11. How many students are assigned to ALPS graduates? (Your estimation)
12. How does an ALPS placement affect a student overtime?
13. Do you have all the resources needed to help students who return from the alternative school program? If not, what do you need?
14. Describe the transition process from the alternative school.
 - a. Criteria for exiting the school
 - b. Support System (who supports this transition and in what way)
 - c. Base school involvement (who supports this transition and in what way)

d. Parent involvement

15. What made for a successful reintegration? Role Specific

a. Administrators

b. Teachers

c. Student

d. Parents

16. During the reintegration process what communication is shared between the parents, staff, outside agencies and the ALPS or traditional education setting?

17. Would you like to tell me anything else about the transition plans and students' reintegration back into the traditional education setting? Please add any information that might be pertinent to this study.

Appendix B: Interview Guides - Alternative School Staff Interview Questions

Interview Protocol

Study: Student Reintegration: The Procedural Responsibilities of the ALPS

Time of Interview:

Date:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee: **Counselor** (Briefly describe the study)

Questions:

1. How are you informed about students assigned to ALPS?
2. Is there communication between you and the base school counselor?
3. What is the reintegration process?
4. What is your role in the reintegration process?
5. Do you receive transition plans for returning students?
6. From your knowledge, who creates or determines these plans?
7. What do students struggle with upon their return to the traditional education setting?
8. Have the base school counselor communicated with you about the student in any way?
9. What staff training have you had on how to work with students who have attended ALPS?
10. How many students that are assigned to ALPS graduates? (Your estimation)
11. How does an ALPS placement affect a student overtime?
12. What additional responsibilities do counselors have when students return to the traditional education setting?
13. Describe the transition process from the alternative school.
 - a. Criteria for exiting the school
 - b. Support System (who supports this transition and in what way)
 - c. Base school involvement (who supports this transition and in what way)
 - d. Parent involvement
14. Describe the reintegration process. Support from the Alternative School
 - a. Contact Person - Who is it?
 - b. Support systems - What are they?
 - c. Follow up - What does that consist of?
 - d. Parent involvement - What is it?
15. What made for a successful reintegration? Role Specific
 - a. Administrators
 - b. Teachers
 - c. Student

d. Parents

16. What additional responsibilities do counselors have when students return to the traditional education setting? (*Meso*)
17. During the reintegration process, what communication is shared between the parents, staff, outside agencies, and the ALPS or traditional education setting?
18. Would you like to tell me anything else about the transition plans and students' reintegration back into the traditional education setting? Please add any information that might be pertinent to this study.

Appendix C: Interview Guides - Alternative School Staff Interview Questions

Interview Protocol

Study: Student Reintegration: The Procedural Responsibilities of the ALPS

Time of Interview:

Date:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee: **Teacher** (Briefly describe the study)

Questions:

1. What information do you receive about students assigned to ALPS from your class?
2. What is the communication between the traditional education teacher and the ALPS teacher?
3. What is the reintegration process?
4. What is your role in the reintegration process?
5. Do you receive transition plans for returning students?
6. Who develops the student's transition plan?
7. What do students struggle with upon their return to the traditional education setting?
8. Have teachers reached out to you for assistance with a student? If so, in what way.
9. What staff training have you received to understand and work with students who have attended ALPS?
10. How many students are assigned to the ALPS graduate? (Your estimation)
11. How does an ALP placement affect a student overtime?
12. Do you have all the resources to help students returning from the alternative school program? If not, what do you need?
13. Describe the transition process from the alternative school.
 - a. Criteria for exiting the school
 - b. Support System (who supports this transition and in what way)
 - c. Base school involvement (who supports this transition and in what way)
 - d. Parent involvement
14. Describe the reintegration process. (Support from the Alternative School)
 - a. Contact Person - Who is it?
 - b. Support systems - What are they?
 - c. Follow up - What does that consist of?
 - d. Parent involvement - What is it?
15. What made for a successful reintegration? Role Specific
 - a. Administrators
 - b. Teachers
 - c. Student

d. Parents

16. What additional responsibilities do teachers have for students who return to the traditional education setting?
17. What communication is shared between the parents, staff, outside agencies, and the ALPS or traditional education setting during the reintegration process?
18. Would you like to tell me anything else about the transition plans and students' reintegration back into the traditional education setting? Please add any information that might be pertinent to this study.

