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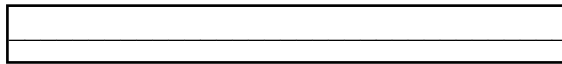


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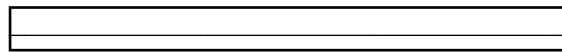
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ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: ENGLISH TEACHER ENGAGEMENT WITH THEIR  
CRAFT AND STUDENTS



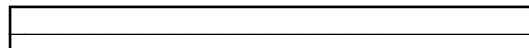
By

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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the Creighton University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in the Department  
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## Abstract

Alternative education (AE) exists to support students who are considered marginalized and who are also considered at-risk of failure due to sundry challenges to their educational process. AE English teachers act as guides, mentors, and leaders for students entering AE programs and schools and youth who are attempting to complete their education. For this research, English teachers in AE engage in their craft and with students to develop an understanding of being socially responsible while learning skills needed for life after school completion. Furthermore, this research provides a platform for AE English teachers in the role of social justice leaders as they engage in their work with students in learning what social justice means in their unique context. This study explores how AE English teachers engage students through alternative education's purpose of engaging disengaged students and preparing them to become socially responsible in life.

*Keywords:* English teacher engagement, alternative education, social justice, social responsibility, leadership

## Dedication

To my mother, Rebecca Piper Jones, my uncle, Garnett L. Mack, and Sheila V. Bullock, my sister from another mother in education and research who encouraged me to be more than the sum of my parts, I could not have done this without you by my side. Thank you to my husband for his unwavering support during this journey and for his encouragement through it all. I am here because of you and your faith in me.

## Acknowledgements

This journey in research is the culmination of my experiences in learning and wanting to do more for those I serve. I wish to acknowledge those who have been a part of my journey. First, I want to thank all of my professors at Creighton University who led me in learning a different way to seek knowledge. Specifically, I am grateful to my dissertation committee, who were empathetic and supportive of me as I worked to complete this research. Yulia Tolstikov-Mast, my chairperson, and Evonne C. Ward, my second chair, thank you for walking beside me on this journey; I respect and value your wisdom and guidance. Thank you to my mentor, Emily Daniels for your encouragement and patience through it all. I appreciate the support from my advisor, Jim Martin, who kept me on course, and Shannon Cox, my academic coach, who patiently answered my questions.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the federal government's Department of Education, the states' departments of education, and the leadership of local school divisions guide traditional public schools as well as unique programs and schools, such as Alternative Education (AE) programs and schools. For this research, AE meets the needs of marginalized student groups identified by state-collected data and serves them under their combined supervision (Erickson et al., 2014; Jimenez et al., 2018). AE's underlying goal is to provide opportunities for students at-risk of failing to complete school (Aron, 2006). Alternative Education programs and schools, as discussed by Jimenez et al. (2018), have no clear definition to explain them; therefore, there is no concise agreement on what AE is and how it functions. This lack of congruity makes the continued study of AE necessary for supporting students who attend them.

Historically, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Alternative Education (AE) was used to redress the inequities of the social injustices of segregation in education (Semel & Sadovnik, 2008). For example, it provided a platform for the small schools' movement of the 1960s and 1980s (Semel & Sadovnik, 2008). Currently, public secondary education in America offers an increasing number of students alternative or non-traditional instructional program options to complete their education (Foley & Pang, 2006). Alternative Education, specifically, plays a role in connecting students to an education that they see is relevant and provides authentic learning that they can relate to as they learn how to be socially responsible individuals after completing school (Wilson et al., 2011). Alternative Education teachers utilize and adapt academic curricula implemented in traditional high school settings (VDOE, 2017). The overarching purpose

of AE teachers includes teaching students life skills that transfer into the workplace and into life-long learning habits that empower them (Pastore-Capuana, 20018).

Current research on teacher engagement emphasizes the use of curricula to make an impact on students as a whole with a focus on teacher development of pedagogy to teach content that is crafted for students to engage in and with to become interested in learning (Kane & Steiner, 2019; Schussler, 2009). Moreover, some studies illustrate teacher engagement as social justice leaders in traditional high schools (Conklin & Hughes, 2016; Klem & Connell, 2004). Still, there is little detailed data on how this process occurs in Alternative Education programs or how teachers in Alternative Education impact students in these programs (Erickson et al., 2014; Porowski et al., 2014). Finally, there is literature on relationship building as part of teacher engagement with students in traditional school settings. This engagement can be in the role of a social justice leader who assists a student in working through issues that make it difficult for the student to be available to learning, as proposed by Klem and Connell (2004) and Crane and Livock (2012). As an example of social justice engagement, teachers and support staff work together to stabilize at-risk students so they are mentally and emotionally available to learn (Foley & Pang, 2006; Klem & Connell, 2004). A strategy teachers and staff use to support students includes developing an individualized plan that creates a climate of inclusiveness, thereby providing a student with a safe environment in which to learn. Crane and Livock's (2012) research shows that teachers and social workers, in tandem, design specific programs that address students' issues that are not altogether of an academic nature but are reflective of their societal issues (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Schussler, 2009). This study explored how AE English teachers, as social justice leaders,

work to provide authentic learning relevant to students as they develop an understanding of social justice and social responsibility. AE English teachers use their craft to address required curricula which is the catalyst for their mission as teacher leaders. They intertwine curricula with social justice themes to assist students in understanding and envisioning their roles in society as responsible individuals.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Current data on Alternative Education imply that students who attend them have opportunities to experience success working with teachers and support staff and thereby show a sense of commitment to AE that provides a chance to complete school while in a nurturing environment with adults who care for them (Powell, 2003; Schussler, 2009).

Alternative Education offers a supportive environment in which the needs of at-risk students are met; however, the research data does not identify how the role of teachers as social justice leaders affects students in the programs (Aron, 2006; Erickson et al., 2014; Klem & Connell, 2004; Porowski et al., 2014).

When teachers in Alternative Education are tasked with engaging disengaged students who have a short amount of time to complete their education, they may perceive their educational situation as impossible (Klem & Connell, 2004). If these teachers have not developed the pedagogy and sundry strategies needed to connect with students, they cannot engage with them as guides or facilitators in social justice. Thus, the students may become high school dropouts with no preparation for life after completing school (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Erickson et al., 2014). The previous statement describes the potential problem teachers and support staff can experience in an AE setting. AE teachers can use social justice as a part of their teaching content to assist students in understanding

how they recognize and utilize social justice and social responsibility as they transition into life (Crane & Livock, 2012; Hytten & Bettez, 2011). This instruction process is further supported by additional staff, such as social workers and school counselors, as they work with students to develop skills in handling personal challenges (Manzano-Sánchez et al., 2020). According to researchers like Kelchner et al. (2017), the goal is to provide transition and intervention support for students in AE so that they are prepared with life skills. For students who have been disenfranchised from learning in traditional high school, AE should be a place to reengage in learning that is relevant to the students and that they can embrace (Klem & Connell, 2004; Raywid, 1994).

There is minimal research on English teachers as classroom leaders in AE using social justice themes as they assist students in developing their understanding of what it means to be socially responsible (Manzano-Sánchez et al., 2020; Newton et al., 2017). Moreover, there is research on teachers as a group, regardless of setting, learning to provide leadership using social justice themes (Capper & Young, 2014; Manzano-Sánchez et al., 2020). The development of teacher pedagogy, strategies, and social justice content are identified areas that teachers need to utilize in supporting student learning. Still, teachers also need to have a sense of the context for understanding what social justice is and how to provide meaningful and relevant instruction to help prepare students for productive and engaging lives after school. (Kelchner et al., 2017; Kelly, 2014; Sierra Piedrahita, 2016).

### **Aim of the Study**

This study aimed to explore how English teachers engage in their craft and as social justice leaders in Alternative Education while engaging disengaged students to

prepare them to be socially responsible individuals in life after completing school.

English teachers can integrate social justice content into their core content instruction, use their craft, and highlight their work as social justice leaders. Their engagement with students can provide authentic and relevant learning experiences that assist them in understanding social justice and social responsibility (Burns & Miller, 2019).

This study is vital as AE English teachers develop and hone their pedagogy to prepare students to understand that what they study in school is relevant and a way for them to be empowered and ready for their future (Newton et al., 2017, p. 423). Other aspects of the purpose of this study include AE English teachers' thoughts on social justice as well as their perceptions of their role with the students they teach to participate in their world with social responsibility (Klem & Connell, 2004; Manzano-Sánchez et al., 2020; Newton et al., 2017).

### **Research Questions**

How and why do English teachers, as social justice leaders in alternative education programs, engage in their craft and with students in preparation for life after high school as socially responsible individuals?

Why do AE English teachers take on the responsibility for their students in the capacity of social justice leaders while teaching AE identified students to understand societal issues that affect them while using a social justice framework?

### **Definitions of Relevant Terms**

The following terms are frequently used in this research and are part of teacher engagement in their craft, students, and Alternative Education.

*Alternative Education:* Broadly defined as educational activities that fall outside the traditional K-12 curriculum—and frequently serve students at risk of school failure. Because individual states or school districts define and determine their Alternative Education programs' features, programs may differ in key characteristics, such as target population, setting, services, and structure (Porowski et al., 2014, p. 3). In the context of this research, Alternative Education is referenced as programs that English teachers work through to engage the disengaged student.

*At-risk Youth:* In the 1983 U. S. Department of Education policy report entitled “A Nation at Risk,” the term *at-risk* or *at risk* becomes a part of the country’s educational framework in an attempt to provide equity to discounted youth. The federal government uses this terminology to describe a group of children who risk failing school. In this context, school failure is seen as dropping out of school before high school graduation (Kaufman et al., 1992, p. 13).

*English Teachers:* According to the National Council of Teachers of English, these teachers are tasked with “the development of literacy, the use of language to construct personal and public worlds and to achieve full participation in society, through the learning and teaching of English and the related arts and sciences of language” (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], n.d., para. 4).

*Re-engagement of students:* The reconnection of students who are disengaged from school. The focus of various programs and governmental objectives is to address the lack of student retention in school (Wilson et al., 2011).

*Social Justice:* Weigert (2015) defines social justice as a subsection of justice. It is focused on benefiting the good of society and the individual's right to participate in and contribute to society.

*Social Justice Leaders:* According to Gershon (2015), social justice leaders are involved in "strong teaching [which] is teaching for social justice," and a teacher cannot be a leader unless they address the "questions of equity, access, and justice" (Gershon, 2015, p. 139).

*Social Responsibility:* This is the understanding and use of societal norms, whether in the classroom or as an "enfranchised" individual. In the context of this study, social responsibility includes teaching and learning critical thinking, learning about the community and culture, preparing to be a lifelong learner, and participating knowledgeably in society (Wentzel, 1991).

### **Methodology Overview**

The methodology for this study was qualitative, using focus groups. Participants were English teachers from Alternative Education programs and schools in the Northern Virginia region. The focus groups included current and retired teachers with varying levels of teaching experience. The focus groups addressed how English teachers consider their engagement with their craft and students in Alternative Education programs, how they function as social justice leaders, and their perception of their role in the AE.

### **Delimitations, Limitations, and Personal Biases**

Data collection focused on Alternative Education in the Northern Virginia region from suburban and urban programs and schools recognized by the Virginia Department of Education. These AE programs and schools follow a general scaffolding that meets the

requirements of the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE); however, they are not identically designed. For example, some AE programs and schools are extensions of the traditional schools on another campus, and some are designed as online programs only. The AE programs and schools for this study display different educational options to meet the needs of their students. For this research, these specific AE programs and schools are run by public school divisions and are not private entities.

