Conceptions of Student Success Within an Urban Alternative Learning Program


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Abstract

*Success* is a term that is often used in educational contexts, but it can be elusive and difficult to define. Furthermore, articulating what student success is, and who has agency over it, can influence the efficacy of the social actors charged with impacting it. This qualitative, grounded theory study pursues two research questions: 1) How is success conceptualized at an urban alternative secondary school? and 2) How is student success depicted to those outside of that school? My analysis of the data that I collected revealed that teachers' conception of success inside of the school was quite different from the external narrative depicted by the school website and within programmatic, informative materials like the student enrollment application and the student handbook. Furthermore, the tension between this internal conception of student success and the differing external narrative framed a struggle for the teachers, one that they felt that they were continually engaged in, a struggle to build and maintain their collective efficacy and to legitimate their work as professional educators to those outside of the school.

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**Chapter 1: Conceptions of Success**

Personally, as a teacher who worked first within a traditional public school in a large but mostly isolated community in rural Wisconsin, I held a standard, but narrow, conception of what student success looked like. I had goals for my students, and I believed that their goals aligned with my own. I knew that my students needed to learn and master particular skills in order to complete course credit, to pass standardized exams, and ultimately to graduate from high school. If I could convince them that reading and writing were not only challenging at times, but also rewarding and potentially life altering, that was an added bonus. Later, as a teacher and as a teacher development facilitator within a rural village in the small east-African country of Malawi, where I often felt like a complete novice myself, I began to understand that less tangible outcomes—like building relationships, growing advocacy, and engagement in inquiry— could also be aspects of student success.

When I returned to the United States, I spent two years working with students labeled "at-risk" in traditional high schools before beginning my graduate work. At that point, I yearned to explore less often articulated indicators of student success, as I felt that the students that I was working with experienced success in ways that did not include standardized test scores or high grade point averages. Upon accepting a position at Ray of Light Alternative Learning Program, an urban alternative school in the Midwest, I immediately saw the disconnect between my personal, early conceptions of success in schools and my new, broader, more complex conceptions of it. I found that I gave significantly less value to the measured evidence of student growth as a sign of success, and I felt like I was not alone in doing so. It seemed to me that something different was

happening within the alternative school than was happening within the other, more traditional or mainstream educational contexts in which I had worked.

The more I observed success within Ray of Light, the more I realized how little teachers within the traditional educational environments—myself included—knew about alternative schools. I noticed immediately that the teachers within this school were doing something different from the other schools where I had worked, something that seemed to have positive impacts on both the teachers and the students and that often resulted in extensions of genuine empathy, in shared moments of pride, and in collective celebration. Upon reflection, I realized that Ray of Light would be an ideal location for purposeful research into a more comprehensive description of what it meant to be successful.

## The Problem With "Alternative"

Alternative education programs are often perceived by those outside of them to be second-choice programs or second-chance schools for students who cannot attend traditional schools for an array of reasons (Mills & McGregor, 2013). In fact, it is commonly believed that if a student cannot be successful within a traditional educational environment, as success is defined there, then the student should consider alternative education, where success might be imagined differently. This assumption, however, stems from an incomplete understanding of what alternative schools do to help re-engage students in learning and how they do it.

*Alternative* is a word that evokes otherness and quietly suggests that its figured counterpart, the traditional*,* mainstream, or normal, exists. Unsurprisingly, there is a widely held perception that any kind of alternative program is "other than normal" or, at worst, "lacking" in comparison to its figured counterpart. Such is the case with

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alternative education, because it is not the dominant mode for educating youth. My

research demonstrates that many of the positive ways that Ray of Light Alternative

Learning Program was different from a traditional school were not expressed in popular

opinion to those outside of alternative education.

## Research Questions

As I considered how to frame a purposeful examination into success at this

particular alternative school, I formulated two research questions:

1) How is success conceptualized within an urban, alternative, secondary school?

2) How is student success depicted to those outside of the school context?

My exploration of these questions led me to a grounded theory about how teachers

conceptualized success and how that conception related to teacher self- and collective

efficacy. My analysis of the data collected throughout this study led me to recognize vast

differences in the ways that the teachers viewed themselves and their own work and the

ways that they and their work were portrayed to those outside of the school.

Furthermore, I believe that this disparity in how the teachers viewed themselves and how

they were viewed by others forced them into a tense dilemma wherein they struggled to

gain external legitimacy from their peers.

## Purpose of the Study

This research closely examines the context of Ray of Light Alternative Learning

Program (ALP) to learn more about how success was actually being conceptualized

within this program. I do not assert that the conception of student success described here

is an ideal conception; instead, I present the specific conceptualization of success within

this school at the time of the study. Therefore, within this text, I examine and analyze the

specific ways that success was conceptualized within that space and examine how that conception of success was depicted to the community outside of it. Due to the nature of examining a group's conception of success within their own work environment, I intentionally approached this research as a collective endeavor with the teachers at Ray of Light. They continuously gave their time and energy in contributing to this work, with the purpose of exposing their internal conception of student success to those outside the school.

I also want to be explicit in stating that, as individuals, we teachers are unique in our histories and experiences; thus, I have used a constructivist lens to frame our own work and our work with our students. All of the educators at Ray of Light—myself included—proudly saw ourselves as learners. The work that we did together to uncover our school's internal conception of student success was indeed a joint effort, as we were all invested in the success of our students and our role in that success. As I am writing this, the teachers involved in this study continue to contribute their ideas and thoughts about this work through text messages, emails, and informal conversations. Their on-going commitment to my research leads me to believe that they continue to long and hope to be seen as the legitimate educational professionals that they are, ones who are doing meaningful work with vulnerable and promising students.

**Overview of Chapters**

In Chapter 2, I review the literature regarding subtractive schooling (Noddings, 2012, 2013, 2015; Valenzuela, 1999) and deficit discourses (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012; Valencia, 2012) in order to explore the ways in which students' experiences in urban school contexts are constructed through social structures and language. I describe the

frame of language legitimation (van Leeuwen, 2000, 2007), and I review the corresponding literature, which I use in later chapters to develop an analytic framework and to explore my data. Additionally, I provide an overview of literature on teacher self- and collective efficacy, which alludes to the potential impacts of the teachers' struggle to be seen as legitimate.

In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of grounded theory, my research methods, and the theoretical framework that I used in this research. I then introduce the participants and the setting of the study. I also explain my choice to participate in the study as a full participant observer. Finally, I detail the analytical process that my colleagues and I used to construct a grounded theory regarding success within this school.

In Chapter 4, I share my findings with regard to my two research questions. I answer the first question by describing the three major elements of student success as conceptualized by the teachers. I then briefly describe the various sub-elements of the elements of student success. I provide data-driven examples for each of the major and sub-elements. Then, I approach the second research question by examining publically available texts, again providing specific examples to support my understanding of the external depiction of student success.

In Chapter 5, I discuss my findings in light of the literature on subtractive schooling, deficit discourses, and teacher self- and collective efficacy. I describe the ways that Ray of Light seemed to practice a sort of "additive schooling" and how the teachers yearned for recognition of their professionalism and their contributions to student success. I also cite the potential for research in this area, specifically in regard to the interconnectedness of teacher efficacy and conceptions of student success. Through

examining all of these together, we might come to see the value of increasingly diverse

and non-traditional educational spaces.

**Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

At the time of this study, I was working as an educational practitioner at an urban alternative school program, the same site as the study, within the Midwestern United States. The term "success" was used often within this environment: "I just want him (or her) to be successful" and "We want to help you be successful here" were two common phrases used by the educators within my school. Yet, when I searched our school's own website for the word "success," I only found it in one place: a note on student attendance. Surely the educators and administrators at this school saw more to student success than attendance; most certainly those individuals working within this school conceived of success in much more dynamic and complex ways. Just like a society with a culture of its own, this school had established vocabulary—like the term "success"—which carried specific meanings for the teachers and students. This very language, in fact, was used as a measure for how well the program was working. But, without really knowing exactly how we defined this term, I found it initially difficult to describe to others how our team worked with our students and how we experienced this success.

As a colleague of the participants in this study, I knew that these educators did not assume that the discourses used within our school were transparent representations of the world. They knew that their students often viewed school as a site of struggle and "success" as something that was far from attainable. Thus, it was at times difficult for the teachers to avoid others' definitions for student achievement. Success seemed to fall into something that Lather and Lather (1991) called "languacentricity": the collapse of one, seemingly true, reality into language. The participants in my study used certain words to name instances that did not fall into the all-too-common dualistic discourse of "success"

or "failure," particularly in terms of grades and standardized test scores. Instead, their language seemed to name something far more encompassing. This tension between conventional definitions of success and something different, something specifically conceptualized within this alternative educational space, immensely interested me.

In what follows, I review the most relevant research literature on the framework of subtractive schooling (Noddings, 2012, 2013, 2015; Valenzuela, 1999), deficit discourses (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012; Valencia, 2012), and teacher individual and collective efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1997, 2006; Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Guskey & Passaro, 1994; Raudenbush, Rowan, & Cheong, 1992; Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). I used this literature to bring to light some of the ways that the teachers conceptualized success within Ray of Light and how success was depicted to those outside of the school. I also review Theo van Leeuwen's (2000, 2007) analysis of language legitimation, as I used it as a frame for my analysis of how teachers talked about their students and their successes. This literature served as a basis for discussion around the conception and depiction of student success at Ray of Light. I also used this literature as a way to understand some of the potential implications for how teachers' perceptions of their students' success conflicted with the external narrative of student success at this alternative high school.

**Subtractive Schooling**

Throughout my experience working within and observing alternative school settings, I have noticed that the interactions between teachers and students, namely the strength of the relationships between the two, seemed to have an impact on student engagement in learning. Valenzuela (1999) laid out the theory of subtractive schooling,

which posits that schools that do not engage students in learning subtract resources from their students. Researchers use this concept to better understand the perceived successes and failures among youth. Subtractive schooling can manifest in two ways: (a) teachers and administrators fail to create meaningful relationships with their students, which leads the students to feel that the teachers do not care about them and that their culture is not valued; and (b) teachers and administrators perpetuate institutionalized assimilationist practices that disregard student culture (Valenzuela, 1999). The theory of subtractive schooling informed how I collected and interpreted the data for this study, as many research studies revealed a close link between student success and caring in education (DeVillar, Faltis, & Cummins, 1994; McNeil, 1988; Smith, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999).

**Relationships and Authentic Caring**

When teachers and administrators view their students through a deficit lens and fail to build meaningful relationships, they disregard their students' culture. As Valenzuela (1999) established, this disregard can lead to a reliance on dominant definitions of success, which often leads students to resist institutionalized education. Therefore, it is the role of the teachers and administrators to actively avoid deficit discourses and to initiate meaningful social relationships with students. Indeed, a student's desire for and excitement about relationships with adults is informed by their past experiences. Noddings (2013) wrote that if a student has had negative experiences with adults in the past, then they may no longer expect to build authentic relationships with their teachers. Therefore, teachers and administrators must be the instigators of these social relationships; in doing so, they avoid viewing their students through a deficit lens, and they reduce student resistance to education.

When meaningful student and teacher relationships are not formed, students perceive that their teachers do not care about them and that their needs and desires are unimportant. Both DeVillar, Faltis, and Cummins (1994) and Smith (1995) emphasized the need for teachers to actively get to know their students as individuals. Similarly, McNeil (1988) expressed the importance of teachers valuing students as whole beings. Valenzuela (1999) showed a clear connection between student-teacher social relationships and student success. When students feel invalidated because they perceive a lack of caring on the part of their teachers, resources are subtracted from them. This diminishes the development of their ability to authentically care and engage in an adult social relationship, and it forces the student into an inauthentic, power-draining relationship (Valenzuela, 1999).

**Assimilationist Practices**

In addition to the problem of inauthentic caring, teachers and administrators engage in subtractive schooling when they employ and enforce assimilationist policies and practices that are designed to strip students of their culture and language (Valenzuela, 1999). McDermott, Raley, and Seyer-Ochi (2009) analyzed the general biases in labeling students from marginalized communities as "at-risk." They asserted that educators often make an effort to assimilate all students to one category of student. This bias suggests that "White, middle-class lives offer children the best of all worlds. [Thus], the message to educators: Fix the children, and race and class barriers can be overcome one person at a time" (p. 101). Those students who do not properly take up and perform within this construct are thus being divested of their culture—the definition of subtractive schooling—and are being viewed through a deficit lens.

**Deficit Discourses in Schools**

The use of deficit discourse in education is an inclination to focus on what is wrong with children and then to see those "wrongs" as deficiencies. Indeed, teachers and administrators use negatively connotated language to describe groups of students who have traditionally experienced failure within schools. Such discourse can be just as harmful to student identity as subtractive schooling practices. Pica-Smith and Valoria (2012) asserted that educators must examine these deficiency-based perspectives of students because such language is detrimental to student identity and often based in stereotypes.

Rank (2004) addressed how deficit discourses arise from the assumption that student failure can be predicated on the problems of marginalized peoples instead of linked to inequity in opportunities or educational access. In particular, these discourses appear when educational professionals assume that some children are inferior to other children because of their genetic, cultural, or experiential differences; educators blame the individual instead of an inequitable system for this perceived inferiority. By extension, students are prone to a sense of despair, because they feel that their problems are predetermined based on their race, culture, or socioeconomic status (Pica-Smith & Valoria, 2012).

As Glassett (2012) noted, "labeling students as 'at-risk' can be counter productive" (p. 18). When blame for a student's perceived deficiencies is placed on the student instead of on the institution, students quickly become disengaged in their learning (Loutzenheiser, 2002). The result of these deficit discourses, then, is disenchanted,

disengaged learners who are reluctant or unable to see themselves achieving traditional definitions of success. As I will explore in Chapter 4, their teachers also struggle with the deficit language used around these students and with their own teaching practices.

## Language Legitimation as an Analytic Frame

To determine the nature of both the internal and external discourse regarding Ray of Light ALP, I used Theo van Leeuwen's approach to discourse analysis in my data analysis, which I present in Chapter 4. Van Leeuwen's (2000) notion of language legitimation allowed me to examine the language used to legitimize and delegitimize the work—and the resulting success—of the teachers and students at Ray of Light ALP. Van Leeuwen (2007) noted four major categories of legitimation in discourse: (a) authorization, (b) moral evaluation, (c) rationalization, and (d) mythopoesis. When looking at a text, a researcher might see one or more of these categories being used to legitimize or delegitimize the ideas within the text. The researcher can also use them to glean insight regarding who has authority within spaces and over actions.

Authorization examines language legitimation in regard to "authority over tradition, custom, and law, and/or persons vested with institutional authority" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 105). It generally answers the question "Who says we must do this?" and it appears in the forms of personal, expert, role model, impersonal, tradition, and conformity authority (van Leeuwen, 2007). I use this category extensively in my own data analysis in Chapter 4.

Moral evaluation is legitimation in reference to value systems (van Leeuween, 2007). It might appear as an evaluation of something based on morals or values, or it might also appear as an abstraction or an analogy. In the case of this study, I quite often

identified moral evaluation as a frame when analyzing my data, as many of the teachers referenced what was "good" and valuable in their opinions. Similarly, many of the public documents used the word "should," which suggests that moral evaluation is at play within text or language (van Leeuwen, 2000).

Rationalization often appears along with moral evaluation (van Leeuwen, 2007). It is composed of two subcategories: instrumental rationalization and theoretical rationalization. Instrumental rationalization speaks to the goals and effects or outcomes of institutionalized social actions. Theoretical rationalization, on the other hand, is language that references the natural order of things as a mode of rationalization and legitimation. Van Leeuwen (2007) asserted that theoretical rationalization generally refers to the way things are.

Mythopoesis, the final category of van Leeuwen's framework, is legitimation that surfaces in narratives wherein the outcome of the narrative rewards or values certain actions which have been deemed legitimate and punishes those actions which are seen as non-legitimate (van Leeuwen, 2007). If, for example, a person has acquired a greater amount of wealth than they previously had seemingly by hard work alone, then one might use the phrase "they've pulled themselves up by their bootstraps" to describe that person. Such a phrase values the protagonist's hard work without mentioning the other factors that also contributed to the increased wealth, such as assistance from others and societal structures. This phrase also connotes that if the opposite of hard work is devalued, then those who do not "pull themselves up" will remain at the hypothetical bottom.

**Teacher Efficacy**

If teachers work hard to avoid and oppose subtractive schooling, but struggle to overcome the deficit language that envelops them, then I believe that there will likely be implications of that struggle on teachers' self- and collective efficacy. As a result of the work of Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997; Bandura & Schunk, 1981), the concept of self-efficacy has become an area of focus in educational psychology over the last four decades; increasingly, teacher self-efficacy has become an area of intensified concentration, especially in the research of Guskey and Passaro (1994), Raudenbush et al. (1992), and Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998).

**General Self-Efficacy**

Before diving into the specifics of teacher efficacy, it is important to establish the most basic and earliest developed construct related to the idea of self-efficacy: a person's belief in the strength and extent of their competencies (Bandura, 1977). Different from outcome expectations—wherein an individual might expect particular outcomes based on certain actions—self-efficacy influences an individual's *choice* of tasks, *effort* put forth, and *persistence* (Bandura, 1986), not necessarily their choice of actions. The concept of self-efficacy allows us to better understand why individuals choose to carry out some tasks over others, the amount of time and energy that they invest in those tasks, and the extent to which they persist in the face of adversity. Further, one's perceptions of their own efficacy influence the ways in which they think, be it erratically or strategically, optimistically or pessimistically (Bandura, 2006). A teacher's choice in tasks, the energy that they invest in those tasks, and their persistence when challenged can all greatly impact the outcomes of their work with students. Similarly, efficacy impacts the ways

that a teacher thinks.  For these reasons, I chose to examine efficacy in conjunction with my research questions regarding teachers' conceptions of student success.

An example of general self-efficacy might be a parent's belief that he can help his children become better readers by reading to them in the evenings, when the family has free time.  Simply *knowing* that reading to a child may increase their reading abilities is not an example of efficacy; rather, it is an example of outcome expectations.  However, when this parent *believes* that he can play a role in his child's reading ability because he perceives himself to be capable of both reading out loud and carving out time to do so, it can be said that he is efficacious.  He believes that he, as a parent, has the ability to positively impact his child's reading abilities and expects that his efforts will have a positive and desired outcome.

Expectations and beliefs alone, however, do not determine behavior (Bandura, 1977).  Expectations of success might help an individual confidently take on a task when they know full well that the actions leading to the desired outcome might be quite challenging.  If the actions are too demanding, and the actor cannot carry them out effectively, then efficacy is not said to have caused the failure.  However, the individual's efficacy may be impacted by this failure in the future.  Therefore, it is generally understood that self-efficacy is multi-dimensional and dynamic.  It can change in magnitude, generality, and strength depending on several factors.

Four factors lead to diminished or strengthened general self-efficacy: (a) performance accomplishments, (b) vicarious experience, (c) verbal persuasion, and (d) emotional arousal (Bandura, 1977; Schunk, 1991).  When an individual experiences a success, their sense of self-efficacy is generally increased; when they experience a

failure, their sense of self-efficacy generally decreases. However, once an individual develops a strong sense of self-efficacy, a single failure, or even many failures, may not lessen the belief in their capabilities. With each success, the individual's confidence increases and their self-efficacy grows stronger. Bandura also pointed out the importance of initial attempts at a task, as they are primary influences on self-efficacy construction: When initial attempts lead to failure, the individual's self-efficacy will be quite low.

Vicarious experience also plays a role in self-efficacy. Both Bandura (1977) and Schunk (1989) examined this role in their research. If an individual observes a peer who they perceive to have comparable capabilities complete a task successfully, then they will likely believe that they are also capable of achieving that task. Therefore, when individuals compare themselves and the outcomes of their own actions to others similar to themselves, they often feel as if they are also capable of having the type of outcome achieved by their peer. Such experiences of vicarious success, then, can increase an individual's self-efficacy.

Similarly, verbal persuasion impacts self-efficacy. Schunk (1991) explored the relationship between a peer's language and an individual's efficacy. When a peer simply tells an individual that they are capable of carrying out a task, the individual's self-efficacy increases regardless of whether or not the statement is actually true. Generally, this source of increased efficacy is temporary, especially if the outcome of the subsequent action is negative.

