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Thoughts from the Margins: A Five-Year Longitudinal Exploration with Former Alternative Education Youth

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Abstract

This longitudinal case study explores the evolving identity constructions and schooling perspectives of former alternative education program members, at an early stage of their adult lives. Using a critical sociocultural lens and in-depth semi-structured interviews, I revisited three young women, five years after their participation in research I had previously undertaken in a middle school, alternative program. This current effort provides individual participant profiles detailing the present life circumstances and thinking of each participant, along with brief middle school recaps and five-year interval updates. This work illustrates its participants' evolving perspectives on selves and schooling and their present recognition of a critically important caring element in their former program. Its resulting implications highlight the influence of social and institutional practices to determinations made by, and about, youth, and imply a need for their continual reassessment. Additionally, this study addresses a call in the literature for longitudinal efforts to determine the long-term effects of alternative education programs and advocates for an inclusion of the voices of marginalized youth in measures towards reform.

Keywords

Alternative Education, At-Risk Students, Identity Construction, Longitudinal Case Study, Caring Education, Social Practices

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Thoughts from the Margins: A Five-Year Longitudinal Exploration with Former Alternative Education Youth

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This longitudinal case study explores the evolving identity constructions and schooling perspectives of former alternative education program members, at an early stage of their adult lives. Using a critical sociocultural lens and in-depth semi-structured interviews, I revisited three young women, five years after their participation in research I had previously undertaken in a middle school, alternative program. This current effort provides individual participant profiles detailing the present life circumstances and thinking of each participant, along with brief middle school recaps and five-year interval updates. This work illustrates its participants' evolving perspectives on selves and schooling and their present recognition of a critically important caring element in their former program. Its resulting implications highlight the influence of social and institutional practices to determinations made by, and about, youth, and imply a need for their continual reassessment. Additionally, this study addresses a call in the literature for longitudinal efforts to determine the long-term effects of alternative education programs and advocates for an inclusion of the voices of marginalized youth in measures towards reform. Keywords: Alternative Education, At-Risk Students, Identity Construction, Longitudinal Case Study, Caring Education, Social Practices

Although pedagogical reform measures usually aim towards the future, their long-term effects on the lives of youth in the margins often times remain unknown. While federal and state mandates assist young people who have documented special needs, those of young people who do not meet the strict criteria of formal classification may remain unmet; in fact, innovative attempts may even be impeded by recent mandating legislation because of its standardization attempts (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006). At present, alternative education (AE) programs do exist for students considered “at-risk” of failing in today’s school systems, but there is little agreement about optimal programming criteria and efforts or any real consensus on which students should be included in this definition (Foley & Pang, 2006; Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002; Quinn, Poirier, & Faller, 2006). The lack of effort for this population is especially pronounced when the relatively small group of students failing in schools otherwise considered to be “successful” (by state determined standards) is considered. This latter student population – one that resides in the “margins” (Kumashiro, 2000) of general education systems in these otherwise successful schools – comprises a research worthy, yet frequently overlooked, target of reform. Follow up studies on the long-term effects of school efforts related to this population are especially needed.

During the school year of 2010-2011, I undertook a study (Harnischfeger, 2015) exploring the perceptions of a group of eighth grade, alternatively placed, non-conforming students from a successful, suburban, upstate New York school, in relation to educational practices. I strived to explore these young people’s constructions of self in relation to school practices, along with their thoughts on education in general and the alternative program to which they belonged. I argued that a better realization of these youths’ perspectives could lead to important knowledge of the effects of school marginalization and to a resulting increase in effective institutional practices.

Over the seven months that I was immersed in the alternative education classroom of the study's targeted school, I became close to the unique, interesting youth who served as my effort's central participants. During the five years that followed, I frequently wondered about their high school experiences and the reality of their larger, post-school identities and lives. How did these (now) young adults look back on their time in the alternative classroom and what, if any, effect did they believe it had on the reality of their present lives? The present, longitudinal component to that earlier work responds to the call of Quinn et al., (2006) for longitudinal research that aims towards determining the long-term outcomes for students placed in alternative programs. Likewise, it adheres to the suggestions of Pifer (2000), Loutzenheiser (2002), and Peterson (2014) for the inclusion of youth voice in this kind of effort. Hopefully, the findings from the combination of these two studies will contribute to greater knowledge of young people who reside on the "outside" of our general schooling system and an improvement in reform applications that better meet their needs.

This present study, like my first, is a qualitative endeavor that seeks to explore its participants' lived experiences in the authentic contexts of their current lives and perceptions. As did Peterson's (2014) effort to explore the understandings of a gifted young woman, this work is centered within an "emergent and flexible design" (p.296 cited in Patton, 2005, p. 278). Likewise, I began with orienting "sensitizing concepts" (Peterson, 2014, p. 296), including my first work's finding that my participants perceived a conceptualization of their "otherness" in school. The aim of this longitudinal component was to sensitively listen to these young adults who had previously been viewed as "problems" in school. I sought an understanding of their past and continuing conceptualizations of identity and (perhaps) "difference." Additionally, I wished to explore their thoughts on how past educational experiences might have contributed to their conceptualizations of themselves, today, and to learn their thinking on schooling, in general.

Literature Review

Many current studies that discuss alternative education reform efforts (Gable, Bullock & Evans, 2006; Lehr & Lange, 2000; Quinn et al., 2006) refer to Raywid's (1994, 1998) differentiation of potential program goals. The alternative education program at the center of my first study represented this author's "a" and "b" criteria – (a) to change the students and (b) to change the school. Likewise, most research (Bauman, 1998; Foley & Pang, 2006; Groves, 1998; Lloyd, 1997) indicates that the majority of alternative programs emphasize Raywid's (1994, 1998) "a" criterion – effecting student behavioral change. Significantly fewer efforts examine a goal that reaches towards his "c" goal – discerning the essential characteristics of overall, effective, larger system-wide change. Quinn et al., (2006) argued that it is actually this latter target that must be addressed, if we are to successfully contribute to reform in alternative programs and schools. These authors asserted that improved alternative programs must be the aim, rather than a change in individual students.

The numbers of youth still not succeeding in our schools remain unacceptable and, therefore, my efforts (Harnischfeger, 2015, present study) strive towards the system-wide change noted in Raywid's (1994, 1998) "c" criterion. Additionally, my thinking aligns with that of Pifer's (2000), Loutzenheiser's (2002), and Peterson's (2014) assertions that we must take our measures one step further and include the voice of actual program participants in our efforts towards change. I adhere to a belief that youths are both influenced by, and the active influencers of, culture (Bucholtz, 2002), and that they are the flexible interpreters (Eisenhart, 2001) of the social environments in which cultural practices are affected; I thus centered my work within these elements. Therefore, in my explorations of my participants' constructions, a consideration of the sociocultural factors of their multiple worlds was imperative to my work.