Appendix D: Traditional Education Setting Staff Interview Questions

Interview Protocol

Study: Student Reintegration: Student Reintegration: The Procedural Responsibilities of the Traditional Education Setting

Time of Interview:

Date:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee: **PRINCIPAL/ADMINISTRATOR** (Briefly describe the study)

Questions:

1. From your understanding, what is the mission of the ALPS?
2. How are you informed about the students assigned to the ALPS?
3. Is there communication between you and the base school principal?
4. Describe the reintegration process for students from the ALPS to the traditional education setting.
5. What is the role of the administrator in the transition process?
6. Do you receive transition plans for returning students?
7. Who develops the student's transition plan?
8. What do students struggle the most with upon their return?
9. Have traditional school administrators communicated with you about the student? If so, in what way.
10. What training have you provided your staff on working with students who have attended ALPS?
11. How many students are assigned to ALPS graduates? (Your estimation)

12. How does an ALPS placement affect a student overtime?
13. Do you have all the resources needed to help students who return from the alternative school program? If not, what do you need?

14. Describe the transition process from the alternative school.
 - a. Criteria for exiting the school
 - b. Support System (who supports this transition and in what way)
 - c. Base school involvement (who supports this transition and in what way)
 - d. Parent involvement

15. What made for a successful reintegration? Role Specific
 - a. Administrators
 - b. Teachers
 - c. Student
 - d. Parents

16. What communication is shared between the parents, staff, outside agencies, and the ALPS or traditional education setting during the reintegration process?
17. Would you like to tell me anything else about the transition plans and students' reintegration back into the traditional education setting? Please add any information that might be pertinent to this study.

Appendix E: Traditional Education Setting Staff Interview Questions

Interview Protocol

Study: Student Reintegration: The Procedural Responsibilities of the ALPS

Time of Interview:

Date:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee: **Counselor** (Briefly describe the study)

Questions:

1. How are you informed about students assigned to ALPS?
2. Is there communication between you and the base school counselor?
3. What is the reintegration process?
4. What is your role in the reintegration process?
5. Do you receive transition plans for returning students?
6. From your knowledge, who creates or determines these plans?
7. What do students struggle with upon their return to the traditional education setting?
8. Have the base school counselor communicated with you about the student in any way?
9. What staff training have you had on how to work with students who have attended ALPS?
10. How many students that are assigned to ALPS graduates? (Your estimation)
11. How does an ALPS placement affect a student overtime?
12. What additional responsibilities do counselors have when students return to the traditional education setting?
13. Describe the transition process from the alternative school.
 - a. Criteria for exiting the school
 - b. Support System (who supports this transition and in what way)
 - c. Base school involvement (who supports this transition and in what way)
 - d. Parent involvement
14. Describe the reintegration process. Support from the Alternative School
 - a. Contact Person - Who is it?
 - b. Support systems - What are they?
 - c. Follow up - What does that consist of?
 - d. Parent involvement - What is it?
15. What made for a successful reintegration? Role Specific
 - a. Administrators
 - b. Teachers
 - c. Student
 - d. Parents

16. What additional responsibilities do counselors have when students return to the traditional education setting? (*Meso*)
17. During the reintegration process, what communication is shared between the parents, staff, outside agencies, and the ALPS or traditional education setting?
18. Would you like to tell me anything else about the transition plans and students' reintegration back into the traditional education setting? Please add any information that might be pertinent to this study.

Appendix F: Traditional Education Setting School Staff Interview Questions

Interview Protocol

Study: Student Reintegration: The Procedural Responsibilities of the Traditional Education Setting

Time of Interview:

Date:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee: **Teacher** (Briefly describe the study)

Questions:

1. What information do you receive about students assigned to ALPS from your class?
2. What is the communication between the traditional education teacher and the ALPS teacher?
3. What is the reintegration process?
4. What is your role in the reintegration process?
5. Do you receive transition plans for returning students?
6. Who develops the student's transition plan?
7. What do students struggle with upon their return to the traditional education setting?
8. Have teachers reached out to you for assistance with a student? If so, in what way.
9. What staff training have you received to understand and work with students who have attended ALPS?
10. How many students assigned to the ALPS graduate? (Your estimation)
11. How does an ALP placement affect a student overtime?
12. Do you have all the resources to help students returning from the alternative school program? If not, what do you need?
13. Describe the transition process from the alternative school.
 - a. Criteria for exiting the school
 - b. Support System (who supports this transition and in what way)
 - c. Base school involvement (who supports this transition and in what way)
 - d. Parent involvement
14. Describe the reintegration process. (Support from the Alternative School)
 - a. Contact Person - Who is it?
 - b. Support systems - What are they?
 - c. Follow up - What does that consist of?
 - d. Parent involvement - What is it?
15. What made for a successful reintegration? Role Specific
 - a. Administrators
 - b. Teachers
 - c. Student

d. Parents

16. What additional responsibilities do teachers have for students who return to the traditional education setting?
17. During the reintegration process, what communication is shared with the parents, staff, outside agencies, and the ALPS or traditional education setting?
18. Would you like to tell me anything else about the transition plans and students' reintegration back into the traditional education setting? Please add any information that might be pertinent to this study.