Emotional arousal also influences self-efficacy. When an individual experiences the physiological changes—such as a rise in heart rate or sweating—that are a result of emotional arousal, efficacy may increase or decrease based on the individual's

interpretation of those changes. For example, if the individual interprets the physiological changes as signaling a lack of skills or ability, then their efficacy will likely decrease (Bandura, 1977).

Individuals who are efficacious work harder and are more persistent than individuals who feel incapable of the task before them. Thus, self-efficacy plays a role in achieving desirable outcomes. If a person exerts more effort over a longer period of time because they perceive themselves to be capable of a given task, then they are, in turn, more likely to produce the results that they want. Conversely, if an individual has a low sense of efficacy regarding a particular task, then they might not persevere over time, or they may even avoid that task (Bandura, 1977).

**Teacher Self-Efficacy**

Researchers generally describe teacher self-efficacy as the extent to which a teacher believes that they are capable of success; it is a teacher's conviction that they can influence student learning, even when working with difficult or seemingly unmotivated students (Guskey & Passaro, 1994; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). The terms "capability" and "conviction" are used in this definition, as self-efficacy refers to self-perception of competency, not to actual levels of competence. The research of Ashton, Olejnik, Crocker, and McAuliffe (1982) showed that teacher efficacy has implications for pedagogical practices, student learning, classroom management, and teacher motivation.

As Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) pointed out, Julian Rotter's work was fundamental to the development of early theories regarding self-efficacy and teacher efficacy. Rotter's social learning theory was used as the basis for the RAND Organization's research on internal and external controls of reinforcement, which

differentiated between *general teaching efficacy* and *personal teaching efficacy.* The former concept describes a teacher's beliefs about the power of external factors in a child's life, like violence at home, socio-economic status, race, and gender, in comparison to their own powers as educators. Personal teaching efficacy, on the other hand, is an aspect of efficacy that is more specific and individual to the teacher and refers to the teacher's confidence—or lack thereof—in their training and/or experiences leading to success (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). The distinction between these two types of teacher efficacy plays a key role in my own research, as I will show in Chapter 5.

**Pedagogical implications.** Research also suggests that both general and personal teaching efficacy influences teachers' pedagogical practices. The works of Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) and of Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) explored this connection. Teachers who are efficacious both generally and within specific contexts are more likely to implement innovative pedagogical practices, and they usually spend more of their class time doing interactive instruction than lecture-based instruction. Teachers with high efficacy manage stress better than teachers with low efficacy, and they tend to stay in the teaching profession longer without experiencing "teacher burnout." There is also a wide body of general research on both domains of teacher efficacy that has shown that those teachers who show high efficacy on efficacy tests persist longer when faced with adversity than do those who show low efficacy. The highly efficacious teachers also provide greater academic focus in the classroom; they provide more timely and appropriate feedback to students; and they are more likely to work with students individually and in small groups rather than as a large class.

Additionally, Emmer and Hickman (1990) found other implications of teacher efficacy on classroom management using a measurement tool that accounted for efficacy in both classroom management and discipline. In this study, pre-service teachers and student teachers with high efficacy used more praise, encouragement, and rewards in the classroom. They also tended to encourage their students more often than those pre-service and student teachers who did not test as having high efficacy. Those with high efficacy were also more likely to ask for help from supervising teachers when dealing with discipline issues, rather than dismissing or internalizing the issue.

**Student achievement implications.** There is a correlation between teacher efficacy and student achievement. Research teams lead by Ashton (1982) and by Tschannen-Moran (1998) each looked at how pedagogical methods impact students directly: Teacher efficacy is closely related to student motivation, student efficacy, behavior in the classroom, and test scores. Teachers with high efficacy, as previously mentioned, persist when a student in the classroom or the course content challenges them. Logically, such persistence in the classroom would likely impact student behavior. Bandura and McClelland (1977) found that the teachers who eventually guided their students to success had increased efficacy. As a teacher's performance accomplishments increases, it becomes more likely that the teacher will continue to exert effort because their efforts prove fruitful.

**Collective Efficacy as It Relates to Teachers**

Certainly, individual teachers might feel that they are capable of impacting students in all types of educational contexts on their own. However, teachers may be more successful in certain educational contexts when there is a sense of collective

efficacy. This is especially important within urban alternative schools, where—based on my experience—students value a sense of community and family among the staff. From my observations of and own work experiences at Ray of Light ALP, when a group of teachers felt that they were capable of accomplishing something important, like helping students find academic success, then they were more able to overcome adversity and achieve their goals.

According to Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000), collective teacher efficacy is the perception that a faculty, as a whole, impacts students and student achievement. It is also rooted in Bandura's social cognitive theory and self-efficacy theories. Collective efficacy stems from the interactions of all members of the group and is related to personal and general teacher efficacy. As such, collective efficacy is a measure of teachers' belief as a group in their capabilities as a team. Just as self-efficacy and teacher efficacy influence a person's choice of tasks, amount of effort exerted on those tasks, persistence, and stress levels, so too does collective efficacy influence these factors. In general, the two most important factors in determining collective teacher efficacy are the perception of the difficulty of the task facing the collective and the assessment of teaching competence across the collective (Goddard et al., 2000).

Goddard et al. (2000) conceptualized collective efficacy similarly to Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) by theorizing that high collective teacher efficacy leads to the acceptance of more difficult tasks and more challenging goals. They also suggested that high collective efficacy may lead to greater organization by the faculty as a whole and to better performance on accepted tasks. In comparison, low collective efficacy results in

the opposite: lower performance and less organization when setting out to accomplish a goal.

Interestingly, Bandura (1997) found collective teacher efficacy to be one of the most difficult types of efficacy to develop, as it is based on past achievements of the group—for which an individual educator might not feel completely accountable—and on the shared responsibility of student outcomes. Additionally, most educators feel that they have little control over the school environment as a whole; this makes collective efficacy development even more challenging. A teacher might be capable of controlling the environment within their classroom, but it is an entirely different task to control the way that other teachers, students, parents, and the community view their school as a whole.

**Specialized Nature of Teacher Efficacy Within Urban Settings**

As previously stated, my research interests are situated within the context of urban schools, specifically urban alternative schools, which serve students who have not been successful within mainstream educational institutions. Therefore, in what follows, I will explore teacher and collective efficacy and its impacts on the teachers and their actions within this type of a setting. Although little research exists on alternative education programs alone, some research can be found on urban schools in the United States. As urban schools and alternative schools often face similar challenges, the examination of teacher efficacy within urban schools is relevant to my work.

Unfortunately, individuals who work outside of the urban school context often conceptualize such schools as dilapidated buildings filled with students living in poverty. I adhere to the formal definition of 'urban,' thus urban schools are those that are located within large cities. Therefore, urban schools differ from each other a great deal.

Certainly, schools in rural parts of the country likely serve students and families living below the poverty line just as some schools within large cities serve more affluent populations. There are, however, some key features that characterize urban schools. The 2003 Schools and Staffing Survey (Tourkin et al., 2007), conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, suggested that a majority of students attending urban schools do live at or below poverty lines. Additionally, a majority of students in attendance are non-White and speak languages other than English at home. In 2003, it was estimated that 64% of urban students lived in homes were English was not the primary language (Tourkin et al., 2007). In most cases, a majority of these students also participated in free and reduced lunch programs. These characteristics paint a picture of the adversity that must be overcome by the faculty working within the schools, and they make the need for quality teachers and instruction apparent.

However, many urban schools currently face issues related to the quality of the instruction that they provide. Quality instruction relies on certified teachers and the education that they are capable of providing for students. Unfortunately, Peske and Haycock (2006) found that many of the nation's largest public school districts employ inexperienced or uncertified applicants who have taken fewer college-level courses and have fewer years of teaching experience than their peers in suburban districts. Moreover, Chester and Beaudin (1996) found that teachers who have less teaching experience and/or are uncertified generally have lower teacher efficacy. There is evidence of negative impacts on student achievement when teacher efficacy is low; thus, this issue deserves intensified examination.

Many studies have shown links between a teacher's years of experience, their teacher efficacy, and the quality of their teaching (Chester & Beaudin, 1996; Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Over the course of a novice teacher's first year in practice, self-efficacy generally decreases. This decrease occurs most significantly over the first months of teaching and usually stays quite low throughout the remainder of the first year. Experienced teachers—those who have taught for three or more years—generally show increased efficacy until they reach the mid-point of their career.

Chester (1991) conducted an ethnographic study of changes in teacher attitudes within urban schools and concluded that several specific school practices can be linked to teacher efficacy. Teachers—both novice and experienced—who have opportunities to collaborate with their peers and supervisors regarding instructional issues are more efficacious and more motivated than those who do not have such opportunities. Additionally, the availability and quantity of teaching resources also lead to an increase in teacher efficacy for teachers who have been in the profession for more than one year. Classroom observations and feedback are also closely linked to heightened teacher efficacy, as teachers who believe that administrators care about and support their pedagogical practices feel more supported and, eventually, more capable of carrying out meaningful instruction.

**Teacher Efficacy as It Relates to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Researchers such as Ladson-Billings (1995) and Siwatu (2007) generally define culturally relevant pedagogy as a method of teaching and learning that is equitable and that builds from a socio-political consciousness of our complex histories. It encompasses the students' cultural knowledge, their experiences in and outside of the classroom, and

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their individual learning preferences.  Essentially, culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning which generates a culturally compatible classroom and curriculum based on students' cultural orientations and histories.  It allows students multiple opportunities to show mastery of a skill using different types of assessments. Furthermore, it provides students with the tools that they need in order to function within the dominant culture while maintaining their own cultural identity, home language, and a connection to their culture (Siwatu, 2007).

The work of both Ladson-Billings (1995) and of Siwatu, Frazier, Osaghae, and Starker (2011) examined the historical practices of traditional schooling models. Historically, schools often inserted their students' cultures into education instead of placing education within their students' cultures.  Culturally relevant pedagogy aims to bridge a gap between what happens at home for students and what happens at school. Because my research took place within the context of a school that serves culturally and linguistically diverse learners, it is essential that teacher efficacy be viewed through the lens of multiple culturally relevant pedagogies.

My work within an urban alternative school with a diverse group of learners has led me to believe that general teacher efficacy might be higher if the teachers perceive themselves as culturally responsive and conscious.  According to Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2007), teachers who know their students well are more likely to believe in their potential and, in turn, have higher levels of success teaching them.  If teachers are knowledgeable about their students' cultures and diverse backgrounds, and indeed perceive themselves to be culturally responsive and conscious, then I believe that they

might have higher general teacher efficacy, which might in turn lead to successful student learning.

## Summary

Three bodies of literature have informed my work with conceptions of success at Ray of Light Alternative Learning Program: subtractive schooling, deficit discourses, and teacher efficacy.  Because teacher efficacy is so closely tied to teachers' actions, considering the literature on teacher efficacy in conjunction with this study helped me to draw connections between it and the teachers' mitigation of subtractive schooling practices and their efforts to reject deficit discourses.  Furthermore, I found van Leeuwen's analysis tool of language legitimation (2007) aided me in outlining the conceptions of success held within and portrayed outside of Ray of Light.  By examining who and what holds agency within educational spaces, I began to see what embodied these conceptions of success and who or what was responsible for them.

**Chapter 3: Methods and Methodology**

I have conceptualized "success" differently at various junctures throughout my career as an educational practitioner. My understandings of success, what it looks like, and how it is measured—and who should determine each of these—have shifted over time and within different contexts. As my experiences working with and assessing students have continued, I have found myself surrounded by more complex and urgent questions about success.

In my early teaching days, when a student received an "A" in my own course, I often wondered if it was due to my pedagogy, to the student's own effort and resulting mastery of concepts, or, on the other hand, if it was due to my failure to assess their skills properly or to uphold a high standard of rigor. In my most desperate moments, I have wondered if an "A" simply meant that a student had followed the rules or had quietly been passive, never challenging expectations.

A search of the term "success" on the U.S. Department of Education website results in articles with titles related to standardized tests, to teachers' access to materials and funding, and to graduation rates, among others. These topics seem to suggest that "success" is a term used to describe different types of student achievement in relation to measurable numbers. Yet, the educational system often broadly states students' achievement of "success" as a goal, silently evoking something much more encompassing than merely numbers. When educational institutions choose to define "success" more specifically, its indicators often become easier to measure, but the definition becomes a rigid one. Such rigidity likely marginalizes and negatively labels those students who fall outside of its boundaries, such as students who do not receive

high scores on the ACT or who do not perform at grade level—despite improvements made throughout the year. Questions regarding who defines student success, who *should* define student success, and what that definition includes are important ones to consider when working with any students, and they are essential to consider when working with students who have fallen outside of the traditional boundaries of mainstream definitions.

I believe that my research at the Ray of Light Alternative Learning Program highlights some of the fundamental pieces of this elusive term "success." Our school was unique in that we regularly saw students who transitioned daily from traditional secondary institutions into our program. These students were known at Ray of Light as "shared" students; they spent time at both the traditional high school and at the alternative school each day. This was quite convenient for the students, because our school was actually physically located within a large, traditional high school. Many of our students began our program as shy individuals who were unsure of themselves and of their capabilities. They knew that the mainstream education system did not work for them, and they sometimes felt that it did not want them. Eighty-six percent of students who transitioned from traditional high schools to Ray of Light during the 2013-2014 school year earned passing marks, and most of them seemed to feel quite comfortable opening up to the teachers about their lives within their first trimester. It seemed that many of these students—many of whom had previously been disenfranchised and disillusioned by traditional schools—were somehow being recaptivated by learning and subsequently labeled as "successful" by educators within the program. Furthermore, the educators within this school chose to focus their peer learning community (PLC) work on identifying "successful" strategies for working with these students. Thus, my research

questions explored something important to both students and teachers: 1) How is success conceptualized within an urban, alternative, secondary school? and 2) How is student success depicted to those outside of the school context?

## Methodological Perspectives

Just as teachers help students to learn vocabulary to name the world around them, they also generate and reproduce specific terms to define the educational environment within which they and their students exist. As Bowers (2001) posits, language is a medium which creates a shared reality and becomes a site through which that reality is negotiated (p. 195). Thus, educators have an immensely important responsibility to use language in a way that empowers students instead of marginalizing them.

Also important is the idea that language within educational settings and elsewhere changes over time in complex ways as certain terms are used and reused in potentially different ways. Therefore, a word such as "success"—which has been traditionally used to describe specific phenomena often related to standardized test scores and graduation rates within educational settings—can be harmful or ineffective when it is reproduced in a way that does not account for its complexities (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012). Furthermore, some words within educational settings privilege certain cultural ways of knowing over others (Bowers, 2001); this can be particularly harmful for students whose culture is marginalized and/or seen as "different" from what has been labeled as mainstream or "normal."

### Social Constructivism

Because the impacts of language within educational settings are immense, evolutionary, and consequential, the theoretical perspective of social constructivism

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helped guide me in this work. Social constructivism has roots within the discipline of sociology and is rooted in the understanding that all knowledge is socially constructed. Essentially, social constructivism points to questions like "How have people in this setting constructed reality? What are their reported perceptions, 'truths,' explanations, beliefs and worldviews? What are the consequences of their construction of the world on their behaviors and for those with whom they interact?" (Patton, 2005). Social constructivism suggests that humans establish "truths" based on their experiences and perceptions. A constructivist researcher studies the realities, knowledge, and culture constructed by individuals and the consequences of those constructions on their lived experience.

The principles of social constructivism were present in this study when I examined how teachers constructed their perceptions of themselves *and* of their students and how those outside of the school used language to construct an image of the Ray of Light teachers and students. Teacher efficacy then seems logically connected to social constructivism. A teacher constructs their perceptions of their capabilities just as they might construct any other knowledge: through a multitude of experiences that contribute to their identity. Therefore, understanding each participant's unique perception, and how they have arrived at that perception, was essential. Thus, I strove to understand teachers' perceptions of what helped them to achieve the goals that they had set out for themselves and for others.

**Semiotics**

Similarly, semiotics suggests that people can generate new ways of transmitting ideas, knowledge, and culture simply because language establishes a means of mutual

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understanding and communication within a society (Patton, 2005). Hodge, Hodge, and Kress (1988) stated that transactions of meaning between specific objects, actions, practices, and behavior are traceable through language. Stemming from the discipline of linguistics and having theoretical underpinnings to symbolic interaction, semiotics lends itself to questions of how signs—such as words and/or symbols—carry and convey meaning within unique contexts (Patton, 2005). Semiotics can help illuminate relationships between language and human behavior. Therefore, I was conscious of relationships between discourses used within the context of our alternative educational programming and of the teachers' and students' perceptions and actions.

Said (2004) accounted for the possibility that language does not embody a statuesque version of one reality, that "words are not passive markers or signifiers standing in unassumingly for a higher reality; they are, instead, an integral formative part of the reality itself" (p. 59). For the educators within Ray of Light, the term "success" did not seem to represent one "true," static version of student achievement. Instead, it signified something that was changing, but that they had some control over.

**Research Design**

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the concepts of subtractive schooling, deficit discourses, and teacher efficacy were not meant to be the only or even limiting concepts through which I collected and examined the data. There are likely an array of concepts and interpretations that might contribute to the conception of success within Ray of Light. Teacher efficacy, deficit discourses, and subtractive schooling, however, provided me with some initial ideas to begin my examination. As I drew out areas of inquiry from the patterns within my initial data collection, I came to recognize additional concepts, most

especially that of language legitimation.  As I intended to generate a theory from my work instead of beginning with a hypothesis, I relied on the patterns that I identified during data collection and analysis; these helped me to modify interview questions, surveys, and other potential data collection methods throughout the research process.

As I collected and analyzed data, I generated a grounded theory that answered my first research question: How is success conceptualized within this urban alternative school?  Because grounded theory research is not conducted in a linear fashion, I remained open to the possibility of finding new types of data and directions for analysis. That being the case, I began noticing something interesting while answering my second research question: How is success depicted to those outside of the school context?  I began to see some discrepancies between the internal conception of success and the external depiction of it.  Noticing this allowed me the opportunity to bring in a new analysis tool, which I will discuss in greater detail in the following sections.

**Grounded Theory Design**

In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss (1967) broke down the barriers about methodological assumptions and instead suggested a systematic process for conducting qualitative research.  They asserted that qualitative analysis could be orderly and logical, eventually leading to the generation of theory.  As restated concisely in *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2014), Glaser and Strauss defined the elements of grounded theory as:

- being simultaneously involved in data collection and analysis;
- constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from pre-conceived, logically deduced hypotheses;

- using the constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis;

- advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis;

- memo-writing to elaborate categories, specifically their properties, to define relationships between categories, and to identify gaps;

- sampling aimed toward theory construction; and

- conducting the literature review after developing an independent analysis (p. 7).

These guidelines aimed to move qualitative research beyond descriptive results to more explanatory results driven by theoretical frameworks (Charmaz, 2014). In their early work, Glaser and Strauss showed that qualitative researchers could build on analytic work done by their colleagues to legitimize their research through this credible, methodological approach.

Charmaz (2014) also stated that she accepted Glaser and Strauss's early invitation for researchers to use grounded theory methods in a way that uniquely suited their work. She suggested that grounded theory methods be viewed as a set of principles and practices and not as prescriptions. She also asserted that grounded theory methods complement other approaches to qualitative data analysis. I took up this suggestion when collecting and analyzing data by using a flexible grounded theory design.

Furthermore, Charmaz (2014) suggested that researchers incorporate ethnographic methods when utilizing a flexible grounded theory design. Therefore, I used ethnographic methods to inform some of my grounded theory research, both as I

observed the teachers in their classrooms and as I interacted with participants, and afterward as I fleshed out descriptive field notes.