Two of Eisenhart's (2001) descriptions explaining the possible cultural conceptualizations that schools may have, in relation to non-dominant student groups, were also applicable to my work. The first was her "Interpretive Model" (p. 209) specifying that culture is actively interpreted, collectively and individually, and doesn't exist as a "given way of life" (p. 212). Second, her "Non-Essentializing Model," based on Clifford's (1986) contention that "culture is not one primordial or coherent thing, fixed in time and space...but rather a dynamic, continually emerging set of struggles among people trying to identify themselves in relation to others" (p. 214) was applicable to my effort. In my original study, I utilized these dynamic, flexible models as I analyzed my students' construction of both their school and home/social worlds; this time, I believed it was imperative to consider their individual interpretations of past AE experiences, as being independently sourced, variable, and possibly subject to change. Additionally, I relied on Wenger's (1998) contention that an examination of the social nature of practices is critical, along with his assertion for an exploration of their "interconnectivity" and "negotiated roles" (p. 45). As did Loutzenheiser (2002), I depended on a dynamic, postmodern framework to explore the multiplicity of these youths' subject positions, as they participated in their various social communities.

Additionally, both my earlier study and this present effort relied on Anzaldúa's (1987, 1996) focus on living in the "borderlands" (p.4), the need to transcend constructions of normalcy, and the fluidity of experiences "between" (p.4). Originally, I extended this concept to a consideration of living in the borderlands within a school – to students who were educated in a place between general and special education. As the participants of my first work actively affirmed school sourced constructions of their otherness, they both resisted and, at times, even reveled in such determinations. This time, although the three young women at the study's center no longer existed within the confines of a formal school program, I suggest they still resided in the "borderlands." Now – one year past typical school age – they were at the entranceway to adulthood, and had only recently left behind the controlled confines of public schooling and the adult determined structures of their homes. Related to their present place in the "borderlands," this present effort asked: did these young women continue to construct themselves as being "other"; what had been their on-going relationship to education; and what were their present life situations and future goals?

As Quinn et al., (2006) emphasized the need for longitudinal research to determine the long-term outcomes for students placed in alternative programs, I argue for the additional inclusion of past recipients' voices to our understanding. I contend that a better realization of these youths' on-going experiences and perspectives might contribute to important knowledge of the long-range effects of school marginalization and the effectiveness of alternative practices.

Context

This study is a longitudinal component to an earlier work with young people who had previously been members of an alternative education program in a relatively affluent, mid-sized, suburb of upstate New York State. My original work (Harnischfeger, 2015) utilized ethnographic methods in the eighth grade alternative classroom and the other settings of this program's larger school. Five years later, my effort was with three of the original central participants – young women who were now eighteen – nineteen years of age and who were, thus, one year past their school cohort's graduation.

In this paper, I update their (and my) more recent understandings, and also attempt to provide adequate related context from the first study's efforts and results. Lastly, I concentrate on my participants' conceptualizations in the "findings" section of this paper. First, however, in the section that follows, I illustrate my own positionality in relation to this work. As noted

by Unluer (2012) this is a particularly crucial element to qualitative efforts, especially when the researcher has an insider role.

My Positionality as a Researcher

During my twenty-six years as an educator in public education systems I sought an understanding of how to meet the needs of students in the margins of school settings. Although most of this time was spent in the formal special education (highly mandated) realm of an otherwise successful school, the four years I spent in this same school's alternative education program led to my significant, and on-going, research interests. As I became well acquainted with this program's population and its students – young people who were considered to be at-risk in this school – I found their characteristics were diverse and quite compelling. Although many adults tended to view these students through a deficit lens, I was intrigued with their potential and strengths. In the subsequent years since the conclusion of that previous study, I found myself wondering how these youths' views on schooling, and life in general, had evolved.

Although I had spent twenty-two years as an educator in the setting of my targeted school, at the time of my first study I was no longer a school employee. I had been away from this setting for significant enough time that none of my student participants had previously known me; however, they did know that I used to be a teacher at their school. Therefore, in order to encourage the level of comfort that would be needed for them to speak openly with me, I made sure to clarify my present role as a researcher and as someone who had no authoritative position over them. Five years later, the three young women who agreed to be my second work's central participants were now young adults. While having (or not having) school authority over them was no longer an issue, it was still important for me to carefully consider my positionality. I needed to thoughtfully ascertain the means of appropriately advancing our relationship onto a more equal, adult footing. It was also important that I not let my past knowledge of their middle-school personalities, nor my earlier personal fondness for them, bias my interpretations of their present statements. Previously, it had been necessary that I reflect on the possibility of my insider knowledge clouding my study's interpretations (DeLyser, 2001; Hewitt-Taylor, 2002; Unluer, 2012). Now, I needed to consider the previous, relational aspects that might become a factor in my current longitudinal efforts. The intertwined nature of ethics and reflexivity discussed by Warin (2011) was salient, and I found that relying on the same questions this author asked, in her own longitudinal study, was imperative and helpful to my work: "How did the nature of consent change over time? How was mutual trust established? How was my own ability to gain insight into the [participants'] interpersonal lives influenced by my ongoing relationship with them?" (p. 806).

The three young women participants of this current study readily agreed to participate a second time when I found them again through Facebook. As they were no longer minors (in relation to research), parental consent was now unneeded. I was pleased by these individuals' eagerness to meet up and participate again, but was also slightly wary of our on-going, mutual fondness. Was this relationship being exacerbated by Facebook's present designation of us as "friends," and how might any connected emotional factor affect the reliability of my research process? Etherington (2007, as cited in Gilligan, 1982) urges "reflexive relational ethics pay attention to the balance required between our own needs as researchers and our obligations toward, care for, and connection with those who participate in our research" (p. 614). I aimed to heed her advice to balance our own needs with those of our participants and endeavored to be mindful of maintaining transparency regarding purpose and decision-making throughout the research process. I shared with my participants some of their statements from the time of the first study and asked for their updated interpretations. Additionally, I frequently repeated back

to them their new dialogue, in order to ensure the accuracy of my interpretations. Throughout the analysis process, I tried to stay conscientiously reflective and to remain as true as possible to my participants' own discursive intents.

Each of the young women in this second study eagerly agreed to be re-interviewed by me in on-going, five-year intervals, and this prospect induced me to also consider the nature of our future relationships. Ellis (2007) contends that work stretching over time requires "an acting from hearts and minds to acknowledge growing interpersonal bonds with others, and [the taking of] responsibility for actions and their consequences" (p. 3). In relation to this statement, I admit that it was somewhat difficult to "unfriend" these young woman at the end of this work's data gathering phase. Following thoughtful reflection on this decision, I decided that this was the best option in consideration of our plans for future mutual research, and in order to accord them their own personal space. Additionally, in response to my goal for an authentic, caring relationships with my participants, I engaged in honest discussions with them about this issue. To my probably unfair surprise, they readily agreed. Finally, in order to assuage any perception that my caring was solely based on my interest in them as research "subjects," I promised to promptly reply, if, in the future, they should message me via social media. (I note these details as an example of both the benefits and dilemmas with which we researchers are presented by present day digital communication advancements).