Appendix G: Student Who Have Been Reintegrated Interview Questions

Interview Protocol

Study: Student Reintegration: The Procedural Responsibilities of the ALPS/Traditional Education Setting

Time of Interview:

Date:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee: **Student** (Briefly describe the study)

Questions:

1. Please tell me about your traditional education setting/base school. (*Micro*)
2. Do you like returning to the traditional education setting/base school? (*Micro*)
 - a. What do you like?
 - b. What don't you like?
3. How did you find the adjustment to the traditional education setting/base school after being in the alternative school? (*Meso*)
4. Do you think people are working for you or against you now that you are back in the traditional education setting/base school? (*Meso*)
5. Tell me about your teachers (base school). (*Meso*)
 - a. Describe your favorite teacher and what he/she does to help you.
6. What interactions have you had with the counselor(s)? (*Meso*)
7. How have you progressed personally since returning to your traditional education setting/base school? (*Meso*)
 - a. How are you doing with your schoolwork?
 - b. How do you feel about yourself?
 - c. How well do you get along with other students and adults?
8. What are your goals for returning to the traditional education setting/base school? (*Meso*)
9. What does success in school mean to you? (*Meso*)
10. Do you feel that you have to change at all to remain here? (*Meso*)
11. Please tell me about the alternative learning program/school. (*Meso*)
12. What were some positives of being at the alternative school? (*Meso*)
13. What was your schedule at the alternative school? (*Meso*)
14. How did the alternative school challenge you academically? (*Meso*)
15. How did you get to the alternative school, and how have you worked to address it? (*Meso*)
16. What was your parent's role while at the ALPS? (*Micro*)
17. Have your grades and behavior improved since your return to the traditional education setting/base school? (*Meso*)
18. What would have better prepared you to change from the alternative school to the traditional education setting/base school? (*Meso*)
19. Would you like to tell me anything else about the transition plans and students' reintegration back into the traditional education setting? Please add any information that might be pertinent to this study.

Appendix H: Questions For Demographic Questionnaire - Traditional Education Setting

Demographic Questionnaire Instructions: This short questionnaire will provide an overall demographic analysis of the entire participant group. This information will assist in the organization of respondent interviews. Pseudonyms will be given to keep participants' identity confidential.

Staff: (Traditional Education Setting)

1. Name: _____
2. Gender: (optional) _____
3. Position: _____
4. Total years in the field of education : _____
5. Total years in your current position: _____
6. Total years at this school: _____

Questions for Demographic Questionnaire - Alternative Learning Program/School

Demographic Questionnaire Instructions: This short questionnaire will provide an overall demographic analysis of the entire participant group. This information will assist in the organization of respondent interviews. Pseudonyms will be given to keep participants' identity confidential.

Staff: (Alternative Learning Program/School)

1. Name: _____
2. Gender: (optional) _____
3. Position: _____
4. Total years in the field of education: _____

5. Total years in your current position: _____
6. Total years at the Alternative Learning Program/School: _____

Questions for Demographic Questionnaire - Student

Demographic Questionnaire Instructions: This short questionnaire will provide an overall demographic analysis of the entire participant group. This information will assist in the organization of respondent interviews. Pseudonyms will be given to keep participants' identity confidential.

Student Participants

1. Name: _____
2. Gender (optional): _____
3. Age: _____
4. Grade: _____
5. How long were you at the alternative school? _____
6. How long have you been back in the traditional education setting? _____
7. How would you describe yourself as a student?
8. Identify your strengths and what you need to improve on?

Appendix I: Participation Invitation Letter

Dear Invitee,

My name is Janet Roberts. I am a doctoral student at North Carolina State University. I am kindly requesting your participation in a doctoral research study that I am conducting titled: An Exploratory Qualitative Case Study of Transition Plans for Reintegration into Traditional Education Settings from Alternative Learning Programs/Schools. The intention is to gain a better understanding of the transition plans and the reintegration process from the perspective of students and staff involved.

The study involves completing basic demographic information and an interview with me, Janet Roberts.

Participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. The study is completely anonymous, therefore, it does not require you to provide your name or any other identifying information.

If you would like to participate in the study please read the Informed Consent letter below.

Your participation in the research will be of great importance to assist in identifying supports and barriers with transition plans and the re-entry process for students coming from an alternative learning program/school. Thank you for your time and participation

Sincerely,

Janet Roberts,

M.A. M.S, Doctoral Student, North Carolina State University