### **Limitations**

Methodological limitations of the focus groups in this research included the small size of the sample group of teachers for the study as it was specific to AE English teachers. There were sixteen alternative programs and schools in the Northern Virginia region. This limitation along with the review of the 31 potential candidates' who represented these programs and schools, which averaged only two AE English teachers per program or school added to the small sample size for the study. The years of experience in teaching, specifically in AE, were limitations, as well as the English teachers' areas of expertise in content and pedagogy. For example, the English teachers in AE had various teaching certifications specific to English or other content, such as only middle school or high school certifications. Limitations in communicating with the teachers could have been impacted by teachers' lack of access to computer equipment or virtual platform for the focus group discussions if there was a lack of access to digital/electronic devices and software and minimal internet access. In that case, this can be evidence of the digital divide's effect on teachers and their ability to access technology and all it entails in regions with limited budgets and equipment (Stanford University Students, n.d.). It is also possible that the design or re-design of AE programs and schools

from one year to the next and changes in English curricula may impact English teachers' ability to engage pedagogically and as social justice leaders.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations for this study included using AE from public school divisions which are governed by local and state policies, to meet minimal guidelines for educating students who attend these programs and schools. The selection of AE teachers in English was a specific choice that allowed for discussion from a common core of knowledge. Further delimitation included the development of the questions for the focus groups. As the moderator, I was the facilitator for the discussion.

### **Personal Bias**

The researcher recognized the potential for personal biases, such as being involved with students on an instructional level (middle, high school, and adult education) as an English teacher for over 35 years and carefully monitored for them. In addition to the bias identified in the previous statement, it is important to acknowledge that, as an Alternative Education administrator for more than 20 years, I have had to evaluate AE English teachers at the middle school and high school levels. While my experiences in this area were a part of my overall development as an educator, it was necessary that the research be tempered with a balanced view of the topic, data, and overarching reason for the study to have merit (Norris, 1997). In this study, there was a potential for bias because of my interactions with AE English teachers as they use their pedagogy while intertwining social justice into their curricula. Referencing the previous statement, one of the challenges that I faced was the fact that I knew a member of the study and had to be clear as to the protocols and parameters of the focus group process. I

was engaged in self-monitoring throughout the sessions to keep all directions clear and concise. The Zoom platform for this study provided each of the group members with a blank screen and a number. It was important for me not to be able to see and visually interact with the individuals. The digital platform provided an insular layer for the participants and me.

### **Reflections of the Scholar-Practitioner**

Throughout the Interdisciplinary Leadership EdD program, I have grown as a researcher and as a leader in the field of Alternative Education. For example, balancing the rigors of life and scholarship throughout this journey has provided self-discovery opportunities for me and facilitated my personal development of resilience and grit in an ever-changing educational environment. This research will continue to be a part of my lifelong learning for the future. I am still discovering more details about Alternative Education and social justice as Alternative Education continues to evolve as the needs of students in AE change.

Reflecting on the changes in AE allowed the researcher to investigate how teachers' and students' needs were addressed while working with them to develop authentic and meaningful learning that is beneficial and relevant to them and society. I have also reflected on how teachers' building relationships with their students was leveraged to strengthen their engagement in Alternative Education as they prepare students to be socially responsible participants in life.

### **Summary**

Alternative Education is broad and thus needs to be narrowed to an area that can be viewed through a specific lens. Within this study, my research questions focused on

teacher engagement in their craft and leadership. In addition, the study of AE English teachers' engagement and their work as social justice leaders with Alternative Education students. As identified by Porowski et al. (2014), Erickson (2014), and Aron (2006), Alternative Education programs and schools do not have a consistent uniformity with which to provide consistent accountability for student growth. Social justice in Alternative Education is not clearly defined but is evident through the work of teacher leaders, administrators, and support staff who try to prepare students for their future. The relevance of social justice for life after high school provides teachers with a framework and an opportunity to guide students to learning that is real and necessary for being a part of an educated citizenry.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review presented an overview of existing research on Alternative Education with a focus on the following three components: (a) teacher engagement (content area--English) as educator and leader in Alternative Education, (b) Alternative Education (AE) purpose to teach and guide disengaged students as well as provide them with authentic and relevant learning experiences to use in life, and (c) social justice (SJ) in education with a concentration on teaching social responsibility which was an emergent theme in the literature on alternative/traditional education (d) teachers functioning as social justice leaders as part of their work with students in the AE arena (Capper & Young, 2014, p. 162). Theoharis' (2008) work regarding social justice leadership in education provides information on the traits of individuals whose backgrounds started them on the path to becoming social justice leaders/principals who guide their schools. These individuals are also the ones shaping the schools according to their visions of what social justice is. The research about teacher engagement as instructor and leader continues to emerge. It indicates that teachers must find a way to balance the various aspects of their craft as they instruct and guide their students and work with other stakeholders (parents and community) to make learning relevant and authentic for the students (Wilson et al., 2011).

The educational arena is no longer about content knowledge alone. Besides engaging students in learning, teachers are involved in leadership and make decisions regarding learning every time they enter a classroom. Teachers make decisions that affect student learning. In so doing, they make choices as to who is prepared for university or to undertake their roles as citizens and who are ready to share in their communities' social

responsibility (Wilson et al., 2011). This study's literature review on English teacher engagement reflects data regarding traditional classroom teachers. It includes evidence of the effect teachers have on students as they [students] appreciate that they and their voices are valued and that they have a role to play in society (Johnson, 2000).

### **Historical Context of Social Justice and Alternative Education**

Under the Johnson administration (1963-1969), the landmark Civil Rights Bill of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 became law, expanding the government's role in education. Johnson's push for education reform under his declaration on the War on Poverty in his Great Society was his effort to remedy poverty and the societal ills that plagued the nation (LBJ Presidential Library, n.d., paras. 4-7). Johnson's goal was to level the playing field for all impoverished children through education. The polarizing and political landscape in education over the next half-century is where Alternative Education develops and evolves (Raywid, 1994, 1999).

Available literature on AE concentrates on statistical data regarding student populations and their diverse needs. These students, essentially, become the stakeholders and the audience for AE programs and schools by choice or not by choice (Jóhannesson & Bjarnadóttir, 2015; Pennacchia et al., 2016; Raywid, 1985). Current researchers cite Raywid's work from the 1990s as they add to the knowledge base on AE (Kelly, 2014; Mills et al., 2017; Porowski et al., 2014). Research literature from the last half of the 20th century to the current day concentrated on the development of AE programs and schools to meet the needs of marginalized children.

Over the years and in the current context of AE, researchers have endeavored to describe and explain Alternative Education; however, they are challenged by the nature of

AE's constant state of flux to address the needs of students, thereby making a hard and fast definition elusive (Foley & Pang, 2006; Porowski et al., 2014). However, Sable et al. defined AE schools as:

A public elementary/secondary school that (1) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, (2) provides non-traditional education, (3) serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or (4) falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education (2010, p. C-1).

This definition was developed using a compilation of data collected in 2008-2009 from the nation's 100 largest public-school divisions (Sable et al., 2010). Thus, having a general idea of what Alternative Education does, the overarching mission of AE is to provide an education for students who struggle in a traditional school setting (Erickson et al., 2014).

Since the early 2000s, researchers such as Porowski et al. (2014) and Pennacchia et al. (2016) have studied AE, which is central to their work on identifying and defining the parameters of AE as it has evolved over the last 60 or more years. On the one hand, Porowski and his colleagues refer to AE as "educational activities" and say that they are "for students who are at-risk of school failure" (2014, p. 1). On the other hand, Pennacchia and his associates refer to AE as a way to "cater" to students who have "experienced a variety of forms of exclusion during school" (2016, p. 1). Thus, AE provides an alternate track to education and continues to exclude them from schooling in a traditional sense.

Current research further suggests that Alternative Education targets students who are identified as marginalized or disenfranchised in the traditional high school setting

(Kelly, 2014; Mills et al., 2017). While there is a consensus on why AE exists, it is difficult to conceptualize a single focused definition of what it is and how it impacts students (Foley & Pang, 2006). Thus, based on samples of the literature: (a) AE is designed to provide students with options that allow them to return to the traditional school, (b) it is a “parking lot” for students who are considered unsuccessful and unlikely to return to traditional high school, and (c) it is a place where students at-risk of academic failure and with social issues that the traditional high school is unable to address (Crane & Livock, 2012, p. 46). Regarding the latter, issues impacting students may include but not be limited to (a) being homeless, (b) being bullied or being the bully, (c) substance use or (d) abuse, sexual or physical, (e) experiencing poverty, (f) dropping out of school, and (g) illiteracy which would impede students’ ability to attend school or attempt to return to school for completion (Crane & Livock, 2012; Jóhannesson & Bjarnadóttir, 2015; Pennacchia et al., 2016).

### **History and Purpose of Alternative Education as a Social Justice Equalizer**

Alternative Education programs and schools are not one-size-fits-all in design or development. They include diverse students with diverse needs; however, states and localities have the autonomy and decision-making power to determine the categories they want to include in AE. Using categories identified by the United States Department of Education, these categories can consist of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, and disability (2011). Additional data on at-risk youth was provided by reporting divisions and clarified these students' categorization (Porowski et al., 2014). As these students are categorized, there is another component of Alternative Education: its mission and reason for existence. As a loose description, AE’s purpose is to provide students at-risk of failure

with a path to graduation. Also, AE can provide students with a way to become functional members of society with the ability to be life-long learners after completing their education (Carver et al., 2010; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Erickson et al., 2014).

Raywid (1999) described AE programs as consisting of three types of alternatives, Type I Popular Innovations— “alternatives that make school challenging and fulfilling,” Type II Last-Chance Programs— “programs to which students are sentenced,” Type III Remedial Focus— “for students who are presumed to need remediation or rehabilitation,” (1994, p. 27). Raywid’s work has been frequently cited in AE studies since the 1990s as seminal research on AE. Raywid mapped out the history of AE, all the while describing AE as an outcome of the dynamic changes in the educational landscape in response to societal changes occurring during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Raywid, 1994). The challenge in providing AE for students in need is that there is no one answer to how AE should be developed to address the needs of a diverse student population with an array of needs (Porowski et al., 2014). Morley, as cited by Porowski et al. (2014, p. 2), believes that there are as many ways to become educated as there are environments that allow this to occur. Erickson et al. (2014) and Lange and Sletten (2002) explained in their studies the challenge in defining AE and rely upon Raywid’s (1994) typology to present a structure of Alternative Education that sorts students into programs. However, these are not definite in their usage. These researchers shine a light on the inconsistencies found in Alternative Education from state to state and in AE’s focus and purpose.

As teachers work with students to address their educational needs, the states determine what AE programs and schools look like and how they are developed. The definition and structure of Alternative Education and the overall description of students

considered at-risk vary from state to state, and local educational agencies further modify the states' requirements to support their school divisions (Aron, 2006; United States Department of Education, 2011). For example, in Virginia, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) provides a rough scaffold of AE components that regional centers can use to create programs and schools. Within this scaffold, these centers must be able to show evidence of students' academic growth and their preparedness to become a graduate at the end of their schooling, as with the traditional schools. The evidence includes academic records, attendance, and discipline data by student and by AE program or school (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.).