**Site Description**

Grounded theory requires, first and foremost, that the researcher find out what is going on within the setting in which they are working (Glaser, 1978). I conducted my research within the alternative school where I had taught for four years, while I was still teaching there. In order to maintain confidentiality, I will address the alternative learning program by the pseudonym "Ray of Light"; this program is an urban, alternative, secondary school within the Midwestern United States. State guidelines for alternative education assert that students who attend these institutions must be "at risk of failure" and meet one of the following criteria:

- is behind in satisfactorily completing coursework or obtaining credits for graduation;

- is pregnant or is a parent;

- has been assessed as chemically dependent;

- has been excluded or expelled;

- has been referred by a school district for enrollment;

- is a victim of physical or sexual abuse;

- has experienced mental health problems;

- has experienced homelessness sometime within the six months before requesting transfer to an eligible program;

- speaks English as a second language or is a language learner;

- has been withdrawn from school or is chronically truant; and/or

- is being treated in a near-by metropolitan hospital for a life-threatening illness (State Approved Alternative Programs Research Guide, 2013).

Alternative schools generally fall into one of two categories: alternative learning programs (ALPs) or alternative learning centers (ALCs). ALPs are supported by a single school district, whereas ALCs are generally supported by two or more districts that are near each other geographically. ALPs do not formally offer targeted services, which are reserved for the elementary and middle grade levels, but they do serve students who are dually enrolled in a traditional high school and an alterative school, or students who are studying full-time at the alternative school. ALPs are characterized as having small class sizes, between 5 and 20 students at this particular alternative school; after-school and/or night classes; collaboration with social service and county agencies; resources to assist with social and emotional needs; a vocational or career focus; independent study and online coursework options; and often, but not always, on-site childcare for students with children. ALPs are funded with general state education revenue (State Approved Alternative Programs Research Guide, 2013).

Ray of Light was an ALP, and it was located within one of the two large secondary schools in the district. It had all of the above characteristics except on-site childcare. Because it was located on a separate floor of the school building, the program environment was somewhat contained from the rest of the school. Over half of the 70 students who attended were enrolled in courses at both the traditional high school and the alternative school. These students usually attended the alternative school in the morning and moved out into the traditional high school for two or more classes in the afternoon.

Data from the full academic year prior to the start of this research showed that students passed 84% of the courses that they attempted at Ray of Light.

Many of the students enrolled in this urban alternative school did not reside in the city in which the school was located. Many of them traveled from other parts of the metropolitan area to attend courses through open enrollment. The community in which it was located and the communities surrounding it had experienced growth and demographic changes over the course of the previous decade, which generated great socio-economic, racial, ethnic, and language diversity. Approximately 54% of the students who were attending the traditional secondary school in the building were students of color, whereas 84% of students enrolled in courses at the ALP were students of color. Almost 50% of students at Ray of Light received free or reduced lunch, but several students who would have qualified for this service refused to complete the paperwork to receive lunch at the school, because they did not want to eat lunch in the cafeteria, which was located in the traditional high school. For these students, Ray of Light provided healthy foods at a discounted price and free backpacks with non-perishable food items—called the "Packs of Food" program—for consumption within a room in the ALP during the scheduled lunch period.

This study took place over one semester of the academic school year. Typically, it takes more time to build relationships and trust between the participants and the researcher. However, I had already established such relationships throughout my time working for the district. This allowed me to easily and quickly gain access to the alternative school and to obtain buy-in from the participant educators and staff. In fact, the participants helped me to generate my initial research question.

I chose to study a school that I had access to on a daily basis and educators with whom I interacted regularly; we were comfortable with each other and looked to one another for critique, assistance, and support. These educators and I generated illuminative and illustrative data through our conversations, as we were all interested in intensely studying our school in a genuine and collaborative way.

Convenience should be one of the last factors examined when determining a research setting and participants. There were many alternative schools that might have served as interesting environments for my study. Additionally, there were many alternative schools to which I had access, as I am associated with both the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs (MAAP) and the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA). However, I firmly believed that this school was a unique example of a program where teachers seemed able to engage students who were not engaged in other educational environments—even within the same building—in successful learning. Further, my relationships with these teachers and my access to our shared teaching environment were strategic and lent well to intensive sampling.

**Participants.** Both the traditional high school and the Ray of Light ALP had a racially homogeneous teaching staff: 95% of the teachers at the traditional school and 100% of those at the ALP were White. The staffs at both the traditional school and the ALP were comprised of half male and half female educators. In order to maintain privacy, I have assigned each participant a pseudonym. All of these participants verbally committed to participating in this study during the spring of 2014 and engaged in an informed consent process throughout December of 2014.

One female, Heather, taught mathematics and was seeking her master's degree at the time of this study. She was in her third year of full-time teaching; she spent all three of those years in this urban alternative school. A male science teacher, Chris, was mid-career and also seeking a master's degree. He had worked in alternative education in several different states and was in his second year of work within Ray of Light. Rex, the other male teacher, taught social studies, had a bachelor's degree, and had been working within the alternative school for over 20 years. Additionally, Gertrude, a novice teacher, began teaching one English class per day at Ray of Light during the second and third trimesters. Gertrude was excited to take part in our work; she and I meet regularly throughout the duration of my research to discuss the data and analysis. I am also a participant in this study. At the time of the study, I was in my ninth year of teaching English, and I was pursuing my Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. I spent my initial year within the district working at the traditional high school within the building and the following three years teaching English within this urban alternative school.

I suspected from the onset that one participant in particular, Rex, would not be interested in contributing as much to this study as the others. Rex worked a second job outside of this school, so he was quite guarded with his time. He initially opted to be only a partial participant, but to my surprise, he was a full participant by the end of the study. He contributed to theories and elected to start his master's degree work over the following summer.

The two administrators who oversaw the Ray of Light program also served as participants. Sally, the program coordinator, worked as a technologies educator for several years before obtaining a master's degree in social work as well as a counseling

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license.  At the time of this study, she had just completed her administrator's license.

Peg, the program secretary, was the woman who students, parents, and community

members first met when they entered the Ray of Light School.  She had worked as an

administrative assistant for the traditional secondary school and for the ALP for over 20

years.

When I began my research, Heather, Chris, Rex, and I had been collaborating

with each other at Ray of Light for two years, and we had become quite close.  As a

group, we explicitly prided ourselves on our "family-like" community within the school.

When Thanksgiving break was about to commence, for example, we would cancel

afternoon classes, and the students and staff would cook and eat a Thanksgiving meal

together.  We established a system known as "light cash," in which students earned fake

money by meeting goals, helping their teachers, and turning work in on time.  Before

winter break, the students were allowed to "purchase" donated winter coats, holiday

decorations, and other gift items.  Then, the students and staff gathered together as a

group to wrap gifts, play games, and make holiday greeting cards, much as many of the

staff did with their own families outside of the school setting.

**Researcher role: full participant observer.**  I was a full participant observer in

this study.  Full participant observation is an inclusive strategy which combines

interviewing, document and archival data analysis, direct participation, observation, and

introspection (Denzin, 1978).  Unlike separations that often occur in data analysis when

the researcher is an observer alone, there are no distinct boundaries around which data is

analyzed when one is a full participant observer.  Often within these types of studies,

researchers in the field combine notes from personal and eyewitness observations with

data acquired through natural interviews and conversations with informants (Patton, 2005).

As a researcher who examined the conception of success within a specific context, I participated in the setting by conversing with informants about what was happening in the school, and I observed the events and incidents that unfolded. This engagement in my work was quite insightful, because gaining perspective regarding research participants' lives from the inside gave me otherwise unobtainable information (Charmaz, 2014). At the time of this research, I had been teaching at the school for roughly the same amount of time as the other teachers and many of the challenges we faced were related. We often worked to mitigate them together. Furthermore, we had a strong connection that lent well to deep conversations regarding this research.

Admittedly, my on-going relationships with the participants of this study might lead some to wonder if I was too close to the context to truly observe things from an unbiased vantage point. This is somewhat of an emic versus etic issue, as described by Pike (1967). The emic perspective is gained when the researcher becomes an insider and understands the culture and context as if they are a part of it. The etic perspective assumes that the researcher has enough distance to compare what they see within the context of the study to what is going on outside of that context. Notably, both of these perspectives are important. Although I do believe I had more of an emic perspective with this particular research study, I also believe that as a part-time teacher who had never previously observed these teachers in their own classrooms, I had enough distance to generate some new understandings about what was happening within the familiar place.

**A climate of practical research.** All of the faculty within this alternative school was committed to strengthening the program through the implementation of new programs and to conducting practical research to mitigate the problematic issues that the students and the teachers faced. The previously mentioned "Packs of Food" program was created as a result of practitioner research conducted by Sally. Additionally, Sally had conducted her own practitioner research on a mentoring program, and Chris was dedicated to studying effective college and career readiness curriculum materials. Heather, who was completing her master's degree at the time of this study, often questioned and adapted her own methods and curriculum materials while thinking about culturally relevant pedagogy. Rex had completed several courses toward his master's degree and admitted that—following his engagement in this study—he was interested in doing some practical research of his own and to eventually finishing his program. Therefore, one of the many benefits of conducting research within this site was that the staff had a strong interest in research and had, in the past and throughout this study, welcomed it as a helpful way to resolve issues that they faced in their teaching and in their students' lives. The staff also regularly engaged in conversations regarding "student success," and the participants all seemed quite interested in my research on this topic. Even after the conclusion of my data collection, several participants continued to send me ideas and data that they hoped that I would consider and possibly include when completing my write-up.

## Data Collection and Data Analysis

The question of breadth verses depth is always a consideration when determining the type of sampling done for a study; the concern about the appropriate amount of time

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and effort used to understand a participant's experiences is one not to be taken lightly. Therefore, I include here an outline of how I collected and analyzed the data for this study. Notably, constructing a grounded theory required me to keep an open mind and to make adjustments to the data collection strategies and to my conceptual frameworks throughout this process.

**Data Collection**

I collected data from the four types of sources: (a) the initial survey, (b) interviews, (c) observations, and (d) texts. During my first approach, I collected data that helped me to think more broadly about the sensitizing concepts that I had originally chosen: subtractive schooling, deficit discourses, and teacher efficacy. Each of these seemed to play a role in the way that success was being conceptualized at this school.

**Initial survey.** My initial data collection included a survey (see Appendix A) with questions related to teacher efficacy, deficit discourses, and subtractive schooling. I did not intend to "measure" teacher efficacy or either of the other two concepts, but I did use Siwatu's efficacy measurement tool (2007) and literature discussing deficit discourses and subtractive schooling to generate the open-ended questions that I included in the survey. This allowed me to obtain a sense of what the teachers perceived to be happening at this ALP. The teachers' survey responses allowed me to locate other potential avenues for examination. In essence, my initial data collection served as a probe for potential patterns in participants' conceptions of success.

The initial survey took place after our winter break in January of 2015. I created the survey in Google Forms and asked the teachers to take it during their prep period.

The survey included five questions, as I did not want to discourage teachers from participating in this study by adding too much to their workload.

**Interviews.** I collected data through formal and informal interviews. I conducted at least two formal interviews with each teacher. At times, I used a formal interview guide approach (see Appendix B), as such a guide allowed me, as the researcher, to prepare specific lines of inquiry without writing scripted questions. I was able to prepare and develop questions, to sequence questions, and to make decisions about what information to prod and pursue during actual conversations with participants. In conducting several formal interviews, it was my aim (a) to delve deeper into the experiences of the participants, (b) to explore at length certain statements or topics of interest for past interviews or observations, (c) to inquire about participants' thoughts and feelings, (d) to check my understandings about notes on behaviors and actions for accuracy, and (e) to encourage participants to share significant experiences, thoughts and feelings (Charmaz, 2014, p. 26). I recorded these interviews and took notes during them.

The embedded nature of this data collection allowed me to blend informal interviews into our everyday working conversations. Indeed, I participated in many informal interviews with participants at random and unscheduled times. With such organic data collection, I did not take notes during the conversation; instead, I wrote reflective memos afterward that captured the substance of the conversation. The teachers—myself included—often met during lunch, before school, and during prep periods in the program coordinator's office, where we felt at ease and comfortable sharing our views and perspectives with each other. These conversations also constituted "informal interview" data that I collected while I was acting as a participant observer.

I also arranged to hold focus group sessions during which any of the participants and I might discuss some of the data and analysis as a group. For the first of two focus group sessions, I prepared a document to guide our conversation (see Appendix C). In this document, I proposed several of the elements that I had identified through my initial coding and explained the concept of a guiding principle. During our second focus group session, I provided the group with a list of the principles of student success that we had discussed during our first focus group session (see Appendix D). Participation in focus group sessions was optional and took many different directions depending upon the data that I had collected up to that point, the concerns of the group, and the time that we had available to meet together.

**Observations.** The physical environment within which a study takes place is often taken for granted, and I understood at the time of my data collection that documenting the physical environment well was essential to understanding what was happening within it (Patton, 2005, p. 281). For example, when reading the word "school," many people have a vision in their mind of what that context looks like. In reality, though, this particular alternative school looked quite different from the traditional school in another part of the building. Therefore, I observed each of the three teachers in their classroom while they were teaching several times during the spring semester. During these classroom observations, I took field notes. After each observation, I wrote more fleshed-out, detailed field notes.

Furthermore, my intimate knowledge of this school and my daily work with the participants in this study allowed me to document the interactions between participants in great detail. Patterns in interactions, as well as frequency in interactions, between

participants can reveal a great deal about the social environment of a place (Patton, 2005). Therefore, I chose to collect data regarding participant interactions. In order to do so, I documented both verbal and non-verbal communication as I observed the teachers in their classrooms and in staff meetings, and I elaborated on these observations in my field notes. I used an audio device to record oral communication, as well as my own field notes, which included verbal notes of the non-verbal communication within participants' classrooms, staff meetings, and professional development activities. I was also mindful of misinterpretations that might have occurred when recording and analyzing non-verbal behaviors. Therefore, I made a concerted effort to follow-up on recorded behaviors with participants directly. My participant observations combined observing with informal interviewing (Patton, 2005, p. 291). I discussed observation notes with participants to make sure that I understood their reasons for both their actions and their interactions. For example, I noticed that during staff meetings, Heather often told stories about her interactions with students. Upon mentioning this observation to her, she went on to explain that the relationships that she had built with the students made her proud and that in sharing those stories, she felt that she could both exemplify the strong bonds that she had built with her students and that she could add to the group's general knowledge about the students.

As mentioned above, I took notes during observations and then elaborated on them to construct descriptive field notes. I documented everything that I felt might be worth noting while in participants' classrooms and in staff meetings, including details about where the observation took place, who was present, what the physical setting was like, what social interactions were occurring, and what activities were taking place

(Patton, 2005, p. 301). My field notes also contained some of my own feelings and reactions to the experience. Although I tried not to impose preconceptions and early judgments on the phenomenon being observed (Patton, 2005, p. 304), I did record those feelings and reactions as part of my data. During staff conversations about how we as teachers might assess students' career and college readiness, I began to wonder if the group valued only traditional indicators of student achievement, like test scores. Upon asking the group if this was the case, I learned that in fact, all of the teachers believed that there might be better indicators of students' career and college readiness than a test. This quick conversation helped me to construct a more vivid understanding of the teachers' perspectives.

   **Texts.** I also worked with various types of texts—such as documents and websites—as data sources for this study. As a teacher already working within this alternative school, I had access to student records, program records, notes of achievement sent to individual students, and organizational rules and regulations. These artifacts provided me with information that could not be observed within the setting (Patton, 2005, p. 293). These documents also provided—among other insights—goals, decisions, and dialogue between students and teachers that might not have otherwise been known to an outside observer. I also found the data in these documents helpful as I developed paths of inquiry to pursue in additional observations and interviews.

   My use of an initial survey, interviews, observations, and texts as conjunctive data sources was essential to my work as a participant observer. One data source alone would not have provided a comprehensive picture of what was happening within this setting.

Additionally, because each of these data sources had its own set of limitations, a combination of sources was much more reliable.

In all, I collected information from one initial survey, eleven participant interviews with six participants other than myself, two focus group sessions—which totaled three hours combined—and over forty hours of observation. I also collected fifty-two texts including two PowerPoint presentations created by the teachers, several emails, images of posters from within Ray of Light, the student handbook, the student enrollment packet, and the school website.

**Data Analysis**

It is important for me to note that the data sources and the methods that I used to analyze data have been shaped and reshaped throughout my research process. As I identified patterns, I refined, changed, and revised data sources and methods of analysis. My research methods and data sources changed slightly as I identified patterns and themes throughout the study. Furthermore, my use of a wide array of conjunctive data sources—as discussed in the Data Collection subsection—was essential to my research. Further, the more reliable combination of sources allowed me to identify codes and patterns as they appeared in varying intensities during my analysis of the different data sources.

As established above, my research methods and data sources changed slightly as I identified patterns and themes throughout the study. I started with some potential perspectives—or lines of inquiry—related to success within Ray of Light, instead of starting with a hypothesis. At the preliminary stage of the process, I felt that several guiding concepts had the potential to inform my research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I

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anticipated that the concepts that I describe below would help me to develop strategies for monitoring and reflecting on the data that I collected as I shaped my understanding of what was happening within this alternative school (Ravitch & Riggan, 2011).

Furthermore, my reflections concerning what was happening within the school were aided by social constructivism, a framework that is well-fitted to grounded theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1991), because constructivists see knowledge and reality as created, not discovered. Postmodern critiques, which generally try to make sense of both perspectives and power at the same time (Patton, 2005), relate to social constructivism in that they also assume that knowledge and culture are created and not existent in one absolute sense.

These lines of inquiry and perspectives pointed to certain sensitizing concepts, which led me to further questions about my topic (Charmaz, 2014). Specifically, I wondered how the teachers were addressing students' individual cultures and values. I was also interested in knowing what discourses were used to describe the students, the teachers, and their work within this school. Therefore, I chose to use the general concepts of subtractive schooling, deficit discourses, and teacher efficacy to loosely frame my data analysis until pointed directions for inquiry arose. I kept these general concepts in mind throughout the process of data analysis. As this process progressed, disparities in agency began to arise within the data, so I added the analysis technique of language legitimation (van Leeuwen, 2007, 2008). When I noticed that teachers were speaking about students as if they were, in conjunction with the teachers, agents of their own success, I began to see a more noticeable difference between this and the way in which the students and teachers were depicted on the school website. This difference led

me to wonder who or what was being legitimized in each context and motivated my inclusion of language legitimation as an analytic lens.

As I collected the data, I located what I believed to be powerful episodes. These included instances when a teacher said something that seemed particularly revealing regarding success or when an interesting interaction took place between a student and one or two of the teachers. Because I recorded all staff meetings, observations, interviews, and focus group work, I revisited these powerful episodes and transcribed the dialogue. From the transcripts and related field notes regarding these powerful episodes, I conducted initial open coding. Initial open coding helped me to locate eight common topics and actions, which I came to call categories of data, pointing to teachers' conceptions of student success: (a) being present, (b) building relationships, (c) completing credits, (d) maintaining a positive attitude, (e) participating in acceptable behaviors, (f) focusing on desired futures, (g) exhibiting engagement, and (h) teachers engaging families. I also collected data from powerful episodes that did not seem to match these eight original categories.

While identifying these eight categories, I wrote memos regarding the relationships between each of the categories as well as the links between the categories and the literature pertaining to my sensitizing concepts. In comparing these relationships, I began to see commonalities between several of the categories. Through identifying the relationships between several of the original categories, I was able to condense the original eight categories into three specific articulations, which I have called the elements of success: (a) contributing to authentic relationships, (b) engaging in academic work, and (c) focusing on students' desired futures.

First, I considered the category "building relationships," which appeared over and over in the data. This initial category seemed strong enough to be an element on its own; therefore, I did not condense it with any of the other initial categories. I also replaced the word "building" with "contributing." The word building described the impact of teachers' and students' contributions; for me, the word "contributing" better articulated the reciprocal nature of this element. As a result of these considerations, I identified the first element of success as contributing to authentic relationships.