Overall, I believe that a process of careful reflection on my positionality in relation to the participants of this study was especially critical to its success. It involved a careful realignment of my thinking involving these young women who, now, five years later, were actual adults. As I wished this work to be an honest, respectful representation of these participants' constructions, I needed to readjust my interactions and considerations with them to this new reality.

Methodology

This study represents a qualitative, longitudinal, case study update to an earlier (Harnischfeger, 2015) effort that used ethnographic methods in an eighth grade alternative education classroom. Like that earlier work, this one is also of a critical constructivist nature and is framed within the sociocultural (social practices) and postmodern theoretical realms. Three of that earlier effort's central participants served this time as "case," and procedures were conducted to procure knowledge of their constructions of self-identity as young women. Additionally, this study sought their thoughts on educational practices and the influence of an alternative program to their present selves and lives. Compton-Lily (2016) noted a frequent research "...tendency toward short-term thinking about students" (p. 467); this effort aimed towards procuring some of the possibilities for longitudinal educational research efforts that he suggested.

Before commencing this present effort, I obtained IRB permission from the higher education institution with which I am currently affiliated, and then attempted to re-contact my previous study's central participants using Facebook (as was previously discussed). Three of my first work's participants responded and agreed to take part this time. I next shared with each individual the purpose of, and plans for, this longitudinal component, and obtained her written formal consent.

Participants

The participants of this study were the three central participants (out of a total of five) of my related original work, who had responded to my invitation to reconnect for a continuation of research efforts. As these young women had been given the pseudonyms Lauren, Sheina,

and Rosie in the first study, I continue to utilize the same names for them, here. It should be noted that Austin, not Rosie, was written about in the original, published study, and that this change was necessitated by my inability to re-contact him. I contend that the addition of Rosie's information lends significantly to this present effort, but regret the omission of an update on Austin. This second study took place five years after the first one ended when these three young women were each eighteen - nineteen years of age. All three of them were from White, middle-class families, and had previously been eighth grade members of the suburban, alternative program described fully in the original work. Additional, detailed information on each of these participants will be provided in the "findings" section that follows.

Data Gathering and Sources

I gathered data for this present effort through an approximately one hour, individual interview with each of my three central participants. As these young women were no longer members of a public school system, nor were they now minors, Lauren, Rosie and I agreed to meet at a local, national chain, coffee shop/restaurant that was part of their community. As Sheina had moved out of town and our interview occurred during a snowy winter, she and I conversed over computer, via Skype. Lauren, Rosie, and I (in individual interview sessions) chatted informally over lunch in order to become reacquainted, and then each participant agreed that I could turn on the voice recorder. Before, and after, each interview session, I additionally engaged in a process of careful memoing, and these memos became a second important data source. Finally, the first study's memos, transcriptions, analysis notes, and final reports became a third source for data gathering and analysis, in this present study. Immediately before re-meeting each young woman, I carefully re-read these latter sources and made careful, related notes, which were then subsequently used to develop potential interview questions. Additionally, I chose quotes and observations from each individual's participation in the first study that I thought might be useful to share with the participants during the present study's interviews.

Although I went into each interview session of this second effort with potential questions (some tailored from my first work's notes), this study – similar to one that Helfenbein (2006) related – was primarily of an emergent design. I relied on this author's admonition that "preconceived notions of the researcher can influence the outcome, operationalize the procedure, and distort the findings" (p. 89, as cited in Carspecken, 1996, p. 25). Additionally, like this author, I utilized my guiding questions mainly as discussion starters and allowed my participants to steer the direction in which our conversations progressed. I shared the main purpose of my research with each of the young women and then encouraged each to speak; I restarted our conversations from my potential questions only when our discussion seemed to lag.

My original study had depended on multiple methods and data sources – observations, interviews, focus group sessions, image analysis from videos, and text analysis documents – in order to understand its "case" of alternatively placed students, in relation to the reality of the institution in which they were mandated members. At the time of this second effort, my participants were now adults and members of the larger world; therefore, I now focused on their stories and the constructions they expressed about the multiple worlds they presently inhabited and their thoughts on possible, past, influencing factors. Once again, as in the original effort, I sought knowledge of both these young women's "small story" identities (Bamberg, 2006) – identity realization that may be temporary and is garnered through their relating of interactions and practices – and also of their larger, on-going "big story" (Freeman, 2006; Mead, 2003) self-knowledge. This interview approach aligned with Charmaz's (2001)

assertion that the usage of qualitatively assessed, biographic-type interviewing is suggested for a gathering of stories using a grounded theoretical approach.

Throughout the data gathering and analysis phases of this work, I continued to heed the need for careful reflexivity and I paid attention to the issues discussed in the “positionality” section, above. This effort was in consideration of Heyl’s (2001) contention that interviews in the ethnographic realm have a co-constructive nature that is dependent on the relationship built up between participants and researcher. Additionally, it helped me to reflect on Holstein and Gubrium’s (2000) assertion that the process may be “permeated by issues of power, emotionality, and interpersonal processes” (as cited in Ellis & Berger, 2003, p.159). I acknowledge that what was rendered through this study is only one construction of reality (Charmaz, 2006), and profess that, throughout it, I worked towards the goal for its participants to be the primary source of its resulting knowledge. I strived to remain as close as possible to this goal during the interviewing and analysis phases of this effort, while admitting that interpretations are inevitably filtered through my own lens, as the researcher.

Data Analysis Procedures

As I wished to reconstruct the reality of my participants for this study’s finding, as much as possible, I aligned my primary analysis approach with Charmaz’s (2006) grounded theory suggestions. Immediately following each participant’s interview, I engaged in a process of careful memo taking, transcribed the audiotaped interview and commenced analysis procedures before I reentered the field. Initially, I began with a process of open coding and determined codes from my narrative sources on a line-by-line basis and later in the process shifted to a process of coding larger discursive events. As I continued the procedure across the data sources, I then undertook a process of axial coding, which allowed me to relate categories to subcategories and to define the properties and dimensions of my categories (Charmaz, 2006). Furthermore, I engaged in reflective memoing throughout the analysis process, and organized my data into a series of color-coded charts that I organized around the developing subcategories, categories, and eventual, final study themes. Throughout these procedures, I continued to compare and contrast the codes and developing categories across the study’s data sources. Finally, I carried this effort into a comparative analysis of the present study’s results to those of the original study. This last step was undertaken to note differences or similarities over time, during the five years since my participants and I had last met.