For example, in North Carolina, the emphasis is on providing AE programs and schools that students are assigned to for issues such as poor attendance, the potential for academic failure, and being in jeopardy of dropping out of school (Erickson, 2014). In Kentucky and Texas, the emphasis is on developing programs that provide safe and secure learning environments for most students by removing students whose behavior is considered to have a negative impact on traditional school settings (Erickson, 2014,). Lastly, in South Carolina, students assigned to AE for a finite amount of time are then assimilated back into the traditional high school setting. However, when the students are back in the traditional environment, they find it hard to adjust to the "old" setting due to gaps in "academic rigor" between the traditional school and AE (Erickson, 2014, p. 114).

### **Teacher Engagement in Alternative Education**

While there is research on various aspects of traditional high school, including curriculum development, teacher development, and student engagement, there is a need for additional research on how AE teachers work within the parameters of these programs

and schools that are typically identified as having characteristics such as (a) a small student-teacher ratio, (b) a targeted student population, and (c) an adaptive structure for student learning (Foley & Pang, 2006). The Alternative Education classroom, under the direction or facilitation of a teacher, can be an environment that provides students with smaller class sizes and with almost a one-to-one teacher-to-student ratio where teachers can develop relationships with them and nurture their self-confidence while they learn life skills (Beattie, 2003). Researchers like Beattie (2003) and others have described teachers in Alternative Education as implementing curricula in non-traditional settings and using their skills to engage unengaged students. However, differentiation in the environment from face-to-face instruction versus virtual instruction can make their work with students in the Alternative Education classroom problematic as students may succumb to stressors, such as the death and illness of family and friends, isolation, and loneliness (Hoffman & Miller, 2020).

Teachers in this Alternative Education environment can work to connect students with social and emotional support and with learning that students feel is authentic and relevant (Beattie, 2003; Crane et al., 2012; Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). Additionally, through the evolution of Alternative Education, the methods teachers use to reach students are changing as well. Face-to-face learning in AE programs and schools remains the norm in brick-and-mortar facilities. However, it has become necessary for teachers to adopt new pedagogy to address how students learn and address their needs (Aron, 2006; Beattie, 2003; see also Entwisle et al., 2004; Jóhannesson & Bjarnadóttir, 2015).

There is research on Alternative Education, specifically demographic data on high school students, as they are at-risk of failure for various reasons, such as attendance and

behavior, which teachers and school staff attempt to address (Aron, 2006). Although student engagement in traditional high schools and Alternative Education is evident in educational literature, there is a need to explore how teachers in Alternative Education are engaged in positions of leadership with students while developing relationships with them. Further, AE teachers provide support for students who are at-risk of failure in school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009). These teachers work in tandem with school resources such as social workers and school counselors to assist students in their personal growth and maturation toward adulthood (CDC, 2009, p. 7; Crane & Livock, 2012; Croninger & Lee, 2001).

Part of Jóhannesson and Bjarnadóttir's (2015) research examined why students drop out of school but then return to complete their education. The students' reasons for returning and staying to completion include the teacher engagement of students through authentic, real-world practical problem-solving. The teachers in AE also understand that alternatives in teaching can provide students and teachers a conduit for building relationships from the standpoint of trust and authenticity of learning (Jóhannesson & Bjarnadóttir, 2015).

Entwisle and her team of researchers (2004) proposed that students' life trajectories affected students' ability to stay in school or need to leave. The study identified that students return to school if they have an opportunity to complete their education. Aron's overview of Alternative Education (2006) highlighted the need to address options for students to finish school and be prepared to participate in a 21st-century workforce. At the same time, Beattie's study (2003) showed the need for teacher

engagement to ignite students' desire to learn and develop their academic skills, which may be used to advance their learning for life.

For the teachers, without clearly defined parameters, AE challenges them to rise to the occasion and engage in their craft while developing curricula and individualized learning plans beyond the teaching constructs that occur in traditional classrooms with little customization of the learning experience (Pennacchia et al., 2016, p. 1). Teachers face the necessity of being innovative in developing their pedagogy to meet the needs of students attending AE programs and schools (Raywid, 1994).

### **English Teachers' Challenges in Alternative Education**

Studies that examine English teachers' perceptions of their roles and the challenges they face in making all the pieces work together straddle the line between research and teaching as they determine what they are preparing students to do beyond high school. Teachers determine whether students attend university or prepare for life and all that it encompasses (Adkins-Coleman, 2010; Beattie, 2003; Sperling & Dipardo, 2008; Pastore-Capuana, 2018; Winn, 2013). Overall, researchers reflect on the why of teaching English and their perception and understanding of its purpose (Klem & Connell, 2004; Winn, 2013). In transformative and authentic learning, the nature of English and its use across educational and socioeconomic discourse, as described by a student, is about "actual real things," and it is about restoring an authentic voice to students that is theirs to own (Pastore-Capuana, 2018; Winn, 2013). It is the role of the AE English teacher to engage and guide students while they are accessible for learning. English class is more than content. It is about "civic engagement" and social responsibility (Pastore-Capuana, 2018; Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016).

English teachers in Alternative Education use pedagogy and instructional strategies to engage students in learning classroom skills while developing life skills for real-world situations, such as creating a resumé or preparing for an interview (Cook-Sather et al., 2015; Mills et al., 2016; Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). AE teachers' particular role, according to Beattie's study (2003), is to act as the engager or the stimulant to excite students to learn (although this statement applies to all teachers regardless of setting) (Klem & Connell, 2004). For AE teachers, specifically, the uniqueness of their job needs to be researched to provide a clearer picture of what they do. Research on English teachers' engagement in their craft while in the classroom exists, but it is about teacher and student relationship building and not specifically about the SJ connection, even though it is implied in the studies (Beattie, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004; Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). Literature states that student engagement is dependent on their relationship with the adult teachers around them (Beattie, 2003; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). The teachers in AE also function as an intermediary, which students utilize to develop their sense of self while learning academics and life skills (Beattie, 2003; Crane & Livock, 2012).

This literature review also examines the existing research on teacher engagement using English content in AE. For example, researcher Maisha Winn suggested that there is a need to teach students to use literature as a way of seeking and restoring justice that goes beyond the classroom (2013, p. 127). Winn described this restorative English pedagogy as a transformation point for teachers to engage students and teach them to use their voices to restore themselves. In contrast, the teachers use this pedagogy as a catalyst for "teaching freedom" (2013). This engagement demonstrates how teachers can include

their work within the craft and use a SJ lens to understand how their engagement in teaching can provide a real-life learning experience that a disengaged student will see as relevant to them (2013). English teachers' engagement in AE is the SJ conduit for student engagement in the AE setting (Pastore-Capuana, 2018).

### **Teacher Engagement: Self-Perception and Transformational Teaching**

The study of alternative education teachers and their engagement in their chosen craft is evident in the literature. However, the research underscores AE as a platform for providing social services and mental health support to students who attend these programs and schools before addressing pedagogy and authentic learning opportunities for students (Johnson, 2000; Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). The data speak to the support that staff provides to students via the application curricula that target students' needs rather than their academics. Studies by researchers like Gibbs (2016) express concern about the transference of focus from teacher engagement to a focus on student engagement; thus, teacher engagement becomes a secondary focus. He further explained that teachers' being *engaging and stimulating* versus being *engaged in teaching* may not achieve the same outcomes. Gibbs's point is that being engaged in the craft of teaching is "first and foremost, a matter of values" (p. 186). In short, teacher engagement is not necessarily about the craft but is beyond it and shows the teacher as a passionate social justice leader who is engaged with students and is acknowledged by students as a teacher who cares about them and their success (Gibbs, 2016; Theoharis, 2008). Teacher engagement in AE in this respect provides an opportunity for teacher-student relationship building that supports students, all the while using a SJ lens and transforming the educator's teaching into an authentic student learning opportunity with which students

want to engage (Johnson, 2000). As teachers make connections with students in AE, researchers like Pennacchia et al. (2016) express concern that these programs and schools allow traditional schools to continue to exclude students. As Pennacchia explained they have a “permanent alternative route” that enables conventional schools to maintain their status quo and not change how they work with non-traditional and traditional students. This type of research sheds light on potential dilemmas teachers may face as they address student learning regardless of teaching the arena (p. 3).

Current literature explores teachers’ perceptions of their role as SJ facilitators and as a lens/focus for developing authentic learning opportunities that resonate with students (Klem & Connell, 2004). Teachers use these themes in tandem as threads that intersect each other for education and life skills development (Beattie, 2003). As Teachers engage in their craft and act as facilitators for student learning, their role becomes interdisciplinary in nature. Teachers interpret classroom content (English) and SJ while translating AE’s function for student understanding of what it means to be a socially responsible stakeholder in their communities once they have completed school.

### **Social Justice in Alternative and Traditional Education**

Critical theory (CT) and SJ framework (SJ) can be seen as two sides of the same issue. CT, as explained by Dover (2013), provides a context for teaching SJ. The intent of educators who indicate that they teach “for social justice” is to attempt to teach students how to interpret SJ using their definition of SJ (Dover, 2013). These teachers also attempt to teach students how to develop their own understanding of what SJ is and how to connect it to their own experiences (Dover, 2013).

CT and SJ can be considered overly used as a theme or framework for teaching, thus losing some of their effectiveness and becoming less meaningful even though the terms are used regularly to describe them as teachers understand and use them (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Adams and colleagues as cited by Dover (2013), explain that SJ education incorporates a variety of pedagogical frameworks and theories to realize how SJ impacts students (p. 6). According to Dover, the frameworks used by English teachers include five elements that encompass the ideal of SJ education.

As shown in Figure 1, the multiple components involved in teachers' engagement in SJ instruction are interconnected. From the central theme of SJ education, pedagogy and content provide various teaching and learning opportunities for teachers to engage students and that also engage students in broadening their understanding of their world and their interaction with it (Dover, 2013, p. 4, 6). Teachers, regardless of content, use pedagogy to develop curricula to engage students in learning about their self-worth (social capital).

**Figure 1**

*Frameworks for Teaching Social Justice in English*



*Note:* This graphic is adapted from Dover’s (2013) research on conceptual and pedagogical frameworks and includes Theoharis’ (2008) research on what motivates social justice leaders to lead.

Overall, the intent to educate students on SJ, while accepted in the classroom, may not have enough data to support how it is taught (Dover, 2013). In the English classroom, the theme of SJ is addressable through content, but the interpretation of the content is up to the teacher to engage students and determine curricula and pedagogical approaches while guiding students in their learning. In AE, it is probable that different English teachers' passions and perceptions of SJ will reflect their approach to SJ education instruction (Dover, 2013).

Additionally, while teachers have an opportunity to instruct students using content, they need to be “literate” in social issues such as race, gender, and social class, among other areas, to be able to engage students through understanding social issues that may affect them (Capper & Young, 2014). How teachers engage students to learn to be socially responsible depends on teachers becoming attuned to “student differences” and

how they connect with them (Capper & Young, 2014, p. 163). With the expectation of being widely versed in the diverseness of students' worlds, it becomes necessary for successful engagement for teachers to understand what it is to be a social justice teacher and leader. So that teachers have the knowledge and skills to engage students in becoming socially responsible individuals and supportive members of society after high school ends (Capper & Young, 2014; Manzano-Sánchez et al., 2020).

According to Hackman (2005), SJ is an educational process that encourages students to take an active role in their own education (2005). SJ became a clarion call for education and government in 1965 when President Lyndon B. Johnson enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, thus making SJ a part of his War on Poverty (Lange & Sletten, 2002). The goal of this legislation was to provide a quality and equitable education for all children, and it focused on minority and poor children to level the playing field so that all students had a chance at a life without poverty (LBJ Presidential Library, n.d., paras. 4-7).