Next, I examined data that pointed to what I initially categorized as "observable student engagement." This data included teachers' references to students' attitudes about their academic work, students' behaviors, and students' willingness to work hard in the classroom. Furthermore, the initial categories of "being present" and "completing credits" shared commonalities with "observable student engagement." The teachers suggested that if students were present in class and worked to complete their credits, then they were indeed engaged. Figure 1 shows the intersections and relationships that I began noticing among the initial categories when comparing the pieces of data. I condensed all of this data into my second element of success: engaging in academic work.
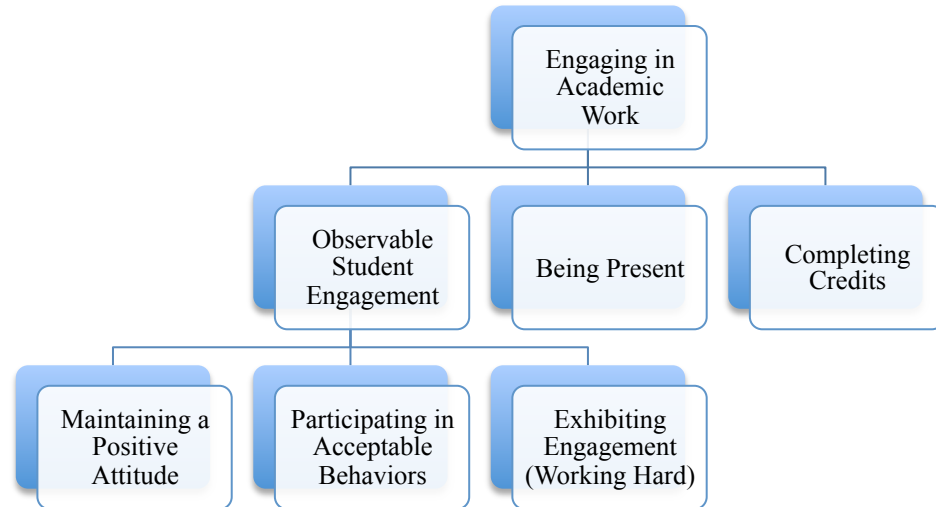
```
                          ┌─────────────┐
                          │ Engaging in │
                          │  Academic   │
                          │    Work     │
                          └─────────────┘
        ┌─────────────┐    ┌─────────────┐    ┌─────────────┐
        │ Observable  │    │             │    │ Completing  │
        │  Student    │    │Being Present│    │   Credits   │
        │ Engagement  │    │             │    │             │
        └─────────────┘    └─────────────┘    └─────────────┘
┌──────────┐  ┌──────────────┐  ┌──────────────┐
│Maintaining a│ │Participating in│ │  Exhibiting  │
│  Positive  │  │  Acceptable  │  │  Engagement  │
│  Attitude  │  │  Behaviors   │  │(Working Hard)│
└──────────┘  └──────────────┘  └──────────────┘
```

*Figure 1*. Condensing relationships between data categories.

The initial category "focusing on desired futures" was a strong element on its own, just as was contributing to relationships. The teachers frequently discussed their students' futures in regard to the curricula at Ray of Light, the teachers' peer learning community goal, and the AVID program. Therefore, I did not condense it with any of the original categories. Instead, I identified it as the final element of success.

While refining, comparing, and condensing my eight initial categories into three key elements, I also began to see differences between the internal conception of student success at Ray of Light and the external depiction of it. Therefore, I introduced van Leeuwen's (2007) language legitimation as a tool for analysis. Memo-writing allowed me to further see the similarities and differences between the internal conception and the external depiction of success at Ray of Light.

In fact, I employed two types of memo-writing throughout my data analysis. I used early memo-writing to explore and complete qualitative codes, to direct and focus my data collection, and to document observed and predicted relationships in the data (Charmaz, 2014). Later in the process, I used advanced memo-writing, which required

me to trace and categorize data, to describe how categories came about and changed throughout my analysis, and to identify my own beliefs and assumptions. I also used advanced memo-writing to flesh out the various conceptions of success as they were presenting themselves from the two different perspectives, those inside of and those outside of the school context. During my advanced memo-writing, I also made further connections by engaging in constant comparison. I compared data from the same participants during different incidents, categories with other categories, categories with subcategories, and concepts with conceptual categories (Charmaz, 2014). Advanced memo-writing essentially helped me to find gaps in my data and analysis, to offer conjectures about the data, and to ask questions of the codes and categories that I had established. For instance, I initially found a gap in relation to the topic of family engagement. Without advanced memo-writing, I might not have recognized that the teachers largely talked about how difficult engaging their students' families had been for them, rather than discussing how such engagement did or did not impact student success. Through recognizing this pattern, I was able to eliminate the "family engagement" category, thus narrowing my initial categories from eight to seven.

After I had begun to settle in on my primary themes and the three main elements of success based on those themes, I gathered additional data, which allowed me to refine my developing theory (Glaser, 1978). During this part of my data collection, or my "theoretical sampling," I collected data pertaining to each particular category or element until I felt that I had "saturated" the category. Saturating a category means ensuring that the newly sorted and diagramed data does not trigger new theoretical insights or properties of the previously established categories.

As I reached saturation, I noticed that language was being used to create a depiction of the teachers and students outside of the school that did not seem to match the conception of student success—and the teachers' roles in it—internally. This was the moment that led me to consider analysis frames that might uncover the distinct differences between the internal conceptions of and the external depictions of success. Once I had sorted and diagramed additional data using van Leeuwen's frame of language legitimation (2000, 2007), the answers to my two research questions became more focused.

I had the option to re-enter the field and collect additional data—even after the formal school year had concluded—had this become necessary. At the time of my research, this ALP organized and facilitated a summer school program, beginning immediately after the school year concluded, which served the same students as Ray of Light ALP had served that school year. Although this summer school program was held in a different part of the building, the same teachers work with the same students. However, the data that I collected during the regular school year was sufficient for generating several elements and a grounded theory about student success.

**Validity and Limitations**

I believe that my research process, as outlined above, properly addressed any issues related to quality in qualitative research leading to a grounded theory. Because I had a sustained relationship with participants and had been working within this site for several years, I had no problem conducting member checks. Indeed, I shared my data and analysis with the participants, particularly within the focus group sessions and interviews; I did so regularly to ensure that I had not misunderstood their comments

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and/or responses to my survey and interview queries. The types and amount of data that I collected lent well to triangulation. I was constantly aware of the questions that I had asked on the initial survey, of the discussions that we had as a group, and of the informational conversations that had taken place when I generated interview questions and focus group prompts, ensuring that I could use several data sources to triangulate my findings.

I also understood that as a person with my own biases and initial assumptions about this research, it was essential that I continually practiced transparent reflexivity; thus, I continuously checked my interpretations of data with the participants. I also invited the participants to contribute their own analysis of what I perceived to be happening at Ray of Light. I often had informal, face-to-face conversations with participants; when I was working on my analysis outside of school hours, I emailed and texted with the participants so that I could learn their interpretations of the data. I also invited four of the participants who were reading research on teaching and learning for their own master's programs to contribute their own ideas about my chosen sensitizing concepts and other potential sensitizing concepts as they related to the data that I was collecting.

## Summary

The interactions between students, teachers, and administrative staff at this ALP were complex, and I do not assume that the theory that I have generated through this study is directly transferable to another alternative learning program. However, I do ultimately believe that in learning more about the conceptions of success within this context, I have been able to shine a light of consciousness on discourses used to identify

individuals, actions, and expectations within an alternative school.  The theory and the three assertions that I generated from this study lend some insight into the disparity between what success looks like for some teachers working with students who experience marginalization within education and how success for those same students appears differently to those outside of that context.  Ultimately, I hope that this work encourages other alternative education programs to more closely examine the discourse that they use to describe their work to those outside of their program and to create a greater awareness of the harms that such a disparity in conceptions of success can perpetuate.

**Chapter 4: Conceptions and Depictions of Success**

My research pursued two specific questions: 1) How is student success conceptualized at an urban alternative secondary school? and 2) How is student success depicted to those outside of the school context? As I collected data over the course of several months, it became quite clear to me that the internal conception of student success at Ray of Light Alternative Learning Program was quite different than the external depiction of it. In the following sections, I use the frame of language legitimation (van Leeuwen, 2007) to describe and analyze my data, which reveals an internal conception and an external depiction that vary quite drastically. First, I will present and analyze how student success is internally conceptualized at Ray of Light ALP, including the three observable factors that contribute to that conception. Then, I will present and analyze how student success is externally depicted in contrast to the internal conceptions of program.

**The Internal Conception of Student Success**

The data suggests that three key elements form the basis of how success was conceptualized within Ray of Light: (a) contributing to authentic relationships, (b) engaging in academic work, and (c) focusing on students' desired futures. Both the teachers and the students had agency over these three elements within the school and saw themselves as overall agents of student success. This became apparent when I triangulated the data through the lenses of language legitimation (van Leeuwen, 2007, 2008) and of symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, 2014; Patton, 2005). This agency was also observable among participants over time.

In this section, I summarize my findings regarding how the teachers perceived student success within Ray of Light through a close analysis of each of the three elements of internally conceptualized success. My analysis includes a short description of each element and supporting data in the form of rich exemplars. These exemplars stem from the teachers' answers to questions on the initial survey, staff meeting conversations, observations of students and teachers in their classrooms, and my interviews with the teachers.

**Contributing to Authentic Relationships**

The teachers at Ray of Light regularly asserted that authentic relationships were critical to student success and that a relationship was not authentic unless both the teacher and the student contributed to it. This dual responsibility became apparent early in my data collection, so I coded for examples of either a student or a teacher contributing to an authentic relationship. In *Subtractive Schooling*, Valenzuela (1999) used the word "authentic" to describe student-teacher relationships that are reciprocal and that are not developed solely for ethical responsibility reasons. Noddings (2012) examined early relationship building; she suggested that teachers initially build relationships with students because they feel a sense of ethical responsibility to connect with students. Therefore, I analyzed the data codes to determine whether or not a teacher was contributing to a relationship only out a sense of ethical responsibility and whether or not a student was also contributing to the relationship. I identified examples of both ethical and authentic relationship building. The relationships evidenced in the data were not relationships where teachers felt obligated to reach out to students or to care for them only for ethical reasons. Importantly, the data codes revealed that the teachers regularly

referenced relationships in which their student was also working to connect with them, thus affirming the relationship as authentic. Furthermore, the teachers' language regarding authentic relationships at Ray of Light revealed three interrelated ideas: (a) the teachers seemed proud of their ability to connect with their students, (b) the relationships between teachers and students helped the teachers to better understand their students' struggles and achievements, and (c) these relationships often helped the staff to recognize valuable patterns in student behavior. These ideas underscore the value of authentic relationships to the internal conception of student success at Ray of Light.

Over the course of my observations, I noted many examples across all internal data points wherein teachers directly mentioned or alluded to the importance of relationships between themselves and their students and among the students in the program. Early in the first focus group, Chris stated, "I think the relationships are the most important." His colleagues responded in kind: Sally said, "Absolutely," and Peg exclaimed, "Yes!"

During the initial survey, almost all of the teachers directly stated the importance of relationships to student success. The third survey question asked, "What are some of the things Ray of Light teachers do to help their students achieve success?" The teachers' responses captured their own conception of success and the role of relationships to that success.

> Sally: Ray of Light teachers are awesome! The teachers are patient, patient, patient. They also take time to get to know the students and build relationships with them. These two things are the most important reasons why students are successful in the program.

Heather: Teachers build individual relationships with students and provide

structure.

Gertrude: I think a benefit of Ray of Light is the personal relationships teachers

and students form in the smaller classroom settings.  The students here should

know that we care about them, know them and empathize with their personal

struggles, whatever those might be.

In all three of these responses, the teachers explicitly reference the importance of

relationships with their students.  Furthermore, the language of their responses alludes to

the reciprocal nature of those relationships.  Van Leeuwen's (2007) theory of language

legitimation states that the researcher should interrogate the given discourse by asking

"Who?" and that the answer will reveal the person with authority over the action

expressed within that discourse.  In the responses above, the action is 'relationship

building,' and the actors are the teachers and the students.  Both Heather and Sally say

that teachers build relationships "with" students, suggesting that although the teachers

might initiate this process, the actual building of the relationship is mutual.  Gertrude also

expresses the mutuality of this process, as "teachers and students form" the relationships.

Thus, the data shows that both parties have legitimate authorship over the relationships

being built.

In addition to the survey responses, staff meetings also exemplified the teachers'

belief that authentic relationships were a key element of student success at Ray of Light.

In the interest of privacy, I changed all of the student names that came up during recorded

staff meetings.  In one such meeting, Heather described receiving a gift from one of her

students.

Heather: It was so legit. Sarah Jones comes in and she goes, "I went to the gas

station for you this morning, Ms. Heather." And then she pulled out a king-sized

candy bar. I was like …

Jenna: Seriously? Wow.

Heather: I was like, "This is for me?"

Sally: I know. Heather is one of a kind.

Heather started this conversation by explicitly calling the interaction she had "legit,"

which is a slang term for legitimate. Often during Heather's lesson, she drew on personal

references, such as using her favorite candy bar as the item in a math problem. In the

anecdote, Heather's student Sarah brought in candy that she went out of her way to

purchase for her teacher. It is clear that Heather had established reciprocal caring

between herself and this student, allowing an authentic relationship to develop. This is

one of many such stories that Heather regularly shared. Sally's comment that "Heather is

one of a kind" affirms Heather's relationship-building capacity; Sally also regularly

commented on how well students seem to connect with Heather.

In addition to the reciprocal caring evident in Heather's story, there is also

evidence that the student and the teacher share personal authority within the relationship.

Sarah's motivation to go into the gas station and to purchase a little treat for her teacher

likely grows out of Heather's past contributions to the student-teacher relationships.

Sarah's personal authority shows in her choice to get a candy bar over the other options

available.

Several staff meeting conversations more subtly revealed the teachers' belief that

contributing to authentic relationships was a key to student success. In these

conversations, the teachers made assumptions about their students based on their existing knowledge of each student.  Teachers often shared their individual observations of a student in order to collectively identify potential problems impacting that student's success.  For example, in one staff meeting, the teachers were deciding which students would receive attendance awards for the week; Alex came up in the discussion, as he seemed to be missing more class than usual and to be leaving class frequently.  As can be seen in the conversation below, they first noted that something was not right with him, and then they explored what they knew about him as a result of the relationships that they were each building with him.

Sally: How is Alex doing for you all?

Rex: Alex is…

Heather: I have him after lunch, but then he went missing before Gertrude's class.

Sally: Oh yeah, we're not [giving him an attendance award].

Heather: Okay.

Rex: Was that yesterday when he went to the bathroom?

Sally: He looked so bad.

Heather: Well that's fine.  But then, like… I was like, "Where did Alex go?"  He was gone for a while.

Sally: I wonder if he went back to the bathroom.

Jenna: I wonder if he has a problem.

Heather: "Ms. Heather, that Tabasco sauce killed me!"

Sally: I know Rex told him to go number two.

Rex: That's my answer when anyone has a stomach problem.

Sally: Poor guy. I'll have to talk with him.

The dialogue shows the teachers working to determine if Alex has a health issue that needs attention and to piece together what they knew about his behavior; the conclusion that Sally will talk to the "poor guy" indicates her willingness to try to figure out what is going on. Alex's comment, "Ms. Heather, that Tabasco sauce killed me!" shows his apparent level of comfort with his teacher. Heather's description of the interaction exhibits the authentic relationship that she and Alex had developed. The teachers' observations of Alex's behavior and their decision to take further action reveal that they care for him.

Furthermore, symbolic interactionism suggests that "we act in response to how we view our situations" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 262). This conversation contains several reactions in response to how the teachers' viewed the situation. Heather shared a time when Alex responded to her in a way that showed he viewed her as a person; Sally chose to take further action to help Alex; and the other teachers shared knowledge from their interactions with him. Each of these demonstrates an aspect of the authentic relationships that exist between Alex and his teachers at Ray of Light. The teachers' concern ultimately showed their desire for Alex's success, which is predicated on their relationships with him.

Additionally, the teachers also talked about the importance of authentic relationships among and between students. During one staff meeting, the teachers discussed Rosa, a student whose attendance had become less regular and who seemed more disconnected and distant in class than usual:

Sally: How's Rosa?

Chris: She's struggling. She came up to me and said, "Life is just so hard. I have a job and get good grades," and I said "You know what? It's hard now but it will get easier later because you work hard."

Heather: I think part of it too is that all of her buddies aren't here.

Chris: Yeah, she and Juanita got along pretty good. I'm glad she felt comfortable coming to me about that, though.

This conversation shows that the teachers understood their students' success as a complex issue, one that is closely connected to student-teacher relationships as well as student-student relationships. Chris shared that Rosa attempted to reach out to him; he and Heather discussed the connection between Rosa's struggles and the fact that her friends were no longer at Ray of Light. Heather's comment contains what van Leeuwen (2007) called instrumental rationalization to acknowledge that if Rosa's friends were at school, things might be easier for her. Similarly, Chris's response to Rosa uses theoretical rationalization (van Leeuwen, 2007) to explain that life will get easier because she works hard. Both teachers rationalize the student's struggles and the potential solutions to those struggles in different ways, showing that regardless of the lens that the teachers used to explain Rosa's concerns, both had relationships with her that allowed them to understand where she was coming from a bit more completely, despite the complexity of Rosa's struggles.

The Ray of Light teachers also saw the importance of authentic relationships in the success of their homebound students. The Homebound Program provided academic support for students who were not able to attend traditional or alternative school because of a suspension, health issues, or other challenges. During one staff meeting, the teachers

discussed the struggles facing one of the homebound students.  Heather suggested that a

lack of authentic relationships between one of the traditional teachers and the student

might negatively impact the student's success:

> Sally: How was homebound yesterday?
>
> Heather: I feel really bad for him because he really wants to come back to school.
> I really like his mom because you can tell she is super concerned but she just …
> and, like, whoever his Spanish teacher is he won't get back to anyone and I feel
> really bad because you can tell that this kid, he's a little bit stressed.
>
> Sally: Yeah!
>
> Heather: And that frustrates me.
>
> Sally: This is why you're doing homebound.  You care.  I want to give him an
> opportunity …
>
> Heather: Like, why doesn't that teacher just respond to his email?
>
> Rex (*in a mocking tone*): Because he's not supposed to be doing it in school. It's
> the responsibility of homebound.
>
> Heather: And [the student] was like, "Well, maybe I'll just go and find [the
> teacher]."  That poor kid.  You can tell he is stressed.  He can barely talk or
> breathe.  But no, it went fine.

Here, Heather expresses her belief that an authentic relationship between the student and

his original Spanish teacher would have helped him achieve greater success.  Sally

identifies the need for this student to work with a teacher who cared about him, which

was why, as the program administrator, she chose Heather to work with him.  Rex's

sarcastic comment about the Spanish teacher writing off the students who leave his

classroom highlights the belief that the teachers at the traditional school disregarded students once they were enrolled in the Homebound Program.  The staff at Ray of Light often discussed their frustration that their peers did not value the success of the students in the alternative programs enough to build or maintain authentic relationships.  This frustration also contributed to teachers' feelings that their peers did not see them as legitimate professionals.

The teachers at Ray of Light ALP put a great deal of emphasis on contributing to authentic relationships with their students.  Indeed, the teachers saw a direct connection between their students' success and their own ability to contribute to authentic relationships through reciprocal caring that went beyond a sense of ethical responsibility.

**Engaging in Academic Work**

The second key element revealed by the data was the students' engagement in their academic work.  The teachers at Ray of Light perceived a strong connection between how engaged a student was in their work and their success.  My definition of 'student engagement in academic work' is grounded in the teachers' own language as represented in the data and in other data collected directly from the school.  These data suggest that a student is engaged in academic work when they show up for school everyday, stay awake during class, and complete their course credits.  The relationship between such engagement and the teachers' internal conceptualization of the students' success is evident by examining three categories of data: (a) observable student engagement, (b) being present, and (c) completing credits.  These three subcomponents suggest a shared responsibility between teachers and students, as the teachers' ability to make course content relevant to students would likely enhance the students' willingness

to show up and their active engagement with materials during class, thus leading to a higher likelihood that the student would complete the course and receive credit for it.

**Observable student engagement.**  The data clearly showed that it was important to the teachers that the students be observably engaged in their work at Ray of Light in order to successfully work their way through the program.  It was also clear that this engagement was the shared responsibility of the teachers and the students, but that the students in particular needed to have authority over their own engagement.