In addition to the above procedures, I also relied on the suggestions of Gee and Crawford (1998) and Gee (2000-2001) for an analysis of discourse. I determined that this additional step was especially necessary since a discernment of participant identity was a primary purpose of this study. This latter analysis procedure was laid on top of, accomplished concomitantly, and inter-related to the coding processes detailed in the previous section, and the motifs and affinities of my participants that follow in the “findings” section stemmed from this process. I believe the combination of these procedures, along with my commitment to a continuous reflexive process – one that places the constructions of its participants at the center – lend to the trustworthiness of this study’s findings.

Findings

My present effort sought to explore how schooling and life had proceeded for the young people I had come to know so well during the 2010-2011 school year. Had their middle school’s alternative efforts helped them to succeed at the high school and how did they perceive their present identities and that of their eighth grade selves? Additionally, how did they interpret past educational experiences? In the section that follows, I provide updates on related findings

for two of my previous central participants – Lauren and Sheina—and those for a third, original study youth – Rosie. Following a brief review of key information from my previous effort, I relate new information that each participant was eager to share, as I individually interviewed her in the winter of 2015-2016. Lastly, in an effort to provide some insight into how my participants’ identity characteristics and beliefs developed from the time of the first study to the second, I end each profile with a short update on the five years in-between.

I believe understanding of these individuals can be more accurately portrayed when sourced, as much as possible, from within the voices of my participants themselves. Additionally, as I wish to maintain a sense of each individual’s uniqueness, I present this information in the same profile format that I utilized in my original study; it should be noted that their tales stem from the “living narrative” (Ochs & Capps, 2001) of the interviews I engaged in with each participant. Categorical information related to present and past constructions of these young women’s identities is represented as “key motifs” (Gee & Crawford, 1998) and “affinity” (Gee, 2000-2001) characteristics and is first presented in chart form for each participant; it is then expanded upon in the individual profiles that follow.

Findings connected to the goal of understanding these former students’ thoughts on education, especially as they pertained to their own past alternative experiences, were developed during analysis of my participants’ narratives and during a comparison of codes and categories from the two studies. This information led to the study’s two larger themes – participants’ valuing of former alternative education experiences and their recognition of a need for caring in education, which are discussed in ending paragraphs of the “findings” section. Finally, important implications for educational practices in relation to these themes follow in the concluding “discussion” section. All three of the young women at the center of this work were eager to participate in my research effort, and I am honored that they entrusted me to share their contributions with a larger audience.

Lauren’s Case

Table 1. Lauren

	Past Study	Present Study
Key Quotations	I don’t fit in here. Like I literally do not belong here. I am an outgoing person. I try my best and like to have a lot of fun. I am also kinda weird... Truly, I belong in a straight-jacket.	I am just so freaking weird. I definitely did not picture where I am now. I didn’t think I was going to be where I am now. I definitely thought that I was going to be a very unhappy person to be honest with you. I have learned that you’ve got to take the good with the bad; you’ve got to take the bad with the good.
Key Motifs (Gee & Crawford, 1998)	Family; high activity level; a finely tuned sensitivity to the social world within the school; a dichotomous relationship between a desire for social acceptance and a pride in being different and unique.	Self-acceptance; pride in individuality.
Identity Related Affinity Component, (Gee, 2000-2001)	Family.	Family; Art.

Review of middle school identity construction. Lauren had been the youngest, most active, and artistic member of my first study. In fact, she had been named the “Most Individualistic Eighth grader” by her middle school peers at the end of the year. At that age, she wore mostly black clothing and her love of art and style was represented in her often changing hair color and clothing choices, including her habit to almost always wear one of her more than fifty, very unique hats – a panda one, a Santa hat with a bouncing tassel, and many more. This participant had a conflicting relationship between a desire for social approval and a fierce pride in being different and unique. At thirteen years of age, this pride in her uniqueness represented the first qualitative category related to Lauren. It was clearly discerned through her discourse, and in observations of her interactions. Her comment (Table 1, above) about not fitting in at her school was the saddest one I heard in the course of my study. She was very attuned to her peers’ mostly critical perceptions: “It’s like I’m probably one of the people who don’t really fit in a group ... not a lot of people get along with me.” At the same time, she also resisted their labeling of her as “Emo” and told me: “that would be someone who is really depressed and is a pessimist always looking on the dark side. And I am an optimist and I always try to look for the brighter side of the situation.”

Lauren had been labeled as having ADHD and struggled to make it through each school day in the middle school. This high activity level represented a second, connected participant quality, as depicted in her narrative: “I don’t know why it is so hard for me to pay attention, but I’m trying to focus, just trying to get through the day.” Along with an interest in art, Lauren displayed a high level of connection to her family and, in return, was strongly supported by them; family was thus this student’s main “affinity factor” (Gee, 2000-2001) and was a third component in her identity construction. Again, this characteristic was present in both this young woman’s words and in observations of her interactions. Her dad and stepmom supported the efforts their daughter made at school and also her unique, individualistic, fashion choices.

Updating – Lauren’s thoughts at eighteen. I was eager to meet Lauren, again, and looked forward to learning if she still boldly externalized her individual style. She did not disappoint me and I found her appearance to be much the same as it had been when I had known her five years in the past. When we met, she was dressed in black tights, a black zip-up hoodie, had long, dyed red hair covered by a pinkish cap on her head, wore a Grateful Dead pendant around her neck, and carried a black purse with pink skulls on it. Additionally, she now had several face piercings and was looking forward to getting her first tattoo. As I turned on my audio recorder and mentioned that it was rather new to me, Lauren’s first statements informed me that, once again, I was meeting with a proudly individualistic and unique young woman:

Lauren: That’s okay (as I fumbled with the recorder). I’m an old soul stuck in a generation of people who live for technology. I could live weeks without a cell phone. I just don’t feel I need it. I need music and I need family. That’s it.

Alice: That’s okay.

Lauren: Dreamers and what’s the word I’m looking for? Optimists. (laughing)

Alice: Still an optimist, huh?

Lauren: Always will be.

This participant’s appearance, words, and interests – particularly as she voiced an aspiration to be a future makeup artist “morticianist” – confirmed her continuing pride in her individuality, and this quality represented the first, on-going characteristic I found from my original study.

Secondly, Lauren displayed another, continuing, affinity factor (Gee, 2000-2001) in her strong attachment to family. Her father had dropped her off at the restaurant in which we met, and he waited for her call before returning. She told me that she remained in her parents’ home, although she went back and forth between her boyfriend’s place and theirs – “but even then I

do not like being away from home.” She noted her parents’ constant strong academic support and said: “I can’t ask for a better family. Honestly I really can’t ... I love my family too much and I will stay there as long as I can.”

Thirdly, the affinity that Lauren had demonstrated in the first study towards art also remained. She quickly confirmed that this was still a passion and told me she wished that she had thought to bring her portfolio with her to the interview. While she was not presently employed in an art related job, her accomplishments and interests – getting her cosmetology and body piercing licenses, and having plans to become a tattoo artist’s apprentice – strongly confirmed this.