The idea of SJ, as explained by Hytten & Bettez (2011), is, in a general sense, somewhat vague or elusive in definition. They explain that the theory and framework of "social justice" exist; however, the interpretation is hard to describe as people bring their own perceptions of this to the conversation. Hytten & Bettez (2011) referenced Hackman's (2005) work which highlights the challenges of conceptualizing SJ when there are varied perspectives on SJ. Still, Hackman proposes that there are five components that describe SJ, which include: (a) content mastery, (b) tools for critical analysis, (c) tools for social change, (d) tools for personal reflection, and (e) an awareness of multicultural group dynamics (2005, p. 104). Hackman (2005) argued these

components are necessary for teachers to be engaged and empowered to use in teaching about SJ. In turn, the teachers provide the context by which SJ content informs and empowers students and involves them in learning what SJ can be as they learn how to “engage in social responsibility” (2005, p.105), which Hackman (2005) noted are learning about SJ to inform their conversations and decision-making efforts concerning the “political, social, and economic forces” within their communities (p. 105). While the teachers work within the construct of SJ education, Hackman suggested that teacher empowerment also includes their use of personal reflection to “inform their practice” as they strive to create a “social justice teaching environment” (pp.106-107).

In a Canadian study by Beattie in 2003, research of one particular school showed how an AE environment could affect positive change for students and stakeholders connected with the school. The research provided data that exhibited the teachers’ innovative responses to the needs of students who attended the school and included collaborative relationships with all members of the school community to provide a positive teaching and learning environment (Beattie, 2003). While critical theory is a theme for this particular study, it is used to support the work of the school and is embedded in the school’s community as a naturally occurring or holistic framework for teacher and student engagement (Beattie, 2003). The teachers, parents, and community members as a whole (stakeholders) cultivate students’ development and understanding of what it is to be connected and contributing members of a learning community (Beattie, 2003). The stakeholders in this study invest in building and fostering relationships with students as they engage in their fledgling roles as socially responsible members of their

communities while learning how to use SJ as a lens to focus on and expand upon their understanding of engagement in life as a part of a community (Beattie, 2003).

The use of English content as a part of their pedagogy in AE allows teachers to employ critical theory as one of their foci while developing the how and why of their engagement in their craft. This content facilitates students' engagement and understanding of SJ as it relates to them and their self-awareness (Beattie, 2003). AE also provides teachers a place where they have some latitude in instructional practices without being tethered to a required framework, as occurs in traditional high school settings. This latitude allows teachers the ability to develop teaching and learning opportunities that engender students' confidence in using their voices and demonstrates their engagement and applying that learning to life (Klein, 1983; Pastore-Capuana, 2018; The Millennium Group [TMG], 2014).

### **Research on Teacher Leaders in Non-traditional Environments**

Teachers who choose to become administrators follow a traditional path and develop according to traditional educational leadership roles in traditional schools (Capper & Young, 2014; Price, 2009; Wenner & Campbell, 2016). Further examination by researchers, such as Price (2009) and Wenner & Campbell (2016), supports the need for the study of leadership development and targeted training for leadership in non-traditional school settings to address the needs of charter and alternative schools (Price, 2009). While presenting the statement above, Price has shared that there is a need to revise leadership training to include data-driven, diverse, and experiential leadership curricula (2009). Wenner and Campbell observed that the characterization of teacher leadership needs to be re-defined. In their study, Wenner and Campbell (2016) defined

teacher leaders as “teacher[s] who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom” (p. 140). Additionally, the purpose that drives teachers' passion for leading can be observed in their engagement with students in teaching them the skills needed to participate in personalized learning development that is relevant and authentic for them (Beattie, 2003, p. 4).

### **Research on English Teachers as Social Justice Leaders**

English teachers, for example, through their content organization, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), include SJ standards and policy as necessary components of leading and teaching SJ in English (Burns & Miller, 2016). This standardization by the NCTE leadership marked a milestone in public education and set an example for other content area organizations to consider. Additionally, the larger organization actively supports English teachers in their roles as social justice leaders (Burns & Miller, 2016). This organization provides teachers with guidance and leadership by providing resources on SJ education. Further, it offers additional pedagogical resources necessary for the teaching and learning process that engages students (Burns & Miller, 2016; Crane & Livock, 2012; Croninger & Lee, 2001; see also Hytten & Bettez, 2011).

English teachers adapt, implement, and innovate instruction to support students' learning in the classroom. Practitioners like Pastore-Capuana (2018), who value students' use of varied learning platforms (writing, filming, and podcasting) to engage students, and Winn (2013), who engages students in performing and playwriting [the] “spoken word,” and writing to understand, restore and seek justice beyond the classroom and

incarceration. These teachers use their content to draw in and engage disengaged students and encourage them to use their voices and creativity to express themselves (Pastore-Capuana 2018, p. 33; Winn 2013, pp. 126-127). These teachers adapt and use their passion by engaging and inspiring their students and using pedagogy for maximum effect in creating authentic relationships with students as invested partners in learning (Athanasas et al., 2015). In Winn's (2013) research on restorative English education, her pedagogical construct and practice support students' personalized learning and use of their authentic voice to restore their sense of self and engender their growth as they meet their academic and life goals (Crane & Livock, 2012; Meo, 2008). Pastore-Capuana uses "pedagogical courage" to engage and instruct students in pushing beyond traditional content barriers to create their authentic voices and connect with "actual real things" (2018, pp. 33-34).

While there is emergent research on how English teachers engage in instruction in the traditional school, the process is minuscule in AE English content classes. English teachers use pedagogy to adapt to the changing landscape in AE and understand what engagement looks like is changeable, as are the needs of AE identified students (Athanasas et al., 2015; Finders, 2000; Guerin & Denti, 1999). To engage students, specifically students completing school, English teachers in AE programs and schools use SJ themes as a framework for teaching strategies to meet the changing needs of students (Finders, 2000). Pastore-Capuana suggests the need to teach beyond high stakes tests and to take risks in teaching that connects with students (2018, p. 33). Alternative education English teachers must also be skilled at building relationships with students and

analyzing what support students need to engage in learning (Beattie, 2003; Gibbs, 2016; Pastore-Capuana, 2018).

While working within an instructional framework with traditional materials adopted for school divisions, the Alternative Education English teacher not only adapts material to fit the needs of individual students' learning but also finds ways to be innovative and engage students. By using various forms of learning through authentic conversation, teachers can build trusting relationships that allow students to feel their voices are valued and that their learning contributions are also (Winn, 2013). Further, Beattie's research provides examples of English teachers who use relationships and their surroundings to develop relevant learning experiences with students (2003). As stated by Gibbs (2016) "Being engaged with teaching and with students and their learning is, first and foremost, a matter of values" (p. 187).

Beyond the innovativeness of Alternative Education teachers in the classroom and their efforts to engage their students, research from the area of special education provides AE teachers with tools to use with students who learn differently. As such, AE identified students may need assignments adapted to their learning style; as Meyer & Rose (2000, p. 39) explained, "No two brains learn the same way." In addition to Meyer & Rose's study of universal design for learning, Meo (2008) delved deeper into universal design as it pertains to neuroscience and how "curriculum presents barriers and supports to academic achievement by diverse learners." Meo (2008, p. 22) further proposed that "curriculum can be developed to include all learners" (p. 22). The use of universal design allows teachers of all students a way to customize learning for the students and connect the skills they acquire to learning that makes sense to them. What English teachers do to support

the learning process is to lead and facilitate how students learn through their interests and needs using students' existing knowledge and expanding it to provide a richer picture of what they are learning and the connections they are making (Gibbs, 2016; Pastore-Capuana, 2018).

Typically, all teachers in traditional classrooms are expected to understand pedagogy and methodology as it pertains to a traditional student's instructional needs. However, alternative education teachers are expected to have more than an understanding of pedagogy and methodology, with some researchers recommending skills in understanding special education and cultural diversity (Guerin & Denti, 1999; The Millennium Group [TMG], 2014;). Alternative education teachers are expected to utilize a broad spectrum of strategies to assist students in engaging in learning (Rose & Strangman, 2007). Additionally, AE English teachers, while having an understanding of English content, have learned to engage students using teaching strategies that engage students and that tie in their understanding of traditional curricular knowledge that is needed for authenticity and relevancy for students in AE (Winn, 2013). These AE English teachers work with other educational staff to provide supports that are not academic in nature, i.e., social workers, school counselors, and community resources and lend strength to the students' understanding that teachers care for them and strengthen the supportive learning relationship students feel is necessary for their success and well-being in school and in life (Beattie, 2013; Crane & Livock, 2012).

For instruction to be relevant to students, specifically students attempting to complete school through AE, it is suggested that teachers should have content knowledge, other competencies, and skills needed to craft learning that benefits students in AE

programs and schools (Athanasas et al., 2015; Hackman, 2005). Additionally, the SJ framework used by teachers becomes a specific part of the AE English teacher's toolbox to build unique academic relationships with the students that are valuable to them and that they appreciate and can use for life after high school (Beattie, 2003; Cook-Sather et al., 2015; Crane & Livock, 2012; Huff et al., 2018).

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this literature review, teacher engagement in AE has included research on how teachers may perceive their engagement in crafting student learning. The research literature also explains AE teachers' need to be adaptable and have the capacity to be social justice leaders while teaching students about it and social responsibility (Hackman, 2005; Huff et al., 2018; Hytten & Bettez, 2011). While SJ can be seen through the lens of critical theory, it is a part of the teaching and learning fabric of Alternative Education. Researchers like Belle (2019), Cook-Sather et al. (2015), Beattie (2003), Croninger and Lee (2001), and Hackman (2005) agree that teachers, regardless of content area, can be social justice leaders, while instructing and facilitating the development of students' authentic learning. Student use of learning that is relevant to them and that they understand is part of learning social responsibility as they begin to participate in life after high school (Hackman, 2005; Hytten & Bettez, 2011).

The research on the how and why Alternative Education English teachers are engaged in their craft, and their engagement with students completing school is emerging slowly. As AE English teachers are forming and building relationships using teaching tools to bring focus to critical theory and SJ frameworks, they present opportunities for authentic teaching and learning that are relevant for teachers and students (Athanasas et

al., 2015; Croninger and Lee, 2001; MacTavish & Kolb, 2006). The literature on English teachers as social justice leaders in alternative education appears to be intertwined with research on relationship building with students and supporting them as they learn in preparation for life after high school (Beattie, 2003; Hackman, 2011). While there is emerging literature on teachers, in general, as social justice leaders, there is little data on English teachers in AE functioning specifically in that capacity. There does not appear to be consistency in how Alternative Education programs and schools work other than that they do work for students who attend them (Aron, 2006; Erickson et al., 2014; Hemmer et al., 2012; see also Huff et al., 2018; Porowski et al., 2014).

Regarding targeted research on alternative education, English teachers, and engagement of 12th-grade students, these are areas for research that can benefit from further exploration and may provide evidence that addresses these issues in tandem. However, there are studies about student engagement in learning in the traditional high school classroom that can be applied to alternative education environments (Beattie, 2003; Cook-Sather et al., 2015; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Pastore-Capuana, 2018). What is consistent in the research is the understanding of student populations considered marginalized and who attend Alternative Education programs and schools (Aron, 2006; Carver et al., 2010; Erickson et al., 2014; Porowski et al., 2014). Teacher engagement in the learning process of the specific learning group, students attempting to complete school, are students considered at-risk of academic failure and need another way to access education to that end and have an opportunity to develop an understanding of SJ, social responsibility, and to prepare to participate in their communities for themselves and for their future (Huff et al., 2018).