Each week, the staff discussed how engaged or disengaged various students were in that week's academic work.  The teachers then determined who had earned an Academic All-Star Award in recognition of active engagement in their work.  As was always done at the end of Thursday morning staff meetings, Heather kicked off the conversation as she grabbed a stack of the post cards that the staff would send to the families of those who were recognized with the award that week.

Heather: Anyone have any All-Stars?

Rex: I'm going to nominate Johnson.

Heather: Ummm…

Chris: No, he hasn't been making any progress on his physical science at all, but … I won't say no.

Heather: I'm going to say "no."  I have to bug him …

Rex: Okay.

In this conversation, Rex nominates a student, but he does not provide his reasoning.  As Heather thinks about her response, Chris shares his own observations.  In telling the group that the student has made little progress, Chris legitimizes the actions of the

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student: He places the responsibility of the work largely on the student. Although Chris will not veto Rex's nomination, he shares his concern that the student is not fulfilling his responsibilities in the classroom. After some reflection, Heather does veto the nomination, because she has to "bug him" to do his work. This student's success is partially due to the role that she plays in prompting him to stay engaged. Here, Heather identifies a partial shift in the authority over the student's work from the student to herself. As a result of this shift, she does not believe that the student should receive the award. In this example, the teachers exemplify their shared belief that the authority and responsibility for students' observable engagement was, at times, shared between the teachers and students. It was often, though, largely the responsibility of the teachers. Here, Johnson is not given an award because he did not fulfill the teachers' conception of success. He was not observably engaged in his work, which was largely his responsibility.

Heather, Gertrude, and I often used language that legitimized our belief that the students and the teachers share responsibility over how engaged the students were in their academic work. This is especially evident in Heather's response to survey question two, "Think of a time you experienced a student achieving some kind of success. Please describe that experience":

> The greatest success I see in my classroom is when a student takes the initiative to ask for help. So many kids don't do anything unless they are constantly hounded, but, some days, they ask for help without being addressed by the teacher. By asking the simple question, 'Can you help me,' to me says that for that one moment, the student actually cares about his/her work.

Heather legitimizes her personal authority over her students' actions when she references her "constantly hound[ing]" them. She then makes a move to legitimize her students' personal authority over their own actions by saying that some students ask for help without being "hounded" by her. Ultimately, this shared responsibility over students' academic progress led Heather to believe that her students were able to become more independent and to eventually care about their work; she identifies this independence and personal authority as "the greatest success" in her classroom.

Gertrude's response to the same question expresses legitimacy through a narrative where the ultimate protagonist is rewarded. Van Leeuwen (2007) identifies this legitimacy as mythopoesis. She begins her response with a general observation about one unit.

> A lot of my students achieved success towards the end of our Killing Mr. Griffin [*sic*] unit in a unique way. Throughout the unit the students had their ups and downs with various discussions, days and assignments. However, I think there is always a general feeling of accomplishment towards the end of a text, when a student looks at this 200+ page book and knows, 'Hey, I read that' … no matter how much scaffolding or teachers' aid they require.

In this response, Gertrude discusses a unit in which she shared personal authority with the students over their academic engagement. She first suggests that the students exercised their responsibility for their academic work by participating in discussions and completing assignments. She then adds to this image by writing that students felt a sense of accomplishment when they realized that they had read an entire book, even if that

meant that she guided them through that process. Gertrude's answer then hones in on a precise example of student success:

> The specific moment of success for a few of my students, though, was when we finished reading the 2nd to last chapter (as a group) and 2 of my students continued reading the final chapter ON THEIR OWN!  Having these particular students actively pursuing a text brings me so much joy because a.) English is not their easiest language, and b.) They are, even if only subconsciously, realizing that reading can be an enjoyable pursuit!

Her use of the pronoun "we" shows that she believes that she and the students were doing the work together.  Both student and teacher have shared personal authority over the academic work, meaning that the internal conception of student success is one of shared agency and responsibility.  While most of her students remained engaged during the group reading, Gertrude shared that some students continued reading after her structured lesson ended.  This, at first glance, makes it seem as if the heroes and heroines of her example are the students.  However, in ending with the sentence "This brings me so much joy because…," Gertrude represents herself as the ultimate protagonist of her story: Her work has helped students overcome language barriers and their preconceived notions of what reading is.  Gertrude's language legitimizes the work of the students while also giving herself authority over their success.  Likely, this is evidence that Gertrude's self-efficacy is quite high; I will examine the importance of high self-efficacy in teachers more closely in Chapter 5.

**Being present.**  Throughout the course of my research, the value of "being present" came up again and again.  It was the most frequently discussed idea in staff

meetings, during interviews, and on the survey administered at the start of this study. In fact, all of the teachers pointedly and explicitly mentioned "being present" as a major component of student success. In addition, it was the most measured, documented, and awarded behavior within Ray of Light. A student was considered present when they showed up to school, did so on time, and did not sleep during the school day. The teachers viewed the students as the most agentive actors and enactors of this element.

The first question of the initial survey asked, "In your opinion, what does 'success' look like at Ray of Light?" Four of the six responses referenced the importance of a student being present in order to be successful.

- "For some, [success is] being in attendance every day."

- "Success is when students are present in my class and completing assignments."

- "Accomplishment means that students are attaining short term or long term goals. For some, that's coming to school more regularly or more often."

- "Success is when students [amongst other things] improve their attendance."

According to the Ray of Light teachers, students who are present in school are well on their way to becoming successful there.

At Ray of Light, students were considered present when they were on time for class; stayed for the entire class period, with the exception of periodic bathroom breaks of five minutes or less; and did not sleep during work or instructional time. Physical attendance in the classroom was documented in two ways: (a) teachers took attendance at the start of their class period and recorded the attendance on a paper enrollment list referred to as the attendance sheet, and (b) they recorded it in TIES (Technology and

Information Education Services), the online software used by the district. Peg, the program secretary, preferred that the teachers recorded attendance on the paper sheet and then filed it by hand each Friday after they finished teaching. These paper copies were kept for the entirety of the school year. When filling in the paper attendance sheets, the teachers used codes to designate a student's status: a "P" indicated that the student was present, an "A" designated that they were absent, and a "T" showed that they were tardy. I observed the teachers taking this paper documentation seriously. Rex, for example, three-hole punched each of his paper attendance sheets and kept them in a binder with his lesson plans, removing them only at the conclusion of the week. Heather color-coded her information and used whiteout to correct any mistakes. Similarly, the teachers recorded student attendance in TIES, where students were marked Present, Absent, or Tardy; the teachers could adjust the online record after submitting it, if necessary. The student, the student's parents, and the educational staff throughout the district could then access this attendance information.

Unlike the TIES attendance program, the paper attendance sheets included additional space after each student's name for the teacher to write down comments, which ranged from a student's engagement level to their course progression. The sheets allowed the teachers to document attendance for the entire week in a single place. The teachers then referenced the sheets, especially their comments, when deciding which students should receive attendance awards at the week's conclusion. This process was systematic, but left space for dialogue about student issues. The teachers spent a good deal of time discussing who would receive an attendance award each week, often talking about student attendance for over 25% of a staff meeting, or approximately 12-15

minutes of a 50-minute meeting.  One teacher, generally Heather or Sally, would read

names from a student list, then the group quickly accepted or "nixed" a student based on

their experience with that student throughout the week.  Conversations about a student's

eligibility for the award were sometimes short affirmations or declinations of the

student's short-term success, as can be observed from the following excerpts:

Heather: Jacob Wills? Oh my gosh … he's been here all week!

Rex: All week!

Heather: Jacobbbbbbb!!


Heather: Libon?

Chris: He's been here all week.

Heather: That kid works really hard.

The second example in particular positions the student as the primary social actor.

Heather says that Libon works really hard, acknowledging his personal efforts to be

present.

Furthermore, the attendance sheet comments also proved useful when the teachers

discussed concerns about their students.

Heather: Deon Brown?

Jenna: Fine.

Rex: He's good.

Chris (*reading through comments on attendance sheet silently*): Oh Deon … does

he work for you guys?

Heather: Eh?

Rex: He's slow as molasses.

Chris: He's slow, but his attendance is good.

Sometimes, the attendance comments sparked longer conversations about the

nonacademic challenges that the students faced and what types of flexible

accommodations might help them be more present and thus be more successful.

Sally: Jose Davis Rodriguez?

Heather: Uhg.  Fine.

Michele: What?  Does he not work?

Heather: No!  At all.  Like I can't get him to do anything …

Jenna: Yeah (*referencing attendance sheet*), it looks like he was sleeping on

Tuesday.

Sally: Will you write his counselor an email?  Because he needs, like, three

credits for graduation.  He's a kid that could possibly not walk graduation.

Heather (*making a note on her attendance sheet*): Ok, done.

Here, Sally takes some authority over trying to solve this student's issue of being

wakefully present by asserting that there is a possibility he might not graduate and by

telling Heather to reach out to his counselor.  In doing this, Sally shows how much she

values students' physical and mental presence in the classroom and exemplifies her

willingness to be an agent for change when there is an issue that she believes she knows

how to address.  She made a similar move—positioning herself as agentive in helping

students achieve success—during another staff meeting.

Sally: Just an FYI, and don't share this, but Jesse Smitts is homeless right now.

They got evicted during break and they are living in and out of a hotel and he's

hopping around with friends.  So, I'm giving him a break about coming late to

school.  And, I contacted the homeless liaison and got him some bus passes, but I

told him that coming late to other classes is not OK.  Just first hour.  First hour

will be hard for him depending upon how many buses he takes.  So, that's kinda

what's going on with him.

Chris: So he's just trying to get by.

Sally: Oh yeah! I mean, this is just …

Chris: His energy level has been really low.

Sally: Right now, school is secondary for him.  I mean, this is survival.  Just like

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. You can't be successful if you're not getting your

needs met.

This dialogue clearly shows Sally positioning herself and the tradition of the school

schedule in a place of authority.  The school schedule, and promptness, is normalized by

tradition and, thus, holds traditional authority, or authorization.  Authorization, as van

Leeuwen (2007) described it, examines language legitimation in terms of "authority of

tradition, custom, and law, and persons who hold institutional authority" (p. 105).  Thus,

authorization answers the question "Who says we should do this?" and it comes in the

form of personal, expert, role model, impersonal, traditional, and/or conformity authority

(van Leeuween, 2007).  When Sally says that she will "give him a break," she shows that

she recognizes her authoritative role and that she will use that authority to provide him

with accommodation that will help him be more successful.  When Chris mentions that

this student is "just trying to get by" and that "his energy level has been really low," he

further legitimizes Sally's authoritative choice.

During another staff meeting, the teachers engaged in a conversation about Diego, a student who had been having difficulty in the Ray of Light program. They had encouraged him to enroll in courses at Urban Learning, an adult basic education program, where he would be away from some of the distractions at Ray of Light, including his girlfriend; he would also have access to GED preparation courses before he turned 21, when he would "age out" of the services provided by the public school system. Unfortunately, the student arrived late to Urban Learning's registration day, so he was turned away. After Sally told the group that Diego would be returning to the Ray of Light program, she added this:

> Sally: I think he just showed up late. He probably didn't even mean to be late, but I can't believe Urban Learning, really?!
>
> Heather: I mean, yeah, but …
>
> Sally: I mean we would never be allowed to do that.
>
> Jenna: Yeah.
>
> Sally: It kinda pisses me off.

Two aspects of language legitimation are apparent in this dialogue. First, Sally acknowledges Urban Learning's authority over the student, as they had the ability to turn him away for being late. Furthermore, they had the power to refuse him the right to voice his reasons for not arriving on time. Sally's language expresses her frustration at their inflexibly when it came to punctuality, and she dismissed Diego's tardiness, because it was most likely unintentional. On the other hand, Heather affirms the program's authoritative actions by adding, "I mean yeah." Sally's next comment works to further delegitimize the program by comparing it to Ray of Light. Interestingly, she says "we

would never be allowed to do that," suggesting that it is not the Ray of Light staff, but some outside group or entity, who hold authority over attendance policies. This adds another layer of complexity to the element of being present: Although the teachers and students are given voice and authority as social actors within these conversations, they also lack agency regarding the school policies overall.

**Completing credits.** Although attendance was an important part of the teachers' conceptualization of student success, both Heather and Chris also talked about how they felt that they could help the students succeed, if only the students would come to school. Thus, the teachers also believed that student success meant that students must master state standards and complete credits in order to be successful in the program. Indeed, the data codes revealed that completing credits was a major part of how the students engaged in academic work at Ray of Light ALP. Credit completion leads to a high school diploma, which was one of the goals most referenced by both the students and the teachers. In order to complete a credit at Ray of Light, a student needed to earn a grade of D- or better; both the teachers and the students were perceived as sharing agency over the students' completion of credits.

In responding to the initial survey, every teacher and staff member mentioned that students completing credits was a major focus of the Ray of Light program. The responses also positioned the students as having agency over their own credit completion. In response to the survey prompt, "Think of a time you experienced a student achieving some kind of success. Please describe that experience," Peg wrote:

Every once in a while we get students who are so motivated to graduate on time. It is great to see it happen. They come into the program so far behind in credits and then they do end up working so hard they do graduate.

Here, it is evident that Peg believes that a student's hard work was one reason why that student was able to complete credits and graduate. In this response, she is exercising moral evaluation, or legitimation in reference to value systems (van Leeuwen, 2007). Moral evaluation can appear in three ways: as evaluation, as an abstraction, or as an analogy. Peg mobilizes evaluation when she says that working hard is a key element to credit completion and that graduation is a favorable outcome of that action. For her, and traditionally speaking, the willingness to work hard is valuable. Her language positions the students as social actors and the act of completing credits as desirable.

Two of the responses to the prompt "In your opinion, what does 'success' look like at Ray of Light?" also positioned the students as the agents of their credit completion. Sally makes an interesting move linguistically in her response by removing herself from a position of authority, even though she is the program coordinator: "Success can look very different for every student. It might mean…passing 1 of the 6 classes, just passing all classes, or earning more credits each trimester to get on track for graduation." Instead of suggesting that she is the expert in defining success, she asserts that success can look different for each student. She then goes on to provide examples of success that relate to credit completion, making it clear that the student is doing the work: The student is "earning" the credits. In Sally's response, the student is positioned as having the most agency over their own success. Heather's response to this prompt begins, "Success is seen in my grade book." Here, she relies upon the traditional notion

that a compilation of student assessment scores leads to either a student's passing grade or failing grade.  At first glance, this is an example of traditional authority.  However, she goes on to write:

> In independent study, if students are passing that means they have met deadlines and work requirements. In teacher led [*sic*] classes, if students do not have missing assignments or zeros and they are present in class to accomplish their work, that work helps them to do well on their summative assessments.

Heather establishes a difference between two types of classes at Ray of Light: teacher-led ones and non-teacher-led, or independent study, classes.  Heather legitimizes the role of the student in completing their coursework for credit by listing actions that the student can take to mitigate poor grades.  She also alludes to her role in students' credit completion when she says, "In teacher led [*sic*] classes…" which points to those times when she has expert authority over the students.

This sense of shared responsibility for students' credit completion also came up often in the teachers' conversations about students completing course work.  Rex once remarked, "She's one that absolutely thinks that we're just going to magically give her the grade so she can graduate without doing any of the work."  This comment suggests that credit completion was not solely the role of the teacher.  During another conversation, Heather commented, "I would vote Aaron Kling [for an Academic All-Star Award].  That kid has plowed through the stuff I've given him," which further exemplifies the teachers' belief that the students must be primarily responsible for their own credit completion under the guidance of the teachers.  Thus, teachers and students were both considered important agents of student success in terms of credit completion.

In recognition of the amount of responsibility that the students had over credit completion, the teachers formally recognized those students who were able to manage the responsibility of their academic work.  In addition to discussing attendance at the end of each Thursday staff meeting, the teachers also discussed which students they believed to have been academically successful over the course of that week: those who had been engaged in course work, who had been completing course work as or faster than expected, or who had displayed some other unique action deemed worthy of praise. Then, on Friday, they presented the qualifying students with the Academic All-Star Award, which consisted of their choice of several prizes and a postcard containing notes from the teachers about why the student had been chosen as a recipient of the award. Typically, five to ten Academic All-Star Awards were given out each week.  The teachers believed that these awards provided incentive for recipients to continue to work hard and that they were motivation for those who had not received an award to work toward receiving one the following week.

Overall, teachers legitimized and explicitly recognized the role that students played in completing their course credits.  They made it clear through their conversations and in their responses to questions about student success that the students themselves, with the aid of the teachers, were responsible for their credit completion and ultimately for their status at graduation.

The teachers' internal conception of success at Ray of Light included the extent to which the students were engaged in their academic work. The data revealed that the teachers perceived a significant link between a student's success and their level of

engagement, as seen through observable student engagement, the act of being present, and the completion of course credit.

**Focusing on Students' Futures**

The third and final key element of student success present in the data was a focus on the students' desired futures. The Ray of Light program was structurally focused around helping students' obtain a high school diploma, but the teachers also tried to help students focus on what might come after that achievement. Several kinds of data exemplified this, from career-focused course offerings and curricula to rich conversations about the appropriateness of the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, which had been implemented building-wide and which was specifically and explicitly geared to "close the achievement gap" (AVID Homepage, 2015) and to help students become successful. Additionally, the teachers chose to focus their annual Peer Learning Community (PLC) goal on their students' career and college readiness, which led to concerns over what appropriate indicators of student success might be.

**Career-focused course offerings and curricula**. Some of the Ray of Light course offerings—such as Work Program and VoTech—were specifically designed to engage the students' in thinking about and preparing for their long-term future. Work Program, a course taught by Rex, taught professional skills needed in many workplaces and paired the students with community businesses to help them gain practical work experience. Similarly, the VoTech program allowed some students to attend community education classes related to specific career pathways for a portion of their day.

During one of my post-lesson observation meetings about curricula with Gwen, my peer teacher coach, I spoke about how I thought our students might view success in

terms of this element.  I also talked about what I suspected we might be able to do in our classes to better focus on students' desired futures, admitting that a great deal of the responsibly in this might rest with the teachers.  This episode is particularly provocative as it also exemplified a tension that I expand upon in Chapter 5 in articulating what success was for students at Ray of Light to an outsider.

Gwen started our conversation by asking me a question she knew was related to my professional interests.  She said, "What, for you and your students, is success?"

I thought for a moment.  I knew that she was probably expecting a specific answer, but I wanted to organically approach her question as much as possible.  I responded:

> So, it seems like, by the time they come here [to Ray of Light], they are really ready to get the course credit.  I was just doing some reflective writing about this last night.  I don't think students always know why they want to complete the credits or why they want to graduate, and they know that that's the goal.  So I was thinking about how more probably needs to be done by the teachers.

In my opinion, students who I had seen come to Ray of Light were ready and willing to work toward getting the credits they needed for graduation.  However, I still felt that there was something missing from this seemingly simplistic progression.  At this point in the conversation, I wondered if Gwen was constructing a judgment about me, likely thinking that I was overly optimistic about the students I was working with in assuming that they should have more long-term goals outside of graduating from high school.  They were, after all, students who had been rejected by or removed from the mainstream

school, who were likely doing what they could just to finish high school in time for graduation.  I continued:

> I was thinking about success in terms of it being a motion towards students' idealized selves.  But, one of the gates along the way to that, often times, students perceive to be graduation.  I don't think they always understand how or if graduation is going to help them.  In fact, we did these goal posters in my class and hung them around our classroom.  After "My goal is…," many of the students listed things like "To be happy" or "To have a family."  Some goal posters just said "graduate" or "finish all of my classes," and I wonder—where do those types of successes fall on that path toward idealized self?  Do students know why they're moving in the direction of graduation?  Students might know how to get to graduation—by completing credits, but they did not always know why they were working toward that goal.

As I expressed in the Completing Credits subsection, the teachers at Ray of Light all believed that graduation was an essential goal for the students.  Even still, they did not necessarily believe that this goal completely defined student success.  The teachers believed that the students needed to work toward graduation, but that graduation was not intended as the ultimate goal.

These tensions between teachers and outsiders existed regarding what the ultimate goals for the students should be and how progression toward those goals would be measured.  The value of focusing on credit completion, graduation, and preparing for the long-term future was evident to the teachers, but just how that focus might be defined by indicators and ultimately evaluated was a deep concern for them.