I did find a difference in one identity characteristic between the two studies, however. This was apparent as Lauren told me about her position as an aide in a nursing home, a job she described as “loving”:

A lot of the residents love me. A good portion of them do not because I am so different. They do not like the dyed hair, they don't like the piercings, they do not like the kind of makeup I usually wear... I do appreciate the ones who don't really like me; I just appreciate their presence, knowing that it's all right that you don't like me. But, it's just like I'm still going to be here if you ever do like me.

Whereas in the past, Lauren had struggled with her peers’ and school’s construction of her as being “different,” this time she displayed a quality of self-confidence in her choices and seemed resistant to others’ appraisements of them. She related that she presently had quite a few friends, but emphasized that her journey through high school was marked by “having social anxiety” and emphatically said: “I definitely did not picture where I am now. I didn’t think I was going to be where I am now, when I was there.”

Getting to today – across five years. Lauren had entered the high school’s version of an alternative program, as she had planned at the end of middle school. Although she told me that she had ended her eighth-grade year optimistic for the high school and thought, “everybody would be my friend,” the first couple of years there had not gone as she had hoped they would. She shared that she had barely passed her freshman year and had been diagnosed with depression, for which she received medication. Lauren described the high school’s alternative program as being “like more of a study hall,” where she received academic assistance a couple of times a day and claimed that it did not help her. This finding contributed to the study’s second theme of a need for caring in schools, as is described in the section, below. Additionally, her middle school wish for an improved high school social life had not transpired during the first couple of years – she told me: “I thought everybody was out to get me.” Lauren related that she began to improve academically towards the end of her sophomore year:

I think I finally realized this is not how I want my future to be. I do not want to be depressed. I do not want to carry on my life thinking that whatever I do is going to be wrong. So I decided now would be the time to buckle down to get my education, to get the Hell out.

Her relationships with peers also began to change during the middle of high school, as she figured out that “not everybody is out to get me, not everybody doesn’t like me because I’m different.” Lauren’s change in self-confidence can be seen as progressing during this time.

Overall, as I noted her “big story” (Freeman, 2006, Mead, 2003), on-going self-described identity characteristics, I found Lauren to be, in many ways, much the same as she had been in the middle school. She was (and constructed herself as being) creative, artistic, and

still very much involved with her family. Yet, five years later, I also noticed some changes, and I mainly attributed these to the daily, social interactions of “small story” (Bamberg, 2006; Hall, 1997; Mead, 2003) constructions in the larger, adult world. She was now much more confident when describing her habits and interests, and made no mention of the high activity level that had been so problematic in the middle school. Before we separated, this time, Lauren told me: “Life is good. Life is very good. I have a job, saving to buy a car. My family is very loving, once again very supporting.” She predicted: “I think in five years I’ll probably be doing pretty good.”

Sheina’s Case

Table 2. Sheina

	Past Study	Present Study
Key Quotations	<p>I know a lot of what there is to become an adult and what adults do and everything.</p> <p>And rules tend to get me in trouble.</p> <p>Yeah, if you want me to respect you, then respect me first.</p>	<p>I mean I get things done; one day I’ll be manager... and get higher up.</p> <p>When it comes to the real world stuff, I’m really good at it. But when it comes to other things, like career things, it would probably help me if I finished school. I don’t feel as smart as I was in eighth grade.</p> <p>I’ve always wanted to go back and say, Hey I grew up; I’m not an asshole anymore.</p> <p>I used to like really love school, it was me that was messing up.</p>
Key Motifs (Gee & Crawford, 1998)	Self-construction as an adult; rebellion against school practices that “treat [her] like a baby.”	Being responsible, leadership; getting ahead.
Identity Related Affinity Component (Gee, 2000-2001)	“The real world.”	Career; animals.

Review of middle school identity construction. In every school, there are at least several students who all building adults know by name, even though they may have never had personal contact with them. Sheina was that student in the targeted school of my first study. The adults of the alternative education program spent much of their team time discussing whether, or not, to allow this eighth grader to remain in the program. She had been older, by a year, than most of her classmates (as a result of being held back in the first grade), and continuously complained that the adults of the school, along with their rules, treated her “like a baby.” However, being a year older was not the main reason for Sheina’s self-construction of maturity (a first, critical, identity related characteristic); rather, there was a large – and significant – discrepancy between the identity she constructed for herself (within the school) and how the institution’s adults and practices related to her. As an eighth grader, Sheina told me, “My family treats me like an adult” and “I know a lot of what there is to become an adult and what adults do and everything.” Her mother confirmed this assertion and shared that this situation had occurred as Sheina had assumed advanced responsibilities following an accident

that she (the mother) had had while her daughter was quite young. However, as might be expected, the adults of the school viewed Sheina as a typical eighth grader, and as one who was required to be compliant with the usual expectations of the middle school.

Sheina had been placed into the alternative education program because of significant absences (97) and failure in four subjects (AE program intake notes, 2010) in the seventh grade. Middle school adults seemed to recognize this student's intelligence and promise, but were critical about her home life and future potential – “[She’ll] be pregnant within the next couple of years.” Sheina continuously voiced her displeasure with the rules – “I hate listening to the rules; there are too many rules” – and adult authority – “If I could change anything here I’d change the way the teachers treat us. I want them to treat us like we’re their equals.” As a result, this student spent significant amounts of her time in school in “in-school-suspension,” and rebelliousness against school practices represented her second identity related quality. Sheina, as an eighth grader, was an astute (and critical) reader of power positioning. I learned that she (no doubt unbeknownst to most of the school's adults) highly valued education, but only if it directly related to that which she termed “the real world”; she told me, “Learning should be based on how the real world is.” The “real world” was thus this participant's main identity connected “affinity” characteristic (Gee, 2000-2001), and this she defined as “being grown up and getting a job and everything.” Sheina continued to have disciplinary issues during most of her eighth grade year, but remained in the AE program until the school year's end. Overall, her grades were somewhat improved, and she looked forward to the high school, which she expected would provide her with more freedom and choices.

Updating – Sheina at nineteen. As I prepared for this second study, five years later, I looked forward to reconnecting with Sheina and to learning how her life as an actual (societally constructed) young adult was transpiring. Additionally, I couldn't help but wonder how her high school years had gone. I found this participant's interactions in her present, daily world to be the most significantly changed of the three young women with whom I spoke this second time. In some ways, Sheina's “big story” identity (Freeman, 2006) – her temporally greater, over-arching self – seemed to be familiar to that I had known when she was fifteen. She remained the same forthright, opinionated, eager-to-talk young woman whom I had previously known. However, her identity appeared to be the most affected by her daily, dynamic, social interactions in the outer world – those that connected more to a conceptualization of “small story” consideration (Bamberg, 2006; Hall, 1997; Mead, 2003). Now that she was outside of the formal school environment, and was no longer under the auspices of its numerous practices and rules, Sheina had the control she had always seemed to covet. Her anger was also not now apparent.