This research incorporates articles on alternative education, teacher engagement, English teachers as social justice leaders, and critical theory and SJ frameworks. It also explores teacher engagement in their craft and pedagogy along with their development and use of curricula for and implementation of SJ themes in the alternative education English classroom. It explores teacher preparedness and adaptability and relationship building with students in their learning to be a member of their community and a stakeholder as well.

The literature on English teachers, specifically as social justice leaders in AE, is still emerging, as is information on their engagement in alternative education and their impact on 12th-grade students. This literature review shows that English teachers in AE can instruct students and use relationship building as a tool to encourage student involvement in life-long learning (Athanases et al., 2015; Beattie, 2013). Furthermore, there is a need to prepare teachers to be adaptable in providing a variety of learning opportunities for students to be successful in learning that carries the students through life (Athanases et al., 2015; Hackman, 2005). However, English teachers in AE are not specifically identified in the research, nor are they or their peers in other content areas specifically trained to instruct students who attend AE programs and schools. Nevertheless, there are recommendations that these teachers may need training in the competencies and skills utilized in Alternative Education environments (Erickson et al., 2014; Guerin & Denti, 1999; Hackman, 2005; Porowski et al., 2014).

Research suggests that English teachers can engage students in learning how to make connections to and through their relevant experiences (Beattie, 2003; Pastore-Capuana, 2018; Winn, 2013). Through their narratives, the teachers in AE describe and

emphasize the need for building relations. The development of learning relationships creates authentic meaning and relevance for students while using AE's over-arching purpose of preparing students to participate in society with an understanding of social responsibility and SJ contexts (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011; Mills et al., 2015; Pastore-Capuana, 2018; Mackie & Tett, 2013). The overall pedagogy of teaching and learning is part of a broader discussion on teacher engagement that facilitates students' commitment to their education as it pertains to them and their path to completing school (Gibbs, 2016; Hackman, 2005).

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative method, focus groups, to provide a structure for collecting and analyzing data that is considered rich in narrative details (Creswell, 2014; Dilshad & Latif, 2013). In his description and use of qualitative research, Creswell involves methods that emphasize textual and image data and include different forms of data analysis other than quantitative methods. This form of research further uses what Creswell refers to as “diverse designs,” which allows for a broader scope of data analysis (2014, p. 183). For this research, the choice of focus groups as the method for collecting data was considered valuable to the study as it relies on in-depth discussions about the topic with the groups. For this qualitative study, focus groups provided a way to explore how AE English teachers engage in their craft and with their students for the purpose of preparing students for life after they complete school.

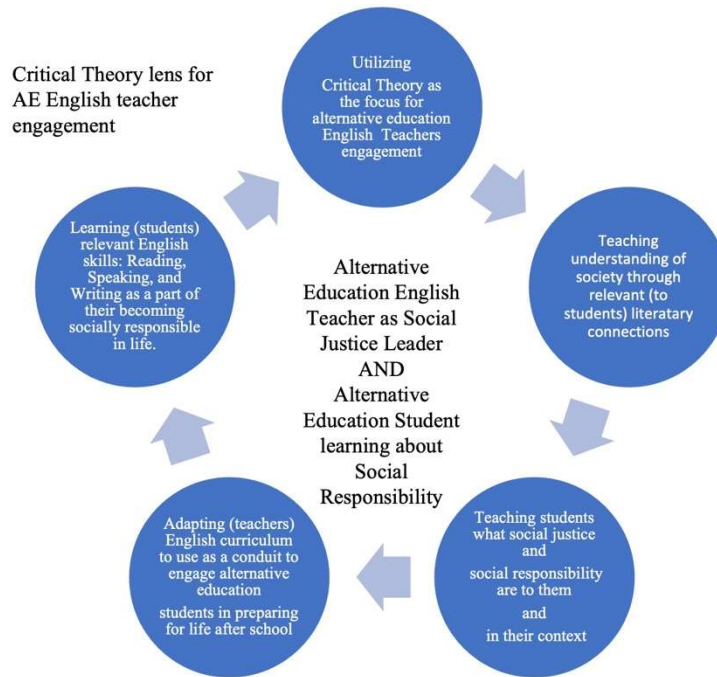
As the focus groups were used to explore AE English teachers’ engagement, it is necessary to understand the purpose of Alternative Education which is to provide an opportunity for students to complete their education without going through a traditional high school program (Aron, 2006; Brown, 2012). The purpose of this research was to identify how Alternative Education English (AE) teachers function in the capacity of social justice leaders as they engage with their craft and with students in preparing them to be socially responsible in life after high school. Critical theory (CT), which allows for the research of a wide array of societal concerns, is a part of the AE framework. It provides a focus by which the researcher is able to see the connection between AE English teachers and their effectiveness in AE. These teachers use their craft to engage students in preparation for their moving forward from school into life, potentially with

tools that will allow them to grow and flourish in society (Chin et al., 2018, pp. 308-309). Furthermore, AE Teachers utilize a CT focus to determine what students need to be prepared for life. This process is informed by teachers’ observations and assessments of students’ availability to learn and changes with the needs of the students when they are unavailable to learn.

While CT also encompasses other types of theories specific to different social themes such as leadership, race, gender, etc., CT provided a lens through which the researcher observed teachers as they discussed their engagement in their craft. Figure 2 examines the connections between CT, AE English teachers, and their use of social justice to teach social responsibility.

**Figure 2**

*Relationship between Critical Theory and AE English Teachers*



AE English teachers in the focus groups shared their thoughts and ideas about their engagement in their craft and with students while addressing societal issues with

them with the goal of providing an SJ framework through which to teach students about being socially responsible (Baker, 2020; Belle, 2019; Chin et al., 2018).

At the time of this study, research literature in Alternative Education provided insight into the demographic data on AE programs and schools, such as how many students attend, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomics. Additionally, the data showed supporting evidence about students who are considered at risk of failure and who may struggle with mental health, substance use, and behavioral issues (Kaufmann et al., 1992; Kelchner et al., 2017; Vang, 2005). While the AE English teachers' demographics were available, this data did not elaborate on why AE English teachers chose to become a part of Alternative Education programs and schools (Capper & Young, 2014).

As indicated by researchers, students in AE may view their English teachers as leaders and partners as they work together to support the students' evolution through their learning experience as well as prepare them for engagement as active members of society (Crane & Livock, 2012; Farris-Berg & Schroeder, 2003; Livock, 2009). Teachers engage in their craft through pedagogy and developing teaching and learning strategies that they utilize with students in traditional and AE programs and schools. In using curricula, teachers utilize familiar content connections to engage students, such as pop culture literature (Finders, 2000; Petrone, 2013). All English teachers in all educational arenas can benefit from support for their work through one of their governing organizations, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), which provides a broad scope of resources. Through its work, and mission and vision statements, this organization expresses the importance of English teachers acting as bridges to learning that impact society (NCTE, n.d.). Through the adoption of language that embraces SJ education

through English/English Language Arts, those who teach English have a societal responsibility to provide learning that not just connects students to the world but engages them in life (Burns & Miller, 2016; NCTE, n.d.).

Researchers like Dilshad and Latif (2013) refer to the use of focus groups as a “value in qualitative research,” emphasizing the design of the research as a way to “investigate the quality” of all aspects of the interconnected components (p. 191). The relationships between the AE teachers, their craft, SJ, and AE identified students were primary aspects of the focus groups’ topics for discussion. Through the focus groups, this study investigated gaps in the research literature on Alternative Education English teachers and their possible role as Social Justice leaders. As of the time of this study, there was research on English teachers and their impact in traditional school settings. However, research did not appear to show evidence of data specific to Alternative Education English teachers’ impact on engagement in their environment of AE programs and schools.

Furthermore, this statement emphasized the identification of a focus on English language teaching, regardless of the educational arena, that supports an SJ purpose. According to The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), this organization realizes the significance of providing support for teachers who are providing instruction that aligns with SJ education with and for students (Burns & Miller, 2017; NCTE, n.d.; Sperling & Dipardo, 2008). Recognizing and understanding the crafting of curricula in AE is essential to how English teachers intertwine pedagogy, strategy, and authenticity in SJ. The AE English teacher, in this context, assists students in understanding how to interpret their world through their experiences, their writing, and their reading in their

daily processes (Burns & Miller, 2017; Pastore-Capuana, 2018). In reference to AE, data suggests that students in AE reengage in learning with the support of compassionate and empathetic teachers who engage them through interests and content that makes sense for the students (Beattie, 2003; Crane & Livock, 201; Pastore-Capuana, 2018). This information on English teachers as a group does not shed light on AE English teacher engagement as Social Justice leaders in the classroom or their engagement in teaching AE identified students about social responsibility or life after school.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study were:

- How do Alternative Education English (AE) teachers engage in their craft as Social Justice leaders while engaging students in learning and teaching them to be socially responsible in life after completing school?
- Why do AE English teachers take on the responsibility for these students in their capacity as Social Justice leaders while teaching AE identified students to understand societal issues that affect them while using an SJ framework (Baker, 2020; Belle, 2019)?

### **Focus Group Questions**

The focus group questions provided a conduit for AE English teachers to share their experiences in their work with the researcher. The themes and subthemes that emerged from these teachers' discussions showed them as leaders in their work.

### **Research Design Overview**

A qualitative research methodology was used for this study. The qualitative data collection strategy was focus groups which provided narrative data from AE English teachers about their engagement with their craft and with students. Focus groups were an effective way to collect rich narrative data from the participants. As explained by Creswell (2014), it is necessary to focus on some of the data and disregard “other parts of it,” which allow “for the process of aggregating data into a small number of themes” (p. 194). The focus groups allowed for exploring how teachers in AE programs and schools saw their work and allowed them to reflect on their craft and their work with students.

### **Participants**

Prior to starting data collection, the researcher gained approval from Creighton University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for this research. Upon approval of the IRB, the data collection for this research involved Alternative Education English teachers working in programs and schools in public school divisions across the Northern Virginia region. This area included counties and cities, all of which have AE programs and schools. Moreover, AE programs and schools in this region are not identically designed. The Virginia Department of Education allows public school divisions to create them to meet the needs of the students they serve (VDOE, 2022; Wang, 2018). The AE English teachers in this study applied their craft in brick-and-mortar buildings in physical classrooms. However, this study included a teacher who taught a hybrid program while working from a brick-and-mortar building. This teaching model allowed AE identified students to take advantage of being in a school while attending classes online only and

without interaction with other students or staff. These programs and or schools met during daytime school hours.

The sample for this study included AE English teachers who are (a) currently serving in AE programs and schools, (b) still in education but are teaching or administrating in other curricular areas, or (c) are retired from AE programs or schools in the Northern Virginia region (VDOE, 2017). AE English teachers currently teaching have contact information available on their school divisions' public websites at the school level. Retired AE English teachers were contacted through older contact directories and informal networking available to this researcher. Under IRB approval through Creighton University, it was not necessary to contact the school divisions' AE supervisors for permission to invite AE English teachers to participate in this study as children were not involved in his research. These AE English teachers were contacted by email and asked to participate in the study. In the Northern Virginia region, Alternative Education programs and schools have a small number of teaching staff and provide for a limited number of students. Initially, contact was made by email with 31 individuals who met the criteria for this research. Of those individuals, nine AE teachers agreed to participate in the focus groups.

There were two focus groups—one with four participants and the other with five participants. As Morgan (1997) stated about focus groups, an ideal number of participants can be between six and 10. However, the number of participants in a focus group can affect "the "functioning" of the group, such as negatively leading to the disruption of the discussion (p. 42). Morgan (1997) also implied that too many groups might not provide further "meaningful insights" (p. 43). While considering Morgan's ideal number of

participants and focus groups for this study, the researcher considered there would be a smaller number of AE English teachers available in the region to be a part of this research due to the smaller AE programs and schools (VDOE, 2022).