The teachers agreed that curricula related to college and career readiness should include exploring job interests, learning resume and cover letter writing, building professional references, and actually searching for potential post-secondary schools or employment. However, they often questioned the appropriateness of implementing programs adopted by the traditional high school that was housed within the same building. During the time of my research, the teachers were particularly concerned about the AVID program, a program that the teachers believed was a college readiness strategy, which had recently been implemented building-wide.

**AVID: A building-wide program for student success**. One morning, while we met for our regular weekly staff meeting, Shela, the AVID coordinator, joined us. Many of us speculated that she had been sent to uncover the extent to which Ray of Light had incorporated the AVID program into our instruction. The teachers at both the traditional school in the building and Ray of Light were expected to use the strategies from this program—referred to as AVID strategies—in their classrooms to increase their students' academic skills. Concern about the motivations of the AVID program arose when the teachers at Ray of Light predicted that it was geared at preparing students for college only. Some of the Ray of Light teachers embraced this program, teaching and enforcing AVID strategies such as the Cornell Notes strategy, but others pushed back against it.

For those teachers disagreeing with the implementation of the program on a building-wide basis, resistance to the program stemmed from the belief that AVID was meant to only prepare students for college or, at the least, to ask students to engage in school in one specific way. Therefore, it would not address the needs and desires of all students, particularly those who did not desire to attend a college.

Before Shela joined the group, we contemplated the program—its implementation, the motivations behind its implantation, and the impacts of both—in a lengthy conversation.  During the conversation, Heather and I questioned the program and alluded to our desire for greater flexibility in its approach.  Rex expressed his dismay at yet another new program, which he perceived to take agency over how material was taught away from the teachers, and Sally and Chris hypothesized that teaching students the strategies, regardless of whether or not they were college bound, might lead to socially moral and "good" outcomes.

> Heather: [AVID] is like forcing a style of learning onto students that may not like that style.
>
> Jenna: Yeah.  It seems like it's like trying to change the students' ways of learning instead of trying to match the school's practices to the students' ways of learning, a sort of assimilation.
>
> Sally: Yea.
>
> Rex: For now … in a few years there'll be something else they want us to do …
>
> Chris: It's teaching them how to do notes and study habits.
>
> Sally: Because it's to prepare them for college, right?
>
> Heather: Right.
>
> Chris: From what I read in research, it's pretty successful.
>
> Sally: I remember going to another school and seeing it a few years ago, and I was impressed …
>
> Rex: Well the vast majority of our kids aren't college bound.

Sally: I disagree with that. I think the desire to go to college is there. It's just going to take them longer to get there. A lot of our kids could be fifth-year seniors and do more work and understand … You know, AVID is just the skills part …

Chris: Well, 60% of kids don't graduate from college in 4 years … I think AVID is meant to get more kids of color into college and successful with it.

Although Heather and I questioned the seemingly formulaic strategies being taught by the AVID program, Chris and Sally were in favor of it. Heather suggested that the program, and the teachers engaged in the program, had authority over how students participated in learning by insisting that students use the AVID strategies. Heather and I perceived that the building-wide implementation of the program was "forcing" students to engage in learning in a specific way.

Sally and Chris, on the other hand, asserted that this program prepared students for their futures. Sally's assertion that most students at Ray of Light might be college-bound prompted some extended discussion. When Rex suggested that a majority of Ray of Light students might not be interested in college, Sally told him that she disagreed with that assumption. She asserted that many of the students at Ray of Light might wish to go on to college, and that the AVID strategies might help them. She seemed to suggest, however, that the skills being taught through AVID might not be the complete solution to students' success. She moves some of the authority originally given to the program itself over students' learning and success to the students themselves by adding that "a lot of our kids could be fifth-year seniors and do more work and understand … You know, AVID is just the skills part." This statement shows that Sally believes that the students are capable

of taking some authority over their own work, which might increase their "understanding." The group agrees that the students should have some voice over how they engage in their learning and for what reasons, but they are divided on the usefulness of the AVID program, which seemed to insist that students assimilate to one way of learning, of experiencing success.

**The PLC goal and traditional indicators of student success**. The school district within which Ray of Light was located used several types of data as indicators of students' progress toward success. Traditionally, the district used students' standardized test scores and grades to determine their readiness for life after graduation. In the year that this data was collected, a new digital application was being designed to help students, parents, and teachers track students' preparedness for post-secondary success. Called the Professional Growth Plan, this application would allow students to see if they were on-track to meet their goals based on several indicators of achievement. This program, too, planned to start with tracking students using traditional indicators of success. The Ray of Light teachers, however, wished to see more complex indicators of preparedness for student success after high school.

Each year, the teachers in the district formed small Peer Learning Communities (PLCs), and then each individual PLC determined a measurable goal that they would work toward over the course of the academic year. During the academic year in which this data collection took place, the teachers at Ray of Light decided to create their PLC goal around the topic of students' college and career readiness. The Ray of Light teachers believed that career and college readiness, particularly using indicators other than standardized tests and grades, was an important area of focus. The teachers' specific

goal was to help students increase their career and college readiness as indicated by increases on their SkillsUSA Employability tests scores.  The Professional Growth Plan application did not account for this test, nor did the majority of students in the traditional high school take it.

As a type of standardized test, the SkillsUSA test was technically a traditional indicator of student preparedness for success after high school.  Therefore, its appropriateness as an assessment of the students' career and college readiness was a source of tension in several staff meeting conversations.  During the beginning of the school year, teachers examined sample questions from the test and questioned whether they might be testing cultural competency instead of college and career readiness. Indeed, in examining the pretest results, there were clear differences in scores along racial and cultural lines.  By the end of the year, the teachers found themselves questioning the appropriateness of the SkillsUSA test to assess the work that they had done with students to prepare them for college or careers.  Fears arose over how the students might fair on the post-test, especially since the teachers did not teach their students about content specifically on the SkillsUSA test; instead, they allowed students to determine what was important to do and to know in order to be on their own path to success.

Of greatest concern to the teachers was that the results would be reported to those outside of Ray of Light.  Each year, there was an all-building meeting at the end of the year; at this meeting, each PLC shared their work throughout the year and the results of that work.  The teachers spent several full staff meetings discussing the data they that they had collected from the SkillsUSA Employability Test and how they might report this

data to the PLCs at the traditional school and to building and district administrators. The teachers expressed that they felt they had meet their goal to prepare the students for their futures, but that data from the test results might not provide a true picture of their own and their students' efforts toward this goal.

To the group's surprise, the end-of-year PLC reporting presentations would be conducted differently than in the past. A few weeks prior to the end of the school year, all of the PLCs were told that they would be reporting on one major success that they had experienced during the year, a moment of which they were particularly proud. This new flexibility excited the Ray of Light group immensely. The staff members decided to recruit students for a short video in which they told the other teachers and administrators about their successes from the year.

This video is an example of the group completely shifting authority over who decides the indicators for student success from the teachers to the students. For it, the students were prompted to answer the question, "What have you done or learned at Ray of Light this year that you are most proud of?" Their answers included:

- "[I] learned that I can put that I can speak two language on my resume."
- "[I have] a resume that I can use to apply for a job."
- "I will use my cover letter… to apply for a medical job."

By allowing the students to define their own successes and proud moments for individuals outside of the school, the teachers legitimized the students' voices and conceptions of success. When the students' and the teachers' actual voices were literally heard, they were able to show how the students—the most important stakeholders—were focusing on their desired futures under their teachers' guidance.

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**The External Depiction of Student Success**

In order to answer my second research question, I examined the relationship between the Ray of Light teachers' conceptions of success and the materials available to those outside of the Ray of Light community. In those places where one of the three key elements of success was present, I examined how it was depicted. Ultimately, the data revealed a disconnect between the observable internal conception of success and the depiction of success present in the publicly available materials regarding the program.

The degree to which each of the three key elements was emphasized externally varied greatly from their internal depictions. Although the teachers valued all three elements almost equally within the school, the public materials—especially the school website, the new student handbook, and the enrollment application—suggested that the most important element of student success was the program's focus on students' futures. Interestingly, the external narrative clearly positioned student behavior, which impacted a student's enrollment and chance to graduation, as the most important aspect of a student's success. By focusing on behavior as a step to graduation, the external narrative focused on the student's short-term future, whereas the teachers' focused on both the short- and long-term futures of those enrolled at Ray of Light. The public materials did show a connection between a student's success and their engagement in their academic work. However, the publically available documents rarely referred to the importance of the authentic relationships between the students and the teachers, an element that the teachers within the school asserted was essential to student success. Furthermore, the external narrative of student success at Ray of Light portrayed the teachers and students as non-

agentive; the program's design and the institution of public education appeared to have the most authority over student success.

In this section, I will analyze the external depiction of student success through two major aspects of van Leeuwen's (2007, 2008) lens of language legitimation. I will examine two specific aspects of the language: (a) what is absent in the language presented to the public, and (b) how that absence impacts the placement of authority over a student's success within the program. This difference in the external placement of authority, as I will show, appears to remove agency from the students and teachers, thereby devaluing their roles in student success.

**What Is Absent**

Most of the information available at the time of this study to those outside of the Ray of Light school environment did not acknowledge the teacher-identified element of contributing to authentic relationships. The Ray of Light student handbook, the application packet, the registration information and forms, and the Continuous Learning Plan—which a student completed when they enroll—were all void of language that identified the presence of authentic student-teacher relationships and the influence of such relationships on student success. Furthermore, references to such relationships and their value were largely absent from the school's website. This is important to note because, as seen in the Contributing to Authentic Relationships subsection, the teachers at Ray of Light used relationships as indicators of student success. By lacking this indicator, the website contributed to a depiction of success that was predicted in a way that disregarded the importance of relationships, something that the teachers efficaciously emphasized internally.

It is worth noting the single, albeit indirect, reference to authentic relationships in the publically available materials. The homepage of the Ray of Light website stated that "the program is designed to increase student learning by providing a smaller classroom setting and offering a wide variety of academic support" (Ray of Light Website, 2015). Some visitors to the website might have interpret this to mean that the environment allowed students more time with their teachers and that there was therefore the potential for authentic relationships to form. The language allowed for the possibility that a reader would understand that the teachers contributed to authentic relationships and thus improved the student's likelihood of succeeding in the program. Because of this vague possibility, I will examine the language legitimation present within this singular, indirect reference to the internally conceptualized element of student success.

The arrangement of the language within the above sentence exemplifies what van Leeuwen (2007) called theoretical rationalization through prediction. As discussed in the Language Legitimation as an Analytic Frame section of Chapter 2, rationalization includes instrumental rationalization and theoretical rationalization. Instrumental rationalization refers to the goals and effects of institutionalized social actions. Theoretical rationalization—the type of rationalization used in the sentence found on the Ray of Light website—aims to reveal some kind of predicted outcome as it is related to a given situation (van Leeuwen, 2007).

The first part of the statement tells the reader that the program has been designed to "increase student learning," a predicted outcome of the "smaller classroom setting(s)" and "academic support." In order to understand who has authority over student success, we must answer the questions "Who is doing the action?" and "How is it working?" The

text implies that an unnamed program designer—not the teachers—has provided the smaller class sizes and the academic support that will impact student success. Therefore, neither the staff nor the students have authority over the increased student learning that is predicted in this data.

**The Placement of Authority**

Individuals who hold authority and agency over an action are typically individuals who have more control than others over the intended outcome of that action. When the students and teachers are not positioned as agents in regard to student success, their perceived impact on student success is muted. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, this likely has implications on efficacy and on the students' and the teachers' abilities to carry out schooling that is additive, rather than subtractive (Valenzuela, 1999), in nature.

The Student Handbook is one of the documents that was available to people outside of the Ray of Light program. Several components of the language within the handbook informed the external conception of student success within the program. I will first examine the Cell Phone Usage policy. When this policy came up in staff meetings, the teachers expressed a link between cell phone usage and how the students were engaging in academic work. The sixth page of the handbook, which I created upon Sally's request, includes information about how students should manage their cell phones during class time. This document contains words in bold font that speak to the student and that assume that the student and the teacher are equally responsible for and accountable for the way that cell phones are managed. For example, the first guideline states:

1. **<u>We will treat class as if it were a meeting</u>**.  Proper etiquette dictates that your cell phone is in silence or vibrate mode at all times.  You would not answer a call or text message during a meeting, so you should not answer or text while a teacher is leading the class.

Here, I purposefully inserted the pronoun "we" to explicitly show that both the teachers and the students were agents in determining the environment of the class "as if it were a meeting."

Words not in bold under the first sentence position the teacher as having personal authority over what happens in the classroom.  The pronoun shifts from "we" to "you" to show that the students are responsible for their own cell phones and their use of them.  This shift moves the text from addressing the reader as part of a collective to singling out the student; it also shows a conscious effort to carefully indicate those actions over which both the teacher and the student have agency and those actions for which the individual student has primary responsibility.  As a teacher myself, it makes sense that I was sensitive to legitimizing the agency of the teachers and students in meaningful ways.  This, however, is one of the only examples of a public document portraying the Ray of Light students and teachers as agentive.

This guideline also uses both moral evaluation and instrumental rationalization.  The words "proper etiquette dictates" answer the question often associated with instrumental rationalization: "Why does this social practice exist?"  This guideline states that it is not "proper" to answer a phone call or send a text message during a meeting, which appears to be a reference to a professional meeting in a workplace; by extension, students should not answer their phones or send texts during class time.  This language is

also closely linked to moral evaluation, because it suggests that some value underlies the guideline: Students who refrain from using their phones during class time are adhering to "proper etiquette," thus they are doing what is considered socially right or good.  Such students are not putting their potential success in school at risk.

Another publically available document is the Ray of Light website. The last tab, labeled "Activities," mentions several opportunities related to academics that students can engage in throughout the academic year, including guest speakers, field trips, and contests.  The short paragraph at the top of the page states that "Ray of Light offers a wide variety of activities for students to be involved in. These activities will help build the foundation for citizenship and leadership for students" (Ray of Light Website, 2015). In contrast to the Cell Phone Usage policy, the program is given the impersonal authority within this language: The word "offers" suggests that the action, the power, stems from the program itself rather than from the students, who do not have any personal authority within this sentence.  The next line of text says, "Every three weeks, a speaker from within the community shares information about organizations, life skills and opportunities for students" (Ray of Light Website, 2015).  The word "shares" assumes that the guest speakers will give something to the students and does not legitimize what the students might have to offer in return.  Again, the students are positioned as having less power than the school or the activities offered by the school.

The final document that I will analyze here is the Ray of Light Student Enrollment Application. The application asks the student to answer several of the questions; therefore, in keeping with the literal sense of the root word "author," its

language places some authority with the student. The final section of the application asks the student to respond to the following questions and prompts:

1. What did you struggle with at your last school?

2. This is a school of choice. Please describe why you want to attend Ray of Light ALC [*sic*].

3. What commitments are you willing to make to be successful at Ray of Light ALC [*sic*]?

4. Please describe any concerns (academic, physical, psychological, social, etc.) we should know about.

5. Why should we accept your application?

These questions, assuming the abstract authority of the program—or potentially the program coordinator—presume certain things. The first question does not ask "Did you struggle…" but instead asserts that the student did struggle. Questions like this one, which position the student at a deficit by assuming that they have struggled with school in the past, are common in schools that practice subtractive schooling. I will discuss the implications of this type of positionality and use of deficit discourses in greater detail in Chapter 5.

The second and third questions, interestingly, begin to shift abstract agency away from the program or program coordinator. Question two also appears to give some authority to the student by stating that the student has a "choice" in their enrollment at this school. They must "want" to attend the school, as they are not being forced to do so. This suggests that the student has agency over this choice. Question three also alludes to the student's agency over their success, because it requires them to make some

commitments in order to enroll.  However, question five removes the student's agency by asking them to state why "we" should allow them into the program.  This "we" might mean "the teachers," but it is difficult to be certain, as the teachers within the program have not been mentioned explicitly in the application.  This document was the only publicly available document containing language that addressed the student directly, and it was the only one that shifted the agency to the student, which it did only temporarily.

**Attendance and cognitive interaction with material.**  Just as in the internal conception of student success, attendance and engagement were important aspects in the external depiction.  At the time of my case study, the first subpage on the school's website was titled "Student Expectations" and it began with information about student attendance, which was laid out as follows:

Student Expectations

Attendance

100% Attendance is expected to be successful at Ray of Light.

80% Attendance or below will jeopardize the students' success and enrollment at Ray of Light.


Calling in sick

Please call the Ray of Light office at [xxx-xxx-xxxx] to report illnesses or absences of any kind.


Research indicates that class attendance is closely related to positive performance in class. The state estimates that the average [X state] student misses 7 days per

school year. Therefore, students missing more than 7 days can be considered

truant and in violation of [X] state law on compulsory education. Attendance

contracts will be created for students who do not follow attendance policy (Ray of

Light Website, 2015).

The language used in the first two complete sentences legitimizes the school and the

school's policies about attendance. The implied social actor becomes evident when we

ask, "Who is 'expecting' the students to attend?"; the answer is the Ray of Light

program. The language also implies that the program may enforce consequences if the

student falls below an 80% attendance record. This is, then, an example of abstract

authority, legitimizing the school's rules and moral evaluation. Van Leeuwen (2007)

writes of moral evaluation, "It is not possible to find an explicit, linguistically motivated

method for identifying moral evaluations. [...] We can only recognize them, on the basis

of our common-sense cultural knowledge" (p. 98). According to this statement, the threat

of consequences leads to the assumption that it is bad for students to attend less than 80%

of the time and good for students to attend more than 80% of the time.

The last paragraph of this section of the webpage also uses legitimation, both

moral evaluation of what is normal and mythopoesis by way of a cautionary tale. In the

phrase "the average [X state] student misses 7 days per year," the word "average"

establishes a normative number: Students missing more than seven days are considered

abnormal. The phrase "violation of [X] state law" acts as a cautionary tale, warning that

students who miss more than the average or normal number of days are breaking the law.

Such students will subsequently be asked to sign an attendance contract. This language

positions the students as potential violators of the policy. It does not mention the internal

use of attendance awards to reward those students who adhere to the attendance expectations. This same language is used in the student handbook. Attendance is not mentioned in the student application.

**Credit completion.** When the outside story of student success is closely examined, the responsibility for obtaining credit seems to shift from the student to something or someone else. Whereas the student was seen as the primary agent in completing their own credits internally, the external narrative strips the student of agency and control in the language used to describe credit completion at Ray of Light.

According to the first sentence on the school website, "Ray of Light Alternative Learning Program is an alternative education option providing a variety of ways for students to earn credits toward a high school diploma" (2015). The use of the word "providing" in this sentence immediately places the responsibility of credit completion on the school itself, which is a more impersonal authority (van Leeuwen, 2007) than the student. The school will, as is stated here, "provide" the student with ways to earn credits.

The homepage of the website goes on to describe the program in more detail. The description of the program again places the school in the authoritative position.

> The program is designed to increase student learning by providing a smaller
> classroom setting and offering a wide variety of academic support. This unique
> program values high academic standards within each curricula area, which meet
> both [local] and [X] State Standards. (Ray of Light Website, 2015)

The repeated use of the root word "provide" shifts the agency away from the student and onto the school. The description also utilizes what van Leeuwen (2007) calls a moral evaluation, as the authority of the school is no longer assumed without justification. The

words "values" and "high academic standards" loosely point to a larger value system, one that relies upon the expert and impersonal authority of the institution of traditional education. By pointing out that the Ray of Light program is "unique" but connected to the socially valued institution of traditional education, the statement aims to bolster the perceived value of the program based on its differences from the traditional school while still aligning itself with the core values of traditional institutions.

## Summary

In all, the internal conception of student success at Ray of Light ALP was one where both students and teachers were perceived to be agentive and legitimate; both contributed to student success. Furthermore, the teachers utilized indicators of students' success like the students' abilities to form authentic relationships and to be engaged in their work, which were different from the district's traditional indicators of test scores and grades. Externally, the teachers and students were stripped of their agency and appeared—through the discourses used to portray the program—to have little impact on student success. In the following chapter, I examine the potential implications of this difference in agency and legitimation and describe the tension and ensuing struggle within which the teachers at Ray of Light found themselves.

**Chapter 5: Discussion**

My research shows that the teachers at Ray of Light Alternative Learning Program had a clear conception of success, but it also shows that their conception was not represented in the external narrative about the school. My analysis shows that the teachers believed that they had agency to support student success inside of the school. However, the documents available publically about the school portrayed both the teachers and the students as having little agency in learning or in collaboratively defining student success. In addition, the teachers within Ray of Light believed that their peers outside of the alternative school perceived them as having a minor impact on student success.

This difference gave rise to a tension that the teachers felt between their internal conception of what constituted success and the external depiction of success. This difference fueled their fear that they were not being seen as professionals who contributed to student success. In what follows, I examine the teachers' struggle with this tension, which is magnified by deficit discourses and the delegitimizing language that exists in the external narrative. I also consider the impacts that this struggle might have had on the teachers' self- and collective efficacy. Then, I describe the ways in which the internal conception of student success was actually a kind of *additive schooling*, different from the external depiction all together. Finally, I consider how future studies might contribute to this work.

**Student Success and the Struggle for Legitimacy**

The teachers at Ray of Light ALP were engaged in a struggle for legitimacy as they strove to be seen and to have their students seen as agents of student success by those outside the school. Over and over again, the teachers at Ray of Light struggled to

legitimize their work toward student success—as it related to the three elements of student success that I presented in Chapter 4—for those outside the school.  In my work to analyze and understand this phenomenon, I again used the language legitimation lenses (van Leeuwen, 2007, 2008).

When I first started my work within Ray of Light, I personally felt this tension, and I noticed the defeated attitude that accompanied it.  When someone in an all-building meeting or over email would say that they would distribute materials to the whole secondary school staff, the teachers at Ray of Light often assumed that they would not receive the materials because they did not have mailboxes in the building's main office.  When the coordinators of an all-school assembly distributed seating charts, the Ray of Light classes were not represented, despite the fact that the Ray of Light program always took part in the all-school events.  During my first year teaching within the alternative school, one teacher in the traditional school even asked me if I was "just helping the shared students study for their 'real' tests"; presumably, this teacher meant the tests that the shared students would be taking at the traditional school.

Yet, I was never shocked at the outside misunderstandings of the Ray of Light program that I encountered.  After all, when I was a teacher at the traditional school, working within the same building, I knew nothing about Ray of Light's mission or its impact on students; I only knew that my seemingly inattentive students could end up there, if they failed to complete their coursework.  Admittedly, early in my time in the building, I was even relieved when some of my more defiant students, ones who I shared with Ray of Light, were excused for the Ray of Light fall and spring picnics.

It was while I initially coded for the elements of student success that I noticed the frequent conversations teachers had regarding how they were being perceived by those outside of the school. I ultimately recognized that these perceptions were related to the elements of success that I had identified. I also realized that, although the teachers joked about these moments, the conversations alluded to a deeper concern for the teachers. I came to realize that the teachers' talk suggested that they were worried about the inaccuracy of the outside perceptions of their work with their students. Further, they were troubled by the difference between their conception of success and the more mainstream narrative that they assumed was being told over and over again about both themselves and their students. This became even more problematic for the teachers, because they believed that the external discourse became the narrative that was retold and spread. Blumer (1969) asserted that social interaction shapes human conduct instead of being simply a mode of expressing or releasing it. Thus, social constructivism, particularly symbolic interactionism, can help us better understand the immediateness of the teachers' struggle and the perceived attacks against their work and professionalism as the deficit narrative became the normative view of the school.

My data showed that the teachers felt that those outside of the program viewed and referred to their work as simple. This can be seen clearly during one staff meeting, when the group talked about an email that Gwen, the peer teaching coach, had sent to us regarding student success. The email ignited the following conversation:

Sally: Ok, so …

Jenna: Did you guys get the email from Gwen?

Chris: The "magical" thing? I looked at it but I was like … it's all out of context.

Rex: I deleted it.

Jenna: "all you have to do …"

Heather: No …

Jenna: Yeah, let me read the last line …

Sally: I didn't even read it.

Jenna: "Students who received feedback chose to revise their papers with a 40%

increase among whites and a 320% among blacks when they had this magical

feedback. It was one simple phrase 'I'm giving you these comments because I

have high expectations and I know you can reach them.'"

Rex: Oh geez.

Jenna (*mockingly*): I just want to know if it works that way! I've been trying so

many different things ...

Rex: Maybe if we put some glitter on it, too …

Here, most of the teachers first admit that they completely disregarded the email that

Gwen had sent them, because they believed that she had a simplistic view of how to

motivate students.  This disregard also seems to suggest that they were accustomed to

outsiders attempting to provide advice or guidance that they did not find helpful.  My

own comment suggests that this advice does not seem helpful to me.  Rex sarcastically

adds an additional simplistic suggestion that we cover things in glitter to engage students.

The teachers' decisions to dismiss or even disregard this email illustrates that the teachers

believed that Gwen did not understand the unique work that they were doing within Ray

of Light.

Throughout my three years working at Ray of Light, I noticed the teachers beginning to raise awareness about their work, to help their peers outside of the program to see their work as legitimate.  As I collected data over the course of this study, I observed the staff as a whole, myself included, working to change the outside perceptions of their work.  The teachers recognized the outside perceptions, but they continually worked toward rewriting that narrative.  The strongest example of this can be seen when the teachers were preparing for their end-of-year Peer Learning Community (PLC) presentation.

> Sally: Ok, here are the Jubilee slides.  "Directions, fill in the name of your PLC." We're just the Ray of Light PLC, right?
>
> Jenna: Yup. Ooo, "decorate your slide."  Do we have any pictures or anything?
>
> Sally: I'm writing a poem.  Or, we should do a rap.
>
> Heather: Where is Di'Quan Johnson when you need him?
>
> Chris: Ok, so we had a 2% increase on scores?  Right? (*beginning to smirk widely*)  I don't know if they'll think that's good …
>
> Jenna: Yeah, 2% is what I have.  Well, we could just write, "We don't have success at Ray of Light.  We have nothing to share; we don't have success at Ray of Light." (*laughing*)
>
> Sally: Just write, "We suck."
>
> Chris: We can be like, "Well, maybe we'll work on how much we suck next year."
>
> Sally (*laughing*): "Since all of you think we suck anyway, we're just going to say it."

Rex: "We've given in to your perception."

The group starts out optimistic about how they might be able to portray their success from the past school year to their peers and the administrators at the traditional high school. The conversation quickly turns sarcastic, however, when Chris begins to question whether or not an outsider will see a 2% increase on the SkillsUSA Employability Test as "good." As I was already aware that Chris was concerned about external perceptions of the teachers' work at Ray of Light, I understood his concern that 2% might not be a noteworthy increase in student achievement on the test. At this point, the rest of the group jumps into the conversation, joking about their very real concern that outsiders view both them and their students as unsuccessful.

Similarly, the teachers used humor to talk about the difference between their conception of success in relation to authentic student and teacher relationships and the external depiction of the value of such relationship. This can be seen when the staff discussed one particular task that the counselors at the traditional school asked all of the teachers—both those in the tradition and in the alternative school—to complete. The counselors sent out a "relationships matrix," which was a list of all of the students' from both the traditional and alternative schools, and which had space for the teachers to identify those students with whom they had a relationship.

Heather: So, did anyone do this relationships matrix thing?

Sally: I did. But, there's like five kids on there that don't even go to school here anymore.

Heather: Yeah, that's pretty bad. (*jokingly*) I know this kid works at Subway, is that good enough?

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Jenna: Do you know his first and last name?

Heather: Ha!  I do know his first and last name, and where he lives.  I LOOK for

him when I go to Subway so I can see how he's doing.

Sally first mentions that the student list is not current.  At that point, the group starts to
joke about a teacher at the traditional school who, during the combined-school—
traditional and alternative—morning staff meeting that day, had asserted that she had
relationships with students but that she did not know their names.  After that staff
meeting, the Ray of Light teachers discussed this incident, concluding that not knowing a
student's name was an obvious sign that the teacher did not, in fact, have a relationship
with the student.  This acknowledgement and conversation led the group to acknowledge
that they define the term "relationship" differently than did this teacher who worked
within the traditional school.

In another staff meeting, the conversation revealed the staff's concern about the
external lack of understanding when it came to the connection between their focus on
their students' desired futures and the success of those students.  At the beginning of the
year, all of their students took the SkillsUSA Employability Test, which the teachers felt
might assess their college and career readiness.  Over the course of the year, several
students gradually exited the program.  This was a potential issue that the teachers had
anticipated and discussed with the administrators and the PLC coordinators early on.
Unfortunately, Sally was instructed to use a specific number—the students' average test
score—in the group's PLC goal.  Thus, we had to set a specific average end score that we
hoped the students would achieve.  At the end of the year, the PLCs were asked to
present about their work and accomplishments—including specific numbers tied to their

PLC goals—at a combined-school staff meeting. The use of the original test score data from the start of the year meant that the data compiled at the end of the year would not be accurate due to the changes in student enrollment. Many students who started the year at Ray of Light did not end the school year there. At one point, the teachers talked about the challenge in reporting such data to those outside of Ray of Light and the resulting tension:

> Rex: What did we say we had for original numbers on the test?
>
> Heather: I don't think it matters what we said originally. I think Sally has to submit that … I remember submitting that "Yes, we met our goal." That's what I remember submitting as the leader last year.
>
> Rex: So they just ask for a "Yes" or "No?" We've worked way too hard on this to just say that.
>
> Jenna: Why wouldn't they let us initially say that we wanted to do a 2% increase? We told them our population changes throughout the year and they said, "That's fine. Don't worry about it."
>
> Rex: Then let's just say we increased by 2%.
>
> Jenna: Hopefully we can just say that.

From this conversation, it can be inferred that the teachers were concerned about the data that they were providing to outsiders. They worried that a 2% increase in student achievement on the SkillsUSA test was neither accurate data nor data which would be valued by their peers and administrators in the traditional school.

Alongside the conversations about their unique conception of student success and their struggle for recognition of it, the teachers also talked about what they could do to

ensure that outsiders viewed their efforts in working toward their definition of student success as legitimate. In the following conversation, the group discussed the commonly referenced concern that outsiders require quantitative examples of their efforts to help students become successful.

> Jenna: I think we need to transfer some of our data to our PLC notes document. Strategies, data, and evidence need to be filled in.
>
> Sally: Yes, agreed. So if everyone can fill in something there … Because that's the one that's shared with the district people.
>
> Jenna: I think each person needs to do three at least.
>
> Sally: Does everyone see that?
>
> Jenna: Yeah, just search for "PLC Notes 2014/2015"
>
> Sally: PLC notes, where are you? ... All right. So put your strategies, what you're doing. So that would be what you have done in advisory. And then if you've done something in class that relates to our PLC, put that on there. And then, if you've taken data in your classes or advisory on anything that has to do with career stuff…

Observable in this conversation is the importance that the teachers placed on exemplifying their work to those on the outside. Sally specifically outlined what data and evidence was necessary on the form that outsiders—administration in this example—would see.

Unfortunately, at the end of the year, the teachers were ultimately unsure if these and their other efforts to change outside perceptions of their work and the students were effective. A conversation which took place during the last formal staff meeting of the

year at Ray of Light exemplified this uncertainty.  The PLC work culminated with each committee contributing a summative PowerPoint slide to a presentation for the teaching staff from both the traditional and alternative schools.  Here, the teachers discuss their slide and the video that they created with their students to exemplify the successes that students had throughout the year:

Jenna: This video is going to be so great.

Sally: Yeah, everyone else's slide is going to be so similar, but ours will be different—focused on the students.

Jenna: Yeah, and we need to make a name for our kids and ourselves!

Rex: We have made a name—[A] "Ray of Light" on the path to prison!

Jenna: Ah, I think that's kinda changed.  I hope anyway.

Sally: I don't know.

Rex: I … would not hold your breath on that.

Rex suggests that "a Ray of Light on the path to prison"—a common phrase among the teachers' peers at the traditional school—still defines the group's work and the students enrolled in the program.  I admit that "I hope" that the perception had changed, but Sally and Rex—who had both been teaching at the school longer than me—expressed apprehension and cynicism.  In all, the external and internal conceptions of success were different, and the teachers were aware of this difference on a very real level.  They were concerned about how those outside of their school perceived them, their work, and their students' work.

## Deficit Discourses and Delegitimation

Indeed, the data showed that the external narrative utilized deficit discourses (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012) and portrayed the Ray of Light program as one that ultimately subtracted social relations, cultural identity, and agency from both students and teachers.

Although all three elements of student success were evident inside of the school, they were not all apparent in the external narrative. To those not inside of Ray of Light ALP, the program's efforts to facility student success did not appear to focus on authentic relationships between students and teachers or on students' desired futures. Inside of the school, the data showed that relationships and a focus on students' desired futures were exceedingly important, so it is interesting that these elements were not a part of the discourse that framed the program's external narrative.

Additionally, the school website and the student handbook emphasized the role of student behavior, especially in terms of following rules. This focus was in opposition to the discourse of care that was used to conceptualize success within the school. In fact, while issues of assimilation in regard to culture, race, gender (Eaker-Rich, 1996) and curriculum (Valenzuela, 1999) are all of concern to care theorists, behavioral expectations and the ways in which they are initially portrayed to students, families, and community members can seem deeply assimilationist and subtractive. While some behaviors were important to the teachers within Ray of Light, as evidenced by their emphasis on student engagement in coursework and learning, behavior as it was described on the website was not a focal point for teachers. Although the teachers talked with students about schools rules near the start of each trimester, the evidence in Chapter

4 suggests that the teachers at Ray of Light built relationships with students over time that, in turn, guided their expectations of students' behaviors.

The assumption that students must be guided by set expectations for behavior from the start of their educational experience at Ray of Light—as the website seemed to suggest—places the students in a position of deficit. Additionally, the assumptions that students cannot engage in learning on their own terms and that they must be guided to do so in traditional ways also negate the students' multiple understandings of how to exist in the world. In the case of Ray of Light ALP and in the case of many alternative schools, it is easy to see that "the cultural construction of a group defined through a discourse of risk represents a quiet, partial image" (Fine, 1993). The Ray of Light website created just such a partial image when it suggested that students entering the program must exhibit certain behaviors to succeed, without regard for their unique identities and needs. This partial image, in fact, strengthens "those institutions and groups that have carved out, severed, denied connection to, and then promised to 'save' those who will undoubtedly remain 'at-risk'" (Fine, 1993). The suggestion that the students have not previously adhered to certain behaviors—and that they must now do so—is dangerous, just as labeling them "at-risk" is dangerous, because it affirms the harmful belief that difference is threatening (Flores, 1997, p. 5).

As previously mentioned, the removal of legitimacy and voice can also be a form of deficit discourse, even when it is not purposeful, as I believe might have occurred with the Ray of Light materials that were publically available. As we saw in Chapter 4, the students and teachers were largely absent in the external narrative of student success.

This implicitly positions the teachers and students as less capable or influential than they actually appeared to be within the school.

Deficit thinking is deeply embedded in our lives and thoughts. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to re-imagine educational spaces, like alternative schools, as sites for radically democratic and more just education. I believe, however, that the alternative to deficit discourses, policies, and practices is indeed democratic education, which includes the opportunity for all students to participate equally in the decisions regarding their lives and classroom practices that will lead to their success. I also contend that mitigating the use of deficit discourses includes not only enacting democratic practices inside of a school, but also using language that legitimizes both students and teachers to story the school's work for those on the outside. Language holds the power to not only narrate a reality, but to shape it. Potential harm can be done to conceptions of success, like that of the internal conception at Ray of Light, if the language used to create the external depiction becomes reified.

Valenzuela (1999) asserted that school can be assimilationist in several ways. Building on her theory, the behavioral expectations that schools and programs sometimes create for students are assimilationist in nature. As was made evident in Chapter 4, the external depiction of student behavior carried specific expectations for those enrolled at Ray of Light. Interestingly, these expectations were framed from a deficit lens: The language used suggested behaviors that would result in negative consequences instead of behaviors that might result in positive outcomes. Furthermore, many of the expectations included rigid language, unsympathetic to the students' needs and lives. This is in direct

opposition to the internal narrative, wherein the teachers considered individual situations when enforcing or disregarding certain behavioral rules.

The Ray of Light school website, the student handbook, and the student enrollment application also used technical language that subtracted from students' agency. Prillaman (1994) examined the differences between what she called *technical* and *expressive* discourse in education. In her critique, technical discourse is impersonal and objective language used in determining goals, strategies, and successes for one group over another, whereas expressive discourse regards an agentive individual's affections, weaknesses, and strengths. The external narrative of student success at Ray of Light was one that utilized technical discourse and that delegitimized the teachers and students at Ray of Light.

Although not congruent with the conception internally, the perception that neither students' nor teachers had agency was very present within the materials provided to those outside of the school. The materials were, in fact, primarily tied to the school district policies and they framed the students as patients of institutionalized education traditions. By portraying the students and the teachers at Ray of Light ALP as having little or no agency, the outside perception was one that delegitimizes both the teachers' and the students' roles in defining achievement, essentially devaluing their ability to function as social actors who design and work toward their personalized definitions of success.

## Efficacy

Personally, I can attest that my own self-efficacy increased over my time working at Ray of Light. I became more persistent in investing in students' success and in advocating for the work that was being done at Ray of Light in my interactions with those

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outside of the program.  I also increased the effort that I put into my work, because my interactions with my colleagues led me to believe that we were all making a difference for the students, despite the deficit discourses used to frame the school externally. Teacher efficacy is the extent to which teachers believe themselves to be capable in their work as professionals.  Here, I use the literature on efficacy to think about how the teachers have conceptualized success, even in the presence of their struggle to be seen as legitimate.  Teacher efficacy is impacted by four main factors: (a) performance accomplishments, (b) vicarious experience, (c) verbal persuasion, and (d) emotional arousal (Bandura, 1977; Schunk 1991).  As I examined how the teachers at Ray of Light had built and maintained efficacy—even in the presence of the struggle described above—I identified the strong presence of two of these factors: verbal persuasion and vicarious experiences. I will explore these in depth in relation to the teachers building and maintaining efficacy. First, I will examine the efficacy that the teachers already had.

**Efficacy: Having It**

Self-efficacy impacts a person's persistence (Bandura, 1986).  The teachers at Ray of Light ALP were persistent in their work with students, especially in their efforts to build authentic relationships with students who may not have had strong relationships with adults in the past.  The Ray of Light teachers were persistent in working to build relationships with their students throughout the year and in always attempting to engage even the most disengaged students.  This leads me to believe that efficacy was high among individual teachers and the group of teachers at the school.  The individual reasons that the teachers were highly efficacious are difficult to pinpoint, but I believe that there are many connections between the teachers' conceptions of success and their

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collective efficacy—their belief that their work was legitimate and impactful. In the next section, I will articulate how the teachers were able to build their individual and collective efficacy, as well as what that meant for student success.

**Efficacy: Building It**

Vicarious experiences are a major influence on teachers' self- and collective efficacy; their efficacy increases by seeing or hearing about others who are similar to themselves achieving the same goals that they have for themselves (Bandura, 1977; Schunk, 1991). The data examined in Chapter 4 includes several examples of the teachers sharing stories during staff meetings and informal conversations about their experience with students in their classrooms. Heather's story about the student bringing her a candy bar—an example of an authentic relationship—modeled for her peers her individual ability to connect with students. Additionally, all of the teachers contributed to the story about Alex, the student who used the bathroom frequently and for unknown reasons. Each teacher knew something about this student as a result of their individual, authentic relationships with him, thus they all contributed to the collective knowledge of the staff as a group.

Formally, I cannot draw a direct connection between these examples of shared stories regarding relationships and the collective teacher efficacy. However, my informal experience while teaching within this context with these participants and my work as a peer observer allow me to see the frequency with which such storytelling and reaffirmation occurred. All of the teachers talked about the authentic relationships that they were building with the students at various times, which helped them to create a shared base of knowledge about the students and to exemplify the relationships that each

of the teachers was building with students.  Therefore, it may be concluded that the teachers sharing stories within staff meetings and group lunches served as vicarious experiences and that doing so more than likely impacted their self- and collective efficacy.

I also observed the teachers using verbal persuasion with each other, which both Bandura (1977) and Schunk (1991) identified as a technique for increasing teacher efficacy.  In Chapter 4, I identified several staff meeting conversations that exemplify such persuasion.  Recall for instance Sally's comment that Heather "cares" about her homebound student and that such caring will make a difference for the student in terms of his success.  Sally's comment that Heather "cares" served as a form of persuasion that might have led to a heightened self-efficacy for Heather.  Staff meetings served as times when the teachers could verbally persuade each other of their effectiveness—as Sally did in reference to Heather's work with the homebound student—and when the teachers could discuss or sarcastically reference the assumed perceptions of those on the outside.

All schools hold staff meetings, thus these collegial or peer-to-peer conversations offer an avenue for further research. One might study the impacts of such conversations among teachers at alternative schools and the impacts of those conversations on teacher efficacy.  Because high teacher efficacy has been shown to lead to greater retention of teachers, such research might glean strategies for retaining teachers at alternative schools, including building teacher efficacy through vicarious experiences like storytelling and through various forms of verbal persuasion.  Furthermore, building stronger efficacy also leads to better stress management techniques and to the mitigation of "teacher burnout" (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

**Efficacy: Maintaining It**

Interestingly, there is a strong possibility that the conversations referenced above and in Chapter 4 might not have taken place if the external depiction of success did not delegitimized the students and the teachers, or if the teachers did not know of the disconnect between the external depiction and their own internal conception of success. Much of the verbal persuasion that took place during staff meetings occurred because the teachers felt the need to address the external perception that they were not legitimate actors in their students' success. This storytelling and affirmation of the teachers' work served as a means of helping the teachers maintain their efficacy despite the delegitimizing external depiction that they faced.

Through staff meetings and group lunches, the teachers were able to engage in vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion that potentially maintained their self- and collective efficacy. If some of the perceived barriers to their work were not articulated to them through the deficit discourses about the students and the delegitimizing language in the publically available materials, then there is a good chance that the teachers would not have needed to engage in sharing stories, to participate in vicarious experiences, or to verbally persuade each other of their capabilities.

**Impacts of High Teacher Self-Efficacy**

When teacher efficacy is high, teachers are more likely to work with students in small groups instead of large, less personal, groupings (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). As my analysis of the data in this study has shown, the teachers at Ray of Light ALP perceived and valued the link between authentic student and teacher relationships and student success. Like Ray of Light, many alternative

education programs maintain small class sizes. This relationship between high teacher efficacy and the desire to work with small groups of students could also be an important aspect of teacher retention at alternative schools like this one, where classes of small groups of students are common. If alternative schools can find ways to keep teacher efficacy high, they might be better equipped to retain teachers who enjoy working with those smaller groups of students. Furthermore, it may be ideal to create spaces where teachers feel good about working with small groups of students in order to encourage teachers to create strong, authentic relationships with students, something that the teachers at this school insisted was essential when it comes to student success.

Another impact of teacher self-efficacy is that teachers with high efficacy are more likely to praise students and to use encouragement in their classrooms (Emmer & Hickman, 1990). Students at alternative schools benefit greatly from the praise and encouragement that stems from those authentic relationships which are built over time (Mills & McGregor, 2013). My data showed the teachers at Ray of Light frequently using praise and encouragement. As mentioned in Chapter 4, weekly awards were given to students for attendance and for academic achievement. Such praise and encouragement, which is grounded in high teacher efficacy, can have pedagogical impacts; similarly, student motivation, engagement, and behaviors can all be linked to high teacher efficacy (Ashton et al., 1982; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

Teachers with high self-efficacy are also more persistent in the face of adversity in curriculum, course content, and student behavior (Guskey & Passaro, 1994; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Furthermore, I believe that the heightened self-efficacy among the Ray of Light teachers likely impacted their persistence in working to change

the external perception of their work.  Although the teachers' conversations about the perceptions held by their peers at the traditional school often sounded fatalistic ("since you all think we suck anyway"), the teachers continued to work to change that perception up to the very end of the year when they bypassed the traditional, bulleted PowerPoint content by embedding the video that they had created to showcase the students' testimonials about their successes throughout the year.

**Collective Efficacy and Family and Community Engagement**

As described earlier, the depiction of student success put forth by the school's publically available materials largely delegitimized and deagentivized the teachers and students. The external depiction of student success did not emphasis student choice or teacher effort and persistence, all of which are outcomes of high efficacy.  If the external depiction more closely aligned with the internal conception of student success, then there might have been the potential for collective efficacy to develop among the teachers and students *and* among the family and community members outside of the school.  If those outside of the school perceived those inside of the school as agentive and legitimate, then the collective efficacy among these two groups would likely be quite high.  I believe that a collective perception of the positive capabilities of the school in conjunction with the community and family members might positively impact each component of student success as internally conceptualized by the teachers at Ray of Light: the students' authentic relationships, their engagement in their academic work, and their effort and persistence in working toward their desired futures.

**"The ALP Way" of Conceptualizing Success**

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Despite their struggle, the teachers strongly believed that they impacted student success through authentic relationships, by helping their students engage in academic work, and by focusing on their students' desired futures. Each of these three elements was exhibited in classroom interactions, discussed among the teachers within staff meetings, remarked upon on the initial survey, and expanded upon in interviews and the focus group sessions. Over and over again, the staff used language that positioned the teachers and students as the main social actors contributing to student success. Furthermore, their language contained all of van Leeuwen's types of legitimization: authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis (2007; 2008). They also used grammatical strategies to position themselves as social actors, like incorporating possessive pronouns, as in "we care about them."

Internally, the teachers lived out their role as social actors in both their conversations and actions, and they recognized their students for doing the same. One example of this—described in detail in Chapter 4—was the disbursement of student awards. At the end of each week, teachers awarded students for taking an agentive role in their education by presenting the students with attendance and academic awards. These awards recognized the students as social actors who were working toward achieving their own success.

By positioning themselves as agents of student success, both the students and the teachers within Ray of Light mobilized the three elements of student success in ways that contrasted with the idea of subtractive schooling. Valenzuela's (1999) notion of *subtractive schooling* explained that schools often subtract resources from students. She asserted that this is done in two ways: (a) teachers and administrators might fail to create

meaningful and authentic relationships with students, which can lead students to feel

uncared for, and (b) teachers and administrators engage in assimilationist practices that

devalue student culture. Using this framework, one might describe what is happening

within Ray of Light as a sort of *additive* schooling, the opposite of subtractive schooling.

**Additive Schooling: Authentic Relationships**

The teachers and the students worked together to build authentic, reciprocal

relationships, to improve students' social capital, and to foster an environment of caring.

The teachers made each of these a priority, as they believed them to be essential aspects

of educating youth, particularly disenfranchised youth, as many of the students at Ray of

Light were when they began the program.

The authentic relationships evidenced in this school were often mutually

constructed and maintained by both the students and the teachers. Matute-Bianchi (1991)

asserted that teachers at mainstream schools often believe that relationships with students

are built through respect and obedience on the part of the students; my data analysis

suggests that the teachers at Ray of Light took an alternative approach. Within Ray of

Light ALP, the teachers did not start relationships with students expecting respect and

obedience from the onset. They instead realized that their students were complex

individuals who had previous experiences that impacted their initial and ongoing social

and academic interactions. In valuing the students' complexity and past experiences, the

teachers built relationships with students that fostered the maintenance of each student as

a whole person and that encouraged the development of their knowledge of social

interactions within the context of Ray of Light.

Teachers also talked about authentic and reciprocal relationships among individuals at Ray of Light and the link between those relationships and caring. Therefore, when I discuss caring here, I am describing caring the way that teachers at this particular school—teachers who Noddings (2015) would call "progressive educators" (p. 6)—and that Noddings herself have imagined it, as a sort of responsiveness that stems from listening to others and legitimating their needs. Both the teachers and the students engaged in this type of caring at the school; thus this responsiveness was quite visible in the teachers' conversations about students, in their interactions with students, and in the data collected through the initial survey. Noddings's (2013) framework for caring also asserts that the teacher's role is to initiate the relationship. As was exemplified in Chapter 4, this attitudinal disposition to building authentic relationships is essential because once the student responds to the teacher by revealing their true self, the reciprocation of the relationship is complete (Valenzuela, 1999); I saw this component of the additive schooling occurring within Ray of Light.

Chris, in an informal interview, shared with me the concern that his sixth period students had over his announcement that he would not be returning to Ray of Light the following year and that this decision was not his choice. He told me that, during that class period, the students were quieter than they had ever been and that they asked a lot of questions about his future plans. He said that they were obviously both sad and concerned about his future. He also told me that the almost-all male and Latino group of students seemed to let down their "machismo façade"—which was generally devoid of compassion—and to express strong concern and sadness over the news that he would be leaving the school for good at the end of the year.

**Additive Schooling: Mitigating Assimilation**

In addition to neglecting relationship growth and withholding caring, subtractive schooling uses assimilationist practices devoid of cultural and political awareness (Valenzuela, 1999). Sleeter (2000) asserted that "creating and teaching a multicultural curriculum takes place within a long history of oppressive and colonial relations" (p. 179). All of the Ray of Light teachers who participated in my case study were White; they were not exempt from this history or its impact on them. They did, however, view the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic relations within the school from a political perspective: They often discussed the superficial moves that some schools made, which included the celebration of holidays and cultural practices, in opposition to the equity work that they enacted through creating relationships with students and working to mitigate assimilationist practices in their own classrooms. They strove to acknowledge the differences present within the student body and staff and the value inherent in those differences. They respected students' behaviors, understanding that their students were products of their complex and individual pasts, where it seemed that a privileged social norm had, in many cases, chiseled away at students' unique identities.

Valenzuela (1999) reported that schools are organized in ways that perpetuate inequality through academic tracking, biased curriculum, and single language enforcement. At Ray of Light, the students attended subject-based classes together; these groupings were mostly untracked, and the students often collaborated to complete their credits. In most of the English and math classes, for example, students worked through material together, regardless of what level of English or math credit they were working to complete. Students who were working to master more advanced content partnered with

their peers to help them better understand their own work. At the end of each trimester, students took pride in their final projects for my English class, because they were able to share their own mastery of their individual standard(s) with the rest of their peers. Interestingly, while the larger school system used Ray of Light to track students who were behind in credits or who faced other difficulties achieving graduation, this was not true within the program, where the students experienced a sort of de-tracking. Such de-tracking generally leads to less rigid thinking about how teaching and learning should occur (Burris & Garrity, 2008), thus it further discourages assimilationist practices.

In addition, I encouraged the students in my English classes to help me chose curriculum materials. I made books that represented students' cultures available in these classes. Many of my students' primary language was Spanish, so I worked to offer texts translated into or written originally in Spanish. Culturally relevant texts and primary language texts increased collaboration among students: They informally shared what they read, and they critically engaged with texts written in their home language, using their home language. Similarly, Heather selected or created math problems that addressed the kinds of issues that her students faced in their everyday lives. These pedagogical strategies and the integration of relevant material in the curricula kept students engaged in their academic work.

Furthermore, language use and behavioral expectations within the school were also student-centered. Some teachers allowed students to use any language they preferred in their classroom, as long as the language was not harmful to other students. The students also needed to able to code switch to the type of English that was more dominant in professional settings for formal discussions and presentations. This language

flexibility often included welcoming students' use of Spanish, non-formal English, and vocabulary sometimes restricted in mainstream educational spaces. Some teachers were also more lenient about students' dress and apparel; for example, some teachers allowed their students to wear hats in their classrooms. All of the teachers allowed cell phones, so long as students understood when they needed to be paying attention to receive directions or instruction. It was widely understood at Ray of Light that the students might need their phones to be in contact with people outside of the school, such as daycare providers or employers. As Heather once said in a conversation with Chris and me after school, "If [the students] are working, and not messing around wasting a ton of time, it's fine."

Valenzuela (1999) suggested that assimilationist practices are not only a symptom of teachers' inauthentic caring, but they are also aspects of a curriculum that devalues students' culture. In creating their own curriculum for increasing students' college and career readiness, the teachers at Ray of Light considered the potential ethnocentrism embedded in their pedagogy and worked alongside of their students to determine the students' desired futures. The schedule created by the traditional school included designated advisory time for increasing students' college and career readiness. During this time, the teachers used their knowledge of students' desired futures to guide their curriculum. At one point, the teachers even decided to vacillate between the phrases "college and career readiness" and "career and college readiness" in an effort to legitimize the importance of either choice. Students attending Ray of Light were not forced to assimilate to a "one size fits all" model. Instead, they were given agency to decide their own desired future and to begin working toward that future with the help of the teachers.

The Ray of Light additive schooling model, where teacher collective efficacy is seemingly high, is one that this district should be proud of. Were the external narrative to have more explicitly attribute student success to the work of the teachers and students, collective efficacy might have been greatly impacted and potentially heightened.

## Implications for Practice

This study has practical implications for the work of teachers, schools, and school districts. Language impacts our lived experiences; thus, we must always be cautious of how we use it. School stakeholders – researchers, policy makers, administrators, and educators—must be aware of how the work of the teachers and students is depicted to those outside of the school. Furthermore, because a more additive schooling is possible when teachers and students have agency over student success, it is essential that school stakeholders consider a broadened conception of student success, one that gives both teachers and students agency and that portrays their teachers as legitimate.

## Implications for Future Research

My work intentionally focused on a single program's conceptualization of student success and the depiction of that success to the other teachers in the building and to the public. In addition to the suggestions for research that I made in the Efficacy: Building It subsection, future researchers could also apply my research model to multiple sites in order to understand how different programs conceptualize and depict student success. Through broadening the sample, the elements and patterns recognized by my research might be emphasized or diminished, and new elements and patterns might arise. Researchers could also examine how schools' internal conceptions of success are communicated to the students within the program. In order to change existing external

deficit discourses around alternative programs, it is important for educational stakeholders to understand how success is represented to students and how it is measured. Doing so would allow the stakeholders to create processes that help teachers to more explicitly live out broadened conceptions of success.

## Conclusions

The goal of alternative education should not be to preserve and strengthen the traditional schools by removing students who are identified by deficit discourses. I believe that the goal should be for additive and agentivizing schooling in all educational programs. Alternative schools are ones where the students in attendance are those who are largely unaccepted in mainstream schools (Mills & McGregor, 2013). When these students' voices and definitions of success are recognized and legitimized, the students experience a type of schooling that is affirmative and additive rather than silencing and subtractive.

Alternative programs that utilize additive, agentivizing practices and conceptions of success should be held as models both for other alternative schools and for mainstream schools that are subtractive and delegitimize some students' definitions of success.

Although this study focuses primarily on the teachers' perspectives, it would be interesting to learn if the students substantiated much of what the teachers perceived about caring and authentic relationships. Evidence based on student-teacher interactions in the classroom and on the questions that I posed to teachers about student perceptions suggests that they might, but I did not pursue student data in this study. Such research might suggest the extent to which the students themselves recognized the additive schooling described above.

Despite the deficiencies of the external narrative, students often begged Sally for admittance into the Ray of Light program. For years, she has had to turn students away because enrollment was at capacity. If the external narrative does not dissuade students from trying to enroll, it seems that there must be a way to expand the reach of the informal, positive external narrative that these students are consuming and buying into.

My research speaks to the value of the interconnectedness of teacher efficacy across sites of learning within a district where students transition from school to school; this interconnectedness and its potential impact on student success deserves greater study. At the same time as and within the same school district where this study took place, conversations regarding the "siloed" efforts of various schools were common; it is worth noting that all of the students in the district would transition from one siloed school to another as they progressed from their elementary schools to one of the middle schools to one of the high schools, even if they never transitioned from a traditional to an alternative educational model. I often overhead administrators discussing whether or not initiatives being implemented at one site would be valuable or even possible to implement at another site because of teachers' previous experiences with the topic. If collective efficacy is to be built across sites, then it would be important for administrators to consider the interconnectedness of the proposed and functioning initiatives.

Because the internal conception of student success at Ray of Light and the external depiction of it are at odds, it is essential to consider what can be done to position these two so that they are in alignment. Furthermore, the struggle for legitimacy within the Ray of Light Alternative Learning Program seemed to have created an environment where verbal persuasion was common. Because verbal persuasion increases efficacy

(Bandura, 1977; Schunk, 1991), teachers' efficacy potentially grew through the interactions that they had with each other during the staff meetings. Increases in teacher efficacy do, in fact, lead to an increase in teacher retention over the long run (Chester, 1991), another added benefit of greater amounts of verbal persuasion. Researching specific ways to increase teachers' opportunities for verbal persuasion within alternative school contexts might be beneficial when considering ways to retain teachers.

What I know now about student success is this: The students who attend alternative schools are not only traditionally marginalized individuals, but they are also working under the guidance of teachers who are also marginalized and who perceive themselves as such. These teachers are not seen as professional agents of student success by their peers outside of their teaching environments or by the public documents available to outsiders. Not only are the narratives of students who attend alternative schools often misrepresented, but the work of the educators who serve them is as well.

The theory generated by my observations and data analysis is that the external depiction of student success at Ray of Light Alternative Learning Program misrepresents the internal conception of that success, particularly in terms of who appears to have agency over it, and that this misrepresentation has implications for the teachers. It is important to be mindful that when the narratives of professionals' work are misrepresentative, there are real world consequences. Here, the consequences appear in the form of a struggle for the teachers, because of the lack of recognition that they receive from their peers despite the positive aspects of education that they help this alternative setting provide to many students. However, these consequences could instead appear in

the form of opportune spaces where verbal persuasion and vicarious experiences are

nurtured more purposefully, leading in turn to higher teacher self- and collective efficacy.

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Appendix A

Initial Survey

1. In your opinion, what does "success" look like at Ray of Light?

2. Think of a time you experienced a student achieving some kind of success. Please describe that experience.

3. What are some of the things Ray of Light teacher do to help their students achieve success?

4. Do you believe that there are times when it is more difficult or impossible to impact students' success? Please explain why or why not.

5. What would you want people outside of Ray of Light to know about our students that they might not otherwise know?

Appendix B

Interview Guide

1. In staff meetings, we sometimes talk about how success looks different for different students.  Could you talk about your feelings on this?

2. What role do you think student mental health or emotional well-being plays in student success?  Is this a facet of student success?

3. In some of our conversations, we've been saying that student success is linked (or maybe even the same as) teacher success.  What are your thoughts on this?  Can you describe this relationship?

4. As a group, we seem to avoid talking about students' pasts; we really only talk about them when we talk about how students have changed.  Why might this be?

5. Often, teachers are charged with making things relevant for students in the classroom.  How might this be linked to student success?  In this case, what does success look like for the teacher and/or the student?

Focus Group Session 1 Guiding Document

**Categories (Properties or Values):**          **Others??**

Relationships                                  6 Pillars of Character?
Student Attendance                             Democratic Citizens?
Credit Completion                              Sense of Purpose?
Happiness                                      Self-Awareness?
Engagement
College and Career Readiness
Goals (identifying and working toward)

**Principles**
Principles are connected to the vision of an organization and lead the organization in its actions. They generally spring from the values of the individuals within the organization.

**To help students become successful, we:**

Appendix D

Focus Group Session 2 Guiding Document

Principles are connected to the vision of an organization and lead the organization in its actions. They generally spring from the values of the individuals within the organization.

**To help students become successful, we:**

1. *Reciprocal Relationships.* Provide opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships with teachers and each other so that they can engage in reciprocal authentic caring and build their social network.

2. *Student Goals.* Focus on students' goals rather than past failures in order to build student self-worth and increase student motivation to work toward their next milestone.

3. *Positive Language.* Grow the confidence and efficacy of both staff and students by breaking away from deficit language.

4. *Favorable Actions.* Lessen unacceptable behaviors by focusing on favorable actions instead of unfavorable actions.

5. *Credit Completion.* Help students master skills outlined in state standards by playing on their strengths and making coursework relevant to their lives.

6. *Non-Judgmental.* Withhold judgment of students and continue to think of them as complex, dynamic individuals who ultimately want to be happy.

7. *Professionalism.* Encourage regular attendance and meaningful effort to promote an environment of professionalism and strengthen college and career readiness.