Sheina and I reconnected in the early part of 2016, during a snowy winter spell. Because of uncertainty about the weather, and the fact that she had moved about an hour and a half from her previous home, we agreed to talk via Skype. Physically, she now presented as a slightly older version of her former self – a pretty young woman with blond hair and blue eyes; I had almost forgotten about her ready, engaging smile and laugh. At nineteen years of age, Sheina held down two jobs – one as a server at a diner and a second as a cashier at a farm supply store. Much of the discussion she now initiated had to do with these jobs and with her plans to “get ahead.” This participant's involvement with job aspirations and future career goals comprised two of her present identity related “affinity” factors (Gee, 2000-2001) and primary “key motifs” (Gee & Crawford, 1998), and these represented key qualitative findings connected to this participant from this second study. Whereas, previously, Sheina had made continuous reference to her desire to prepare for, and to join, the “real world,” she was now an actual, adult member of this environment and her primary narrative component was of her success in this constructed setting. Additionally, Sheina had plans for her future, including a career in business or as a medical assistant. While caring for animals still remained (as in the past) one of her

main affinity interests, the majority of her effort was now invested in “getting ahead.” She told me that, in conjunction with this goal, she was nearly finished with a GED (Graduate Equivalency Degree) program at a local community college.

Sheina’s self-constructions regarding competence in her job, and a leadership role within it, were the primary pieces of information she wished to relate to me, during this second study’s interview. She was proud of the leadership position she assumed at work and claimed that she would “definitely be a manager,” if she remained there a few years. She told me: “I have way more responsibility than the other cashiers, unfortunately, without getting a raise (laughs). But, I do a lot of projects for my manager.” Leadership assumption and the taking of responsibility thus represented this current study’s key qualitative categories connected to Sheina. It seemed to be important to her that I know the relationship she engaged in with her peers at the store:

I know a lot and I just like the fact that someone says I don’t know how to do this, and I know. But I’m never an asshole about it. I’m just, like, this is how you do it. It makes me feel better, it makes them feel better cause you know I kind of help them out of tough situations.

Sheina had transversed a long road from a student who was perceived to be problematic, to a self-described eager, responsible employee with larger aspirations.

Getting to today – across five years. Sheina’s school difficulties had continued at the high school until she dropped out, during the third week of eleventh grade; the first study’s quality of rebelliousness had thus continued throughout her schooling. She told me that she had entered the high school’s version of an alternative program, but described it as having a mainly academic focus, and not one that provided the personal, affective attention of the program in the middle school. As in Lauren’s case, this finding also contributed to the later described theme of a need for school caring. Sheina verbally connected leaving school to: moving and changing schools two times; depression; school absences; and continuing disciplinary measures as, “I got even worse with my rebellious stage.” The experiences she shared implied the need for continued questioning of current school practices, as are discussed in this study’s “implications,” below.

Finally, I believe that Sheina’s reflections on factors related to her developing identity were perceptive and worth exploring, especially in relation to institutional practices (as is inferred in this study’s “implications”). She told me: “I’ve always liked school, liked learning stuff, cause I’ve always wanted to be ahead of the game.” While her current efforts at her job provide evidence to the latter part of this statement, its first assertion might come as a surprise to a number of her former teachers. She readily agreed when I asked her to confirm my interpretation that, in some ways, she had changed: “Yeah, I’ve always wanted to go back and say hi to him (the former middle school assistant principal) and say, hey, I grew up and I’m not an asshole anymore” (laughs). She continued:

I was very mature in that age. I was doing everything. Um, I love my mom and everything, but I was, um, I was doing everything for myself...In my mindset I was very grown up and, now, looking back at it, I understood some of the things I said. I do agree that back then I was ahead of the game. I understood a lot more than I let the teachers in on.

These statements infer that this young woman was beginning to connect her home life, and its responsibilities, to her behavior at school, even though the “ums” in her narrative suggest that, at nineteen years of age, she was not ready to fully commit to this assertion. Whereas most of

the adults in her former school had simply judged Sheina (and her mother) for her rebelliousness, I contend that her statements suggest a level of complexity related to her actions. This finding also supported the study's later implications.

Sheina ended our conversation on an optimistic note and predicted that in five years: "I want to further the whole education thing, so at least I have that under my belt. I might pretty much be "a blondie" here, but at least I will have gotten a degree in something."

Rosie's Case

Table 3. Rosie

	Past Study	Present Study
Key Quotations	Love hurts, boys lie, people die, parents yell, you always try. You're never good enough and you don't know why.	I love it [her job in a childcare center]. I've always wanted to work with kids. It's always been my thing. I think connecting with the students is what matters most.
Key Motifs (Gee & Crawford, 1998)	Obtaining acceptance and affection; a pervasive aura of conflict and apprehension.	Caring for children; conflict.
Identity Related Affinity Component (Gee, 2000-2001)	Music.	Children.

Rosie was the third participant in my second effort and the one whose profile was not included in the published version of my first work. Because I wanted to obtain a fuller sketch of how my participants' lives were progressing, and as I could not re-contact Austin, I chose to include Rosie this time; I believe her insights contribute significantly to the understandings from both of these studies.

Review of middle school identity construction. As an eighth grader, I had found Rosie to be immediately memorable – first, for her smile and, then, for the sadness that was apparent lying just beneath it. The adults of Rosie's middle school thought of her as a student with strong academic potential and also as one with significantly influencing home issues: "has a unique home situation that she puts a lot of energy into managing"; "has some emotional baggage and needs positive experiences here." They especially worried about her potential for risky future choices. At the time of my first effort, Rosie lived with her dad and grandparents, and periodically visited her mom who was reportedly struggling with alcohol related issues.

In my first study, the central motif (participant qualitative characteristic) connected to Rosie focused on the energy she expended in seeking acceptance and affection, along with the effort it took her to deal with the resulting complications and conflicts. In conjunction with her attention needs, she displayed significant amounts of wariness, insecurity, and distrust of others' intentions. These manifested as a quality of apprehension concerning school adults and her parents. In relation to the former, Rosie said: "Teachers judge you by your looks and the way you dress" and "you have to build a relationship with them"; her relationship with family was marked by continual conflict. Similarly, she was insecure and hesitant with her peers, spoke frequently about the school's numerous cliques and told me, "Everybody thinks that they're better than us" (her AE classmates). As a result, she made only a few, close, peer

connections at the middle school, and these were with other alternative program students; a quality of social apprehensiveness was still quite apparent.