The criteria for teachers in the focus groups included having a minimum of 1 year experience as an AE teacher and one year as an English teacher, as prescribed by the Virginia Department of Education's requirements for licensure in their content area (Virginia Department of Education n.d.). The participants were currently teaching, whether in AE or other content areas or are retired Alternative Education English teachers who engaged with an audience of diverse students who are considered marginalized and at risk of failure. Because the number of AE English teachers in each of the school divisions is consistently small due to the small size of the programs and schools, the pool of AE teachers in the study is also small. The AE English teachers selected for this study were responsible for teaching single grade levels, more than one grade level, and other content. The research utilized two focus groups via the Zoom platform, which allowed the focus groups to partake in rich discussions in a virtual setting about SJ, social responsibility, and connections for teachers and students (Krueger & Casey 2015; Morgan, 1997). See Table 1 for the demographics of participants in this study.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Age Group	Experience more than five years	Experience less than five years	Retired	Teaching environment	Teacher certification
1	Female	30-40	Yes	No	No	In-person	<sup>a</sup> ESL
2	Female	50+	Yes	No	Yes	In-Person /Hybrid	<sup>b</sup> German
3	Male	40-50	Yes	No	No	In-Person	English Ed
4	Male	20-30	No	Yes	No	In-Person	English Ed
5	Female	20-30	Yes	Yes	No	In-Person	English Ed
6	Female	50+	Yes	No	No	In-Person	English Ed
7	Male	50+	Yes	No	Yes	In-Person	English
8	Male	50+	Yes	No	Yes	In-Person	English
9	Male	30	Yes	No	No	In-Person	English Ed

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>ESL English as a Second Language is the certification/licensure for this teacher.

<sup>b</sup>German is the certification/licensure for the teacher responsible for the in-person/hybrid program.

The participants were recruited by the researcher, who, for transparency, has over 30 years of experience teaching and administrating AE programs and schools in Virginia. Additionally, the researcher's expertise is English and has 5 years of writing English curricula for general education and differentiated education (i.e., gifted and talented, English language learning, etc.). Because there are a limited number of AE teachers in the region, the researcher personally knew some of the focus group participants and is stating this for transparency. Since only nine teachers agreed to participate in the study, the researcher had to allow teachers she knew to participate. The researcher understood this significant research limitation and took appropriate steps to

mitigate it. She was careful to explain the importance of the study and its purpose, and that participation in the study was informational and not to be construed as personal. This effort to maintain a formal structure for the study afforded the researcher a demarcation line to avoid biasing the focus group discussions. In addition, the researcher engaged in bracketing to monitor her reaction to stay unbiased during the data collection and analysis stages. More specifically, the researcher gave the focus group members a detailed and structured statement of their purpose and role in the study. At the outset of the focus groups, the researcher stated that the questions would not be elaborated upon for discussion to not bias the discussions.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process started with communication by email to the entire pool of AE English teachers. Once the potential participants responded to the email communication regarding the study, there was a follow-up phone call made to each individual to ask them for some demographic data to include in the actual study. The researcher acquired the participants' agreement to participate in the study through email, and the focus groups were developed. The questions created for this study were specific to AE English teachers and their engagement with their craft and students.

The types of questions developed for the focus group discussions were designed to engage AE English teachers using Bloom's Taxonomy as the basis for open-ended questions (see Appendix C), which categorizes teaching and learning based on knowledge, comprehension, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis levels and also focuses on teaching, learning, and assessment (see Appendix D) (Bloom's Taxonomy: Resource for Educators, n.d.; Bloom's Taxonomy-Learning in Action; Koltko-Rivera, M. E. (2006).

The focus group discussions required these teachers to reflect upon their engagement in their craft, their understanding of their role as Social Justice leaders, and their engagement with AE identified students in learning about social responsibility for life after high school.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

At the time of this research, the country was addressing the lingering challenges of COVID-19, pre- and post-pandemic, face-to-face and virtual meetings were used to manage the focus groups. Once the potential participants were screened and agreed to participate in the study, the researcher sent the necessary documents for their review and permission, i.e., the Bill of Rights for Research Participants (*see* Appendix A), requesting their formal participation. After the researcher gathered the confirmed study participants, the focus groups were scheduled.

The researcher moderated the focus groups with AE English teachers in a virtual setting, specifically using Zoom, and asked participants' permission to record them before the focus groups started. Sessions were approximately 120 minutes long and allowed time to complete all discussions. The moderator's role with the groups was to provide the focus groups' format, questions, and structure without influencing the discussions within them. The goal for the moderator/researcher was to avoid biasing or influencing the groups' process, which would taint the data.

### **Data Collection Timeline**

Data collection used questions developed based on the literature review information in chapter two of this research. All current AE English teachers for these focus groups were in the midst of their fall semester in the regular school year with full

engagement at their physical school sites. They all agreed to participate in the sessions after school hours and on weekends. The retired AE English teachers were more readily available to participate in the focus groups and were flexible in scheduling, accommodating those currently teaching. The focus groups were scheduled in mid-November and early December at times convenient for the participants and as soon as feasible for them during the public-school term in the fall 2022 school year; the focus groups were completed before the end of the first semester in 2022.

### **Data Analysis**

The data from the focus groups' discussions were digitally recorded using the Zoom platform, and the participants were invisible to each other and the researcher. A black screen with a number only was representative of a participant for confidentiality, videotaping of black screened for the individuals who were heard and not seen, and the only identifiers were numbers assigned by the researcher. The researcher transcribed the audio from the recordings using Microsoft Word's dictation-to-text feature. The researcher also viewed and listened to the recordings to make corrections when the software transcription misunderstood words in the discussions. The data analysis from the two focus groups was coded using themes and discussion threads as they became evident.

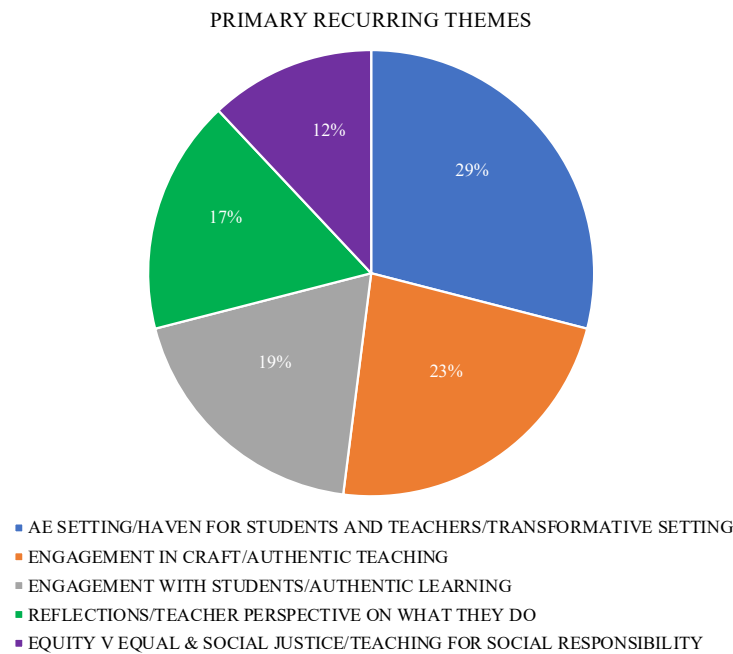
Initially, the themes in the discussion were concentrated on teacher engagement with their craft and teacher engagement with their students. From these more significant themes, the data from the two focus groups were categorized by discussion responses and then further analyzed using the data coding and analysis software MAXQDA.

As the data analysis of the two focus groups evolved, data from this research, as described by Creswell (2014, p. 194), proved to be "dense" and "rich" with information.

The data from these focus groups expanded beyond the two initial themes of engagement in craft and engagement with students to five primary themes and 59 subthemes. The data were coded from the focus group discussions and analyzed based on teachers' explanations of their work and examples of what they do based on how they answered the questions presented. The five overarching themes that emerged from the focus groups are shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Primary Recurring Themes*



Within these themes, AE English teachers provided insight into their views on the process of engagement as a whole. While the five themes were wide-ranging, the data analysis concentrated on these more significant themes and showed various connections between teachers, crafts, students, and leadership. The subthemes showed different facets of primary themes that were representative of the AE English teachers' discussions, while the rest of the discussions concentrated on the subthemes that emerged. AE English

teachers see their engagement as interconnected through their work. The data in the white circles show significant themes, and the data in the blue circles are highlighted subthemes of interest in this study. Directional arrows within the map show how the teachers see the connections between them all and show the directions their thoughts take as they do their work.

The information from the focus groups was organized into two Tables, 2 and 3, which show the primary and subthemes as they occurred in the focus groups.

**Table 2**

*Five Primary Themes in Order of Importance*

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AE Setting/Safe Haven for Students and Teachers/Transformative Setting
Engagement in Craft/Authentic Teaching & Learning
Engagement with Students/Social Justice Leader
Reflections/Teacher Perspective on What They Do
Equity vs. Equal & Social Justice/Teaching for Social Responsibility/Authentic Leader

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**Table 3**

*Subthemes*

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<u>Engagement in Craft/Authentic Teaching &amp; Learning</u>
Teacher Engagement with Craft
Authentic Teaching/Learning
Teacher Engagement in English
Teacher Perspective on Student Needs/Development
Teacher/Student Collaboration/Independent Learning
Teaching for Higher Education/Career
Teaching Social Responsibility/Community Engagement/Awareness
Preparing Students for the Future
Teacher Recognition of Irrelevant/In-authentic Learning
<u>Engagement with Students/Social Justice Leader</u>

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Teacher Engagement with Students/Guide/Mentor/SJ Leader  
 Teaching Students to Adapt to Change  
 Teaching Students About Self Worth and What Matters  
 Teaching Students to Find Purpose Outside of School/Not Finding Purpose  
 Teaching Life Skills/Soft Skills/Tools for Success in Life/Skills for the Workplace  
 Teaching Critical Thinking  
 Student Engagement  
 Teaching Students Already Dealing with Life  
 Teaching Students Who are Shut Down from Learning  
 Communications with Students

AE Setting/Haven for Students and Teachers/Transformative Setting

AE as a safe haven for students  
 AE as a safe haven for teachers  
 Reason for AE Existence  
 Student Sense of Adversity  
 Student Sense of Isolation  
 AE as Beneficial for Non-traditional Learners  
 Culture and Trust/Inclusivity/Non-Judgmental Place  
 Traumatized Students  
 Student Confidence  
 Social-Emotional  
 Resilient/Resistant Student  
 Student Motivation/Empowerment  
 Teacher Showing Strengths/Weaknesses  
 Teacher Motivation  
 Teaching Students to Be Life-Long Learners  
 AE Another Place to Try to Be Successful in Learning  
 AE Originally a Place for Discipline  
 AE Safe Place to Make Mistakes and Grow  
 Impact on Student Success

Reflections/Teacher Perspective on What They do

Teacher Reflection on their Role  
 Teacher Reflection on their own bias  
 Teacher Reflection on Frustration  
 Teacher Reflection on their Ability to Connect with Students  
 Teacher Reflection Students Learning Self-efficacy  
 Teacher Reflection Students Being Validated  
 Teacher Reflection Students' Understanding of Self-worth  
 Teacher Reflection on Student Development in AE English Classroom

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Teacher Reflection on Positives and Negatives of AE  
 Teacher Reflection of Stigma of AE/Value of Teacher Work  
 Teachers' Personal Reasons for Teaching in AE/Purpose/Life Goal  
 Teachers' Reflection on Engagement in AE

Equity vs. Equal & Social Justice/Teaching for Social Responsibility

Teacher Perception of Equity  
 Equity/As Positive/Generational  
 Equity Meaning  
 Diversity  
 Social Justice  
 Teaching Productivity in Society/Contribution to Society  
 Preparing Students for Adulthood  
 Teacher/Student Dealing with the Stigma of Public Labeling  
 Marginalized Students  
Teaching Students to be Self-Sufficient

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*Note:* While listed under the primary themes, the subthemes in the table above are not exclusive to the primary themes and can appear in other themes as appropriate.

### **Methodological Integrity**

This researcher made an effort to maintain a non-biased focus on this study for the data to be accurate and ethically sound. The methodological integrity of this study was foremost the researcher's concern for providing clean data that future researchers can use or re-create. It was essential for this research experience that the researcher did not become a part of the research data beyond the designated role of moderator; otherwise, the data would have been rendered tainted and unusable. Recognizing that passion for an area of research is a two-edged sword, it was necessary to pay attention to how the researcher interacted with the focus groups. As indicated earlier in this chapter, working from a strict set of guidelines, the researcher's involvement in the focus group discussions was that of moderator only to ensure that bias did not enter the data collected and analyzed.

**Ethical Considerations**

It was necessary to follow all protocols (see Appendix B) set out by the research community and the university throughout this research process. The research process began and ended with understanding the researcher's approach and how the researcher was responsible for doing no harm to anyone participating in the study. Understanding that the Belmont principles provide the safety protocols for research, this study did not engage in unethical research practices. Creighton University's strict adherence to the IRB's regulations provided clear and appropriate limitations on who was involved in this study. No children were involved in this research. Further, it was essential to obtain the proper consent from participants in the research and to protect their confidentiality and the organizations potentially accessed during the study for transparency.

Ethics in this study included the researcher's transparency and allowing any participant to withdraw from the study regardless of the reason. In addition to being transparent in the study's development, safeguarding the collected data was necessary. To that end, the information on this research is stored in a private cloud accessible by the researcher only. No specific school or student data was disclosed during this research; thus, no documentation was required for permissions to access any Alternative Education school or program and a school division.

**Summary**

This research concentrated on an existing gap in the literature on Alternative Education English teachers as Social Justice leaders and their ability to engage students completing school in preparation to participate in society after high school. The researcher only engaged AE programs and schools in the Northern Virginia region for

potential participants. The AE English teachers of students completing school were the sample group for the study as they were the Social Justice leaders the students engaged with while learning about being socially responsible in life after school.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This study explored the engagement of Alternative Education (AE) English teachers in their craft and with their students. The study explored how AE English teachers engage in their work as social justice leaders in preparing students to be socially responsible for life after completing school.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

This study's purpose was to explore how AE English teachers, as social justice leaders, in AE programs, engage in their craft and with students to prepare them to be socially responsible in life after completing school. The study focus was initially on two themes (a) teacher engagement in craft/curricula and (b) teacher engagement with students, both with attention on using social justice to support students' understanding and preparation for being socially responsible in their context. From two themes to five, the research resulted in the emergence of primary themes and subthemes. This study showed AE English teachers' insights into their development of content and curricula, authentic teaching and learning strategies for students, leadership ideas, and philosophies that connect what teachers do to what they believe students need to understand for life.

### **Results**

Through their dialogue, these teachers showed how they use instruction and social justice to provide transformative and authentic learning in AE to support AE identified students. In this chapter, quotes from participants are shared to illustrate the significance of the discovered themes and subthemes, as seen through the eyes of these AE English teachers who provide leadership in the AE arena. AE English teachers exhibited empathy throughout the focus group sessions. They spoke to the need to check in with students to

see if they were able to learn on a day as well as trying to engender a sense of humanity into their lives. For these AE English teachers, AE is a place where disengaged students can be reengaged in learning to prepare for life after completing school.

### **Focus Group Comparisons**

There were two focus groups, one with four participants and one with five. The dynamics of the groups were similar in that they each had participants who voluntarily spoke about their experiences in their AE English classrooms and the AE arena. Both groups were comfortable responding to the questions from the researcher, who was also the moderator. Individuals in the groups were also comfortable reaffirming each other's sentiments on topics for discussion and were also comfortable enough to agree to disagree and expand on their thoughts and experiences.

Between the two groups, the AE English teachers discussed being mindful of the value of authentic teaching and learning that engages as many students as possible in hopes of rekindling an appreciation and an understanding of life-long learning and "growing their sense of social awareness" (Participant # 5). While the AE English teachers' discussions were about authentic teaching that encourages students to reengage in learning, there were also discussions of AE as a place where students are sent because they are not being successful in a traditional setting. One participant expressed concern about students pulled out of class to address other specific student health needs that, while they are necessary for the whole student, nevertheless affect the student's availability to access the curriculum. In essence, these teachers were mindful of what AE in its broader scope does for the AE identified student even though the student is not always available to learn. The themes that emerged in the analysis showed an emphasis

on AE as a haven for teachers to make a difference with students for their future by nurturing them and encouraging them to want to learn for life.

### **Theme 1: AE Setting as a Safe Haven for Teaching and Learning**

Among the focus group discussions about Alternative Education, social justice, and responsibility was the AE teachers' concern that students be able to learn in the AE environment. They shared that students needed to recognize and understand how to learn, what equity and equality are in the world, and how they, the students, are accepted and empathized with as they are figuring out life. Discussions in the focus groups provided insight into how AE English teachers presented practical lessons about equality and equity, as seen in the quotation below:

I like to show the kids, when they feel that things aren't just or aren't equitable, how far we've come and how far we have to go. That once when you're in it [life] and when they're in, they just are having trouble seeing it [life].

Another example shares a story explains how one of the AE teachers sees how the playing field needs to be leveled so that AE identified students have a chance at being successful:

You can't tell fish to climb a tree. It's a different way of approaching and reaching the students where they're at, not necessarily where the students always say they need to be because school--it's not always the highest-level priority or thing that our kids have to deal with. And it's just presenting the same level of education in a different way, hence the alternative piece. And I think throughout. Communities can't speak for everybody. I think that's where that misnomer, the misconception of what we do, is misunderstood.

### **Theme 2: AE Teacher Engagement with their Craft**

AE English teachers presented examples of how they engage in their craft using content and curricula that they develop or modify to benefit their students. These teachers work on different timeframes from the traditional schools depending on a student's needs to leave school. One AE English teacher referred to this as the “ebb and flow of the Alternative Education setting” and the “ability to be flexible and realize you may not get to everything in the curriculum” (Participant # 6). These teachers have to winnow down the curriculum to provide the basics of what the AE identified students need to be successful academic students in the limited amount of time available for them to learn. However, AE English teachers also feel the urgency of preparing the students for what happens after school is over. Thus, as one participant shared:

I want them to be ready for adulthood, to step out into the world, so I try to give them as many tools as possible, including talking to them about if they need to get paperwork like a birth certificate [or] Social Security [card]. They don't leave my classroom without a resume, and just little things like that I do a lot of building toward adulthood so that way they can be independent. (Participant # 4)

#### **Authentic Teaching Using Relevant Connections for Curricula and Life**

AE teachers expressed the need to provide practical skills to their students, and the teachers also emphasized the importance of students learning from literature from authors who students resonate with. The following quotation illustrates how an AE English teacher ties in the teaching of the novel *Night* to a visit to the Holocaust Museum for historical context, which then provides a point for reengaging the students in understanding the “bigger picture” of life. The goal is to provide an experience that

students see as authentic or relevant and makes sense to the students. As shared by this participant:

I take them to the United States Holocaust Museum in DC. And when they see, I don't know if you've been there, but then they see. The big bin of shoes and combs and brushes and scissors that were taken away from the victims. And then that while we're reading *Night*, it has to happen simultaneously. They start to understand a little bit--I can't use the word donate or charity because many of them are on some kind of program, some charitable program. Many of my students are so, I don't take it from there--you know, there are people worse off than you, that's not the point. The point is to introduce that humanity back into the program and see--get them out of their own heads. So that they see what is the bigger picture because I know they don't read the news. They don't watch the news. They don't care about the news. But they're reengaged. They are actually engaging with life once they graduate where they haven't before. So, yeah, that's what I try to do [provide] experiential [opportunities]. Everything right now is going to be, you know, through experience. (Participant # 6)

Other examples presented by the AE English teachers suggest that adulthood comes fast, and the students need practical life skills. The development of curricula that addresses students' practical needs can look like the example shared by Participant # 2:

We used to focus on preparing for the next step in their lives and helping them be resourceful. Learning how to research properly and for the right information for what they need. Whether that is colleges that they seek to attend or whether that is opening their minds as well, you know to, what is there that I can do in the future,

that I may be passionate about--that I will like. I mean, who has ever thought about becoming a surveyor, or a train conductor, or a farrier? You know that these are careers that make a great living and are alternatives to colleges and universities, and so, oftentimes these, you know, internships, apprenticeships that pay for your education [are] helping them to know how to research properly, navigate through this jungle of information that's out there, and we actually brought people from outside [of the school] who had been in industry and who helped the kids to develop interviewing skills and together with them we helped them in public speaking and feeling confident--just preparing them for the next step and opening their minds to what is out there.

From another participant:

For seniors, it's all about real-world skills, getting them to introspect--look within themselves. I think yesterday I mentioned how we study what makes a good person through Ben Franklin's idea of rationalism. And then help them develop a work ethic. So, on the first day, I give them their final exam and every single assignment that is due by the time graduation is supposed to come around the corner. That builds accountability. Time management, all those different skills. So, I try and teach them that your character is everything. (Participant # 9)

### **Curriculum Development as a Path Forward for Students' Preparation for Life**

AE English teachers spend time creating curricula with which student can connect. From surveying students at the end of a course to building relationships that engage students in discussions on what is important to them, these teachers fine-tune their curriculum frequently to meet the needs of the students. Lessons that involve the

students, teachers, and even support staff can assist students in learning to cope with issues they may face. AE English teachers take the time to guide students in learning to be resilient and prepared for being a part of society once they have completed school. While English curriculum requirements are directed from the Department of Education and school divisions where AE is involved, there are opportunities to provide life skills lessons to enhance and support students' learning and understanding that learning does not end when school does. For example:

The more important aspect of Alternative Education is that the students I'm getting into my classroom lack many of the-- we'll call them soft skills that many of their peers have. Things like executive functioning skills, being able to be resilient, social, emotional learning skills, and so integrating those executive functioning skill development aspects into the English classroom, I think is really important. (Participant #3)

Students' ability to learn when life challenges are blocking their accessibility is one of the issues that AE English teachers see when teaching students who are struggling to be in school and are not functioning academically. With a finite amount of time to prepare a student for completing school, what the teachers use for curriculum work is what appeals to the students. As suggested by one participant:

finding relevant materials that appeal to them. I know that we can't be driven by testing, and you know, often, these students have been beaten down with it. At the same time, these kids are often repeating classes, and often I see kids who were three points away from graduating, being done, and being able to move on to the things they want to do. (Participant #8)

Another participant elaborates further on engaging the disengaged student through the example below:

I see that the students are resilient, and they do want to learn. They do much, much better when we're meeting their social-emotional needs. So that's something that we do with that team teaching model. So, when I see that they're [students] more receptive... their brain kind of expands, and they're able to produce more and more high quality. In this case, writing. (Participant # 1)

AE English teachers' overall engagement with craft and students and authenticity

At the most basic level, AE English teachers take existing curricula and re-design them to create lessons that permit students to feel successful in learning within the AE framework. They build their coursework to match the needs of the students so that they feel comfortable learning from their mistakes and successes. For example, a participant developed a lesson that showed historical figures as vulnerable individuals, which in turn, showed students that others, even people that society considers significant, had had similar struggles and experiences in their lives:

[For] Black History Month, we were talking about there was an article written by Frederick Douglass 20 years after Abraham Lincoln's death. He was saying we should not be putting Lincoln up on a pedestal, that he was some--you know, superhero that did everything all the time, right. He made mistakes, and Douglass brought up mistakes that Lincoln made, and he [Douglass] said, but you know he is trying to understand. He is trying to learn. And with that framework, we are looking at a world that sometimes seems to have gone mad. You know, we are trying to be human for others' sake to understand why things have gone badly.