In the first part of the year, Rosie seemed to thrive in the small environment of the alternative program and shared: “Getting to know the teachers is a program positive.” However, as the school year progressed, I noticed that this connection ebbed and waned; her pattern was to visibly become close to selected adults – her guidance counselor, a teacher – and then to immediately back off the relationship at the sign of any conflict. Despite displaying inconsistent improvement in both academics and behavior as her buy-in to the alternative program fluctuated, she improved overall during her eighth grade year. Towards the end of the spring, Rosie planned to enroll in the high school’s version of an AE program, telling me she thought her dad had signed her up for it. In my first effort, I had found it interesting that she thought she might like to be a guidance counselor in the future. As will be noted below, this statement now seemed like a harbinger to her future choices.

Updating – Rosie at eighteen. Rosie’s ready smile was familiar when we met again, five years later. She was dressed in black with a colorful scarf, had a couple of face piercings, a pierced tongue, and at least two tattoos peeking out from under her clothes. Overall, she now impressed me as looking healthy and appeared quite happy to see me. However, she commented that she still “doesn’t get along with people who aren’t like me” and told me that she is selective about friends. Her quality of social apprehension thus remained. I noticed that Rosie now wore an engagement ring on her finger and learned that she planned to get married the following year. She noted that she and her fiancé lived together in an “in-law apartment” at her father’s house. In this latter statement, it seemed clear that Rosie and her father continued to retain a relationship, but the conflicts that had so frequently been noted with her parents in the middle school continued. As I reminded her of her past quotation that “parents yell” (Table 3, above), she replied: “Well, like the parents yell part is definitely the same thing [today]. I mean I don’t fight as much with my parents like I used to, but it’s definitely still relevant (laughs).”

In addition to discussing the past five years and current people in her life, it was very obvious that Rosie (like Sheina) now wanted to talk mostly about her job. This consisted of providing childcare in a before/after school center in her (past and current) community and she noted: “I love it; it’s always been my thing.” As is connected to the section that follows, Rosie had strong opinions on the need for connecting with children and believed this to be a critical element in education. Her present identity was centered within the efforts she made while working with children at her childcare position and an affinity factor (and category) of caring for children was strongly inferred. As this young woman (as noted below) had spent her own educational time trying to form attachments with teachers, she now flipped the two positions and constructed herself to be the adult giver of caring, rather than its eager recipient.

Getting to today – across five years. Rosie’s path to the job she now loved had been quite complex. Since I had last seen her, her time in formal schooling had been rather tumultuous and is illustrative of the quality of conflict that was a part of her identity. She had entered the high school’s version of an alternative program and, like Lauren and Sheina, spoke of its different (from the middle school’s) structure. However, this participant differed in her view of how effective she thought this structure had been for her:

Rosie: It was just like a study hall, but you could have it up to two or three times a day. And you could go in there and they would help you. I mean it worked, especially if you utilized it.

Alice: Did it feel like the same atmosphere [as the eighth grade program]?

Rosie: Um, kind of, yeah. Yeah. I connected a lot more with the assistants, than I did with the actual person [teacher], though.

Again, it was apparent that Rosie had sought out adult connections in fulfillment of her primary needs, as she took advantage of this setting's one-to-one academic assistance as a means for adult connection. As with Lauren and Sheina, this emphasis on caring again led to the study's second theme.

Rosie was next sent to the local BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services) tutoring center for two hours a day, in fulfillment of the district's mandate to provide her with continuing education. She noted that, once again, she appreciated the one-to-one adult connection she received, and explained that, after this short-term placement ended, she became determined to continue her schooling only in another alternative setting: "cause high school wasn't the right place for me." When attempts to find a different, satisfactory, high school program failed, and as she learned that she was now too far behind to graduate with her class, Rosie made the decision to end her engagement with formal schooling. Instead, she enrolled in a BOCES centered GED program and proudly noted that she received her (GED) degree, "the same year they [her school cohort] graduated, but a couple of months before [them]."

Rosie's constructions of her schooling experiences and the effect these had on her beliefs and career path are important, both to her as an individual and to this study's larger understandings. They, along with constructions from Lauren and Sheina, figure in the larger, thematic findings that follow.

Themes Stemming from Participants' Interview Information

In addition to discerning information about my three participants' present constructions of identity and their views on past school experiences, I also sought their insights on educational practices, in general. Two larger study themes developed through analysis of discursive data from their narratives and from comparisons of findings from my first study with those from this second one.

A valuing of former alternative program membership. As was also discerned in my first study, all three of the young women again expressed a valuing of education in their narratives, – Lauren, mostly to please her parents, Rosie, for what it might teach her about working with children, and Sheina, for its capacity to help her get ahead in the "real world." They were each proud of the degrees they had or would soon receive and spoke of plans for possibly furthering their education. While each young woman noted the various issues she had had while in eighth grade, she also gave strong and common (to each other) opinions related to the middle school's alternative program and its perceived value. I sought answers to this question by presenting the following question to each participant during our interview: "If you had a little sister or maybe a child in the future, who was similar to you in middle school, would you place her in the same program?" They told me:

Lauren: "Yes, I would" and "It was an amazing experience."

Rosie: "Absolutely. Like she [AE teacher] was always on us about everything and at the time I was like (shakes head and sighs), 'get off my back,' but it helped me to realize that she actually did care... She helped me a lot. I don't think I would have gone as far as I did."

Sheina: "I would definitely use the alternative program if it was available and they were like me... I'll say this, 'I would take it in a second!'"

As can be inferred from these statements, each participant readily affirmed approval of her past membership in the alternative program. Each also expressed an opinion that she had not utilized the program's benefits fully enough, and had not really appreciated it in the past as much as she would now, if allowed to go back. In our discussion, Sheina clearly noted this when I asked

her what she would like to say to her former teacher, today: “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m just so sorry.”

It might be suggested that such regret is a typical human experience for many adults, as we look back at the perceptions we held when we were the age of my participants; I concur and, in fact, wondered how many of the changes I was hearing in this study were because these youths had aged and simply grown up. Still, I contend that their opinions were emphatic and my analysis of the overall statements they shared resulted in strongly indicated themes. While these young women (as in the first study) gave additional suggestions for reforms in education – daily scheduling changes, content concentrations, specialized schools – a recognition of the role that caring played in making their alternative program valuable was especially strong and resulted in the study’s second theme.

A need for caring in education. Peterson (2014) asserted that in qualitative efforts, “emerging themes [may] prompt examination of additional pertinent literature” (p. 297). I found this author’s statement was especially applicable to this present work, as the essential need for caring in schools strongly emerged from my analysis of participants’ words and became the study’s second theme. The alternative program at the center of my first study had included elements of connection and caring that were readily recognized, five years later, by its former members. In relation to the inference for this essential component, I found myself reengaging with Noddings’ (1992, 2002, 2015) work, and a centrally related suggestion from this scholar will be discussed in the study’s “discussion” section.