You know why? Why bad things happen to good people? And it's not fair but to deal with how we can be human and sympathetic to everyone out there.

(Participant #7)

On any given day, the AE English teacher can be expected to function as a mentor, emotional support, guidance counselor, and surrogate guardian, among other things. Traditionally, in public school settings, these roles are not under the purview of English teachers or teachers in other content areas; however, the empathetic AE English teacher takes on all these roles depending on what their students need to be able to access learning. AE teachers may need to make daily transitions from one role to the next as their engagement with students depends on their student's ability to learn at that moment. To engage students, these teachers must be able to adjust quickly to change as determined by a student's readiness or availability to learn. In the focus groups, several participants shared that they check in with students to assess how they are when they arrive at the class. This ability to quickly assess students' individual needs is almost second nature to these teachers. The challenge for AE English teachers is determining if a student will be ready to access curricula or if another option is needed to engage a student and bring them to the point of being able to function in the class. In reference to the previous statement, these teachers do not have specialized training to assess all aspects of a student at a moment's notice.

Still, AE English teachers try to determine what their students need to be successful in learning at that moment. This sense of obligation and responsibility that the teachers project sets them apart from teachers in the general education setting. AE English teachers consider all aspects of an AE identified student's education valuable.

These teachers continually work to engage their students by showing their commitment to them through crafting curricula, building relationships, and letting the students know why they teach in AE and what matters, which is what teachers and students value (Gibbs, 2016).

### **AE Teacher Engagement with their Students**

AE teachers take time to learn about their students and find ways to assist them in learning to be independent. From teachers sharing their own stories of becoming adults to letting the students know that they are not alone and that there are resources in the community to assist them when they struggle. Several of the AE English teachers continue to provide support to students once they complete school. In one instance, Participant # 4 explains to students:

That adulthood comes at you real hard, and I reiterate that a lot. I teach mostly seniors, so I do. They leave my class with a resume. They can e-mail me whenever they want if I need to check their résumé or if they need to update the resume after high school. I tell them that over and over again. You know where I am, so I will help you fix your resume. We do a mock interview. Mock panel interviews because those are the most uncomfortable, and we talk about how to try and relate.

As the teachers work to prepare the students for life beyond school, they are now assisting students in juggling completion of school and the reality of functioning as a member of society and learning to live and work outside of school. Other questions that AE English teachers work with students on include, how do I negotiate rent? How do I

apply and interview for a job? How and why do I need to make a plan to fall back on when times are tough? Participant # 4 explains further that life can be complicated:

I actually am a little more blunt when it comes to life after high school. I tell them that adulthood comes at you real hard. When you're trying to find a place to rent, how to triangulate and find a way to negotiate a rent? The other thing--life happens. I prepare them for all these little details. As far as life after school goes, I tell them a little bit about like what my early adulthood was like, including when I was homeless. So, I let them know that it can be hard and extremely challenging and so again, when it comes to our research project at the end of the school year. It has everything to do with making a plan and having a plan to fall back on [for] themselves, and or they e-mail it to their personal addresses, e-mail addresses so that they can always come back to it. Because, again, like adult life being hard, things happen, and I want them to be able to have a plan to go back to get back on their feet.

### **Theme 3: AE English Teachers' Engagement with Students as Social Justice**

#### **Leaders**

Throughout this study, the focus group participants, AE English teachers, have been open to discussing why they are a part of the teaching culture of AE, and they have discussed teaching students to understand and embrace how and what they learn. AE English teachers in this study described their work with minimal use of the phrases *social justice* (SJ) and *social responsibility* (SR) except when directly asked a question about SJ and SR. These teachers provided examples of how they offer students opportunities to learn about social justice through empathy for their peers and for members of their

community who are different. They demonstrated how they built relationships with the students and verbalized how they engaged them in learning about the nature of consequences in life after school, as expressed in the statement below:

They know they can have an impact if they choose to. And the biggest thing I try and reinforce is every choice has a consequence, good or bad, and I try and help them realize it's not just on them. It can affect others around them. (Participant # 9)

### **AE English Teachers, Empathy, and Critical Theory (CT)**

Adapting curricula is part of what these teachers do daily. What they do beyond crafting curriculum to engage students lies in the AE English teachers understanding what AE identified students are facing beyond the school day and what is impeding their ability to function and learn in school.

However, the existing research does not address a gap in the research literature on AE English teachers and what they specifically do as social justice leaders. For this study, Critical theory was a lens for focusing research on ascertaining the engagement of Alternative Education English teachers in assisting students in understanding what social responsibility involves and what social justice means to them. To support students in learning for life, AE English teachers adapt curricula for students to access more easily. These teachers explain that there are times when events outside of the school day impact students, affecting their ability to access curricula. In instances of this nature, the AE English teachers are the buffer and the bridge as they assess students' needs and craft lessons that students are willing to engage in, as demonstrated by the quotations here from AE English teachers:

We can provide truly what those students need to be successful. Not that they can't be successful. They're all kids, and mistakes are made, lessons are learned, whether they're here for disciplinary action or just because they need a different instructional approach. (Participant #7)

Another teacher shared the students need to be ready for the realities of adulthood.

I want them to be ready for adulthood, to step out into the world. So, I try to give them as many tools as possible, including talking to them about if they need to get their paperwork, like a birth certificate, Social Security [card]; I teach them about going to a Public Library and getting that process started. They don't leave my classroom without a resume. And just little things like that, I do a lot of building toward adulthood so that way they can be independent. (Participant #4)

AE English teachers are instinctively empathetic advocates for their students. These English teachers engage students in learning how to learn and assist them in seeing opportunities to understand what social responsibility is for themselves. These teachers also recognize the urgency of preparing AE identified students for what comes next and, in doing so, assist students in making real-world connections with the concepts of social responsibility and social justice. For students who are preparing to leave school, AE English teachers find a way to connect students to what comes next:

My kids come with senioritis hard, or they are done. They think they've done it. They think they've learned; they think they've grown, and the entire English, well, curriculum that I give them is to make them realize that who they are now is not going to be the same person they are five to ten years down the road. So, they write letters to their future grandchildren, and I try and engrain in them that what

you do when the coach is watching doesn't define you. It's what you do when his back's turned. (Participant #9)

### **AE English Teachers as Leaders, Advocates, Mentors, and Beyond**

The literature on transformative teaching comes into focus in this area as the focus group discussions shed light on how AE English teachers are social justice leaders who engage the whole student. The phrase, “You have to be able to reach them to teach them,” sums up what these teachers do as they take on a wide variety of roles to get to the point of being able to teach the AE identified students. Addressing other issues that impede students' ability to access the curriculum has to happen before engaging them (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). Teaching AE identified students becomes the challenge for AE teachers as they decipher what the students need and then build learning opportunities for these students using authentic curricula, creating bridges to learning, and building supportive relationships (Gibbs, 2016; Johnson, 2000; Theoharis, 2008). Participant # 5 explains this process in more detail:

I do have a pretty big focus in my classroom on trying to build up those social-emotional skills that were mentioned before. Because just knowing that from a kind of holistic perspective, if our students are able to develop healthy, supportive interpersonal relationships with people and their families and their communities at their workplaces, that's going to improve their fulfillment, chances of success, their healthiness, all throughout their lives. And that really supports and is [the] foundation of anything else that they might hope to achieve. So, I really do place a high priority on those skills. And in the English classroom, we've talked a lot already about the importance of research skills and those really practical research

and organizational skills that it takes to do things like search for jobs online and apply for those jobs. To look for information about insurance or transportation, things that, you know, as students are kind of thrust into this more independent chapter of their lives, they're going to need to know how to find and navigate and comprehend that information. So, trying to build in opportunities and projects and reading texts for us to explore those types of media, I think, is really important.

Through their dedication and sense of responsibility, AE English teachers shared their concerns for the AE identified students. In the focus group discussions, these teachers expressed a wide array of thoughts on issues such as social-emotional learning, mental health needs, motivation to learn, motivation to be ready for the future, and even motivation to apply what they have learned to real-world experiences. While AE English teachers are resilient and flexible, they also expressed the importance of preparing their students to be as resilient as possible and ready for whatever life presents them.

#### **Theme 4: Reflections from AE English Teachers**

AE English teachers in this study expressed the need to teach students about life's fairness or lack of it. Participant # 6 explains, "I like to show the kids when they feel that things aren't just or aren't equitable, how far we've come and how far we have to go. That once you're in it [life] and when they're in it [life], they just are having trouble seeing it [life]."

AE English teachers also shared that they wanted to provide historical context for students to understand what happened in the past can affect a student's understanding of the present using social justice issues. Participant # 8 shares that:

Fairness, I think, is an incredible tool—a great way to get to the curriculum and the alternative classroom. You know, if your job is to get kids to speak publicly or to write--all kids. And I think particularly some of the kids that I had are about fairness. You know, the most common thing you'll hear a kid complain about is that's not fair, and one of the resources I used this year was the book *Lies My Teacher Told Me: [Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong]* by James W. Loewen, [which] put it into kids minds to generate discussion of things that were or are untrue that they've been taught, and you know to tell a kid that in 1936, a quarter of a million Americans were deported to a country they've never been to because they were brown. And why don't we teach that? What do you think it is that makes people have these racist feelings? And man, you step back. You have classroom discussion now because you've come at it through the angle of why are people unfair to others. You want to get them to read well. Let them know that, you know, 115 years ago today, a young man was lynched about three blocks from here. Here's an account of the alleged crime. They're [the students are] all about it. They want to understand. Coming from equity, justice. Those are things that they have a lot of experience with or a lot of experience not experiencing. And as far as the angle of that question of what it is, what it's, what is its importance to me, it's my inspiration. My inspiration for working with kids was to make sure that all kids had a fair shake. And that's why the alternative school setting is so important.

AE English teachers shared their frustrations with experiences that affected their ability to teach content they thought was relevant to students. Participant # 9 says about teaching a novel that a parent challenged:

My first year, I taught *Be More Chill* [by Ned Vizzini], and it was contested by another parent. Yeah, the material, it was out there, but the kids could relate with it. It's skip class, smoke marijuana, and hook up with a girl. Oh yeah, that happened, but that happens in real life too. I made it out, but for you to have to create a universal permission slip for all parents with an option for an alternative because it does shield the kids from maybe something they can't relate with.

One of the AE English teachers shared their need to be an advocate and give students hope:

On a daily basis, I would always begin by trying to connect with the students. These are students who often had never had any kind of positive connection in the schools, and so I would seek to, you know, check in with them. How are things? What's going on? Is there anything new and you know, be real with them. Challenges I may face to develop that relationship that they haven't had; I also would take time to try to connect the students