Rosie, in particular, exemplified the caring theme, as she continued to search for this element the entire remainder of her time in school and now adamantly professed its need: “I think connecting with the students is what matters most.” Lauren’s statements concurred, and she additionally emphasized a need for peer connection as being additionally integral to the success of the AE program: “I think their goal was to get us all to work together, not just in classwork, but as friends... We had everybody in there and we just all came together as one. I wish that would happen more.” Although she continued to feel like an outsider for much of the remainder of her time in school, Lauren looked back fondly at the caring and community she had experienced in the alternative program. Finally, as Sheina shared that she had not found the alternative program of the high school to be as effective as that of the middle school, I heard the same: “They didn’t seem to care that much. So, I definitely would tell her [the middle school AE teacher] to advise other people to keep it up”; she, too, valued the middle school program’s essence of caring.

In reflecting on past experiences in the alternative program, all three young women now, as young adults, identified components they had valued. Although no participant could be said to have had a smooth path through the high school, each emphatically asserted that her placement in the eighth grade AE program had been the right decision. Also, each credited her perceived experiences of caring and connections as being the primary reason. As we consider the means to improved schooling for similar, future students, a careful consideration of possibly related factors to these findings is worthwhile.

Discussion

A Consideration of Study Limitations

Before commencing a final discussion of the implications from this study, a consideration of its potential limitations is necessary. Limitations are inherent in all research endeavors and trustworthy qualitative efforts are enhanced from their careful reflection. First, as is frequently typical of qualitative work, these young people had been former members of only one school. However, this study’s aim was to deeply illustrate its targeted case – in this

effort, former alternative education participants and their lived realities and perceptions. Additionally, as my long-range goal was to obtain ongoing sketches of my participants' lived realities during various intervals of their lives, and with as little inconvenience to them as possible, the time I spent with each young woman was limited. In order to possibly enhance future understandings, I am contemplating adding a focus group session during my next, ongoing, component of this longitudinal work, in five years time. The purpose of this study, as with any qualitative work, was to illustrate the realities and constructions of a targeted group, rather than to be generalizable. However, as with other such endeavors, its implications are likely to be transferable to similar research considerations.

Implications and Study Relevance

Evolving constructions and the need for longitudinal studies. The first implication from this study stems from the idea that, at the time the study occurred, its three participants were still residing in the "borderlands" (Anzaldúa, 1987, 1996) between youth and adulthood. This work illustrates its participants' conceptualizations of their past schooling experiences from this middle place, and thus sheds valuable light on these youths' thinking from this specific time in life. At eighteen-nineteen years of age, my three participants readily credited caring from program adults as being an important benefit obtained from their experiences in the eighth grade AE program. However, none of them suggested that school practices might have had a connection to their broader, negative schooling issues. Rather, each young woman laid the blame for such (negative) experiences solely on herself. Lauren did not consider any role the school might have had in not adequately accommodating her activity level and learning style. Instead, she continued to source both her difficulties during the first two years of high school and her eventual positive academic change to factors stemming from within herself: "I decided now would be the time to buckle down, to get my education." A similar self-attribution can be found in Sheina's words: "Some days I really did like [the AE teacher] and I respected her, but for the most part, I was just being a stubborn little asshole." Likewise, Rosie's statement that the high school "...wasn't my atmosphere, I guess you could say" puts the onus for fitting into the setting directly on herself.

A clear change is indicated in comparisons of my participants' statements from their current places "in-between," to the perceptions they had voiced as younger, actual members of their schools. As these young women continue to get older, and their experiences in the larger outer world continue to broaden, will their perceptions of, and attribution for, the negative issues they had in school continue to change? I suggest that this work thus infers the need for further, longitudinal studies for understanding and assessing the effects of reform efforts for students in the margins. Quinn et al. (2006) specifically made the suggestion for such ongoing research with an alternative education population, and my own plan for continuing five-year interval efforts with these same participants is one response to their call.

An implied question regarding school/societal determinations and social practices. Secondly, this study illustrates the role that past and present social practices have in contributing to individuals' changing constructions of selves and their surrounding world. It suggests the need for continuing research into this factor, especially in regards to young people in the margins. Wenger (1998) asserts that we must examine both the social nature of practices and their "interconnectivity and negotiated roles" (p. 45). The young women of this study were no longer influenced by the daily institutional practices of formal schooling and the connection of these to their constructions of self and position, as they had been five years in the past. By the second study's time, they were beginning to negotiate the social practices of the larger outer world, in conjunction with their newly acquired, adult, responsibilities and freedom. The connection that these differently influenced, outer world practices had to their current identities

was meaningfully implied, and an exploration of the nature of new practices to identity seems merited. In particular, I contend that this work infers a need to actively question the sourcing and perceived construction of school-based and outer world assumptions, determinations, and practices, especially in relation to populations similar to this effort's young women. Whereas my first study's participants had been determined to be at-risk in relation to the practices of their school, five years later each seemed to confidently own her new construction of "adult," within the outer world – Lauren, as an assistant to the elderly and an aspiring artist, Sheina as an up and coming leader at her work, and Rosie as a compassionate caretaker of children. At this time, each participant appeared to be mostly content – with herself, the place she was now assuming in the outer world, and the future path she was choosing to take. Additionally, I contend that each young woman might now be thought of as being a contributing member of her larger community.

A comparison of findings between the past study and this current one thus implies a noticeable change in constructions of identity by (and about) my (now) young adult participants. Additionally, these findings infer a link of these changes to influencing social practices – from the school and the larger society. In relation, I contend that a questioning of the institutional constructions and practices that had given its former school members the label of "at-risk" students is merited. On a broader scale, my two studies' implications suggest the need to more fully explore both the practices and the agents in schools – and in the larger society – that determine (and are accorded the power to determine) the meanings of "potential" and resulting "success." Specifically, this need exists as these terms are connected to youth who are typically found in alternative education programs.

Final suggestions. Lastly, I believe that one final note is merited. In relation to this study's implications, a suggestion that more questions than answers are included may be made. In fact, I agree and argue that this component is probably this work's most worthwhile implication. It infers that we must continually ask questions of, and reassess, our larger determinations and decisions connected to our youth, especially in relation to those residing in the margins. Additionally, we should always keep in mind that each young person is a completely distinct individual. Noddings (1992) poses a challenge for a "...greater respect for a wonderful range of human capacities now largely ignored in schools" (p. xiii). While not minimizing the importance of academic curriculum, she encourages its reexamination and asserts that education's primary aim should be "to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving and lovable people" (p. xiv). I contend these latter characteristics pertain to the young women I came to know in this study and suggest that such individuals personify the diverse range of talents implied in her statement. As Lauren, Sheina, and Rosie have demonstrated, the voices from this population can add important value to our research efforts. They represent a diverse and worthy resource for our efforts towards reform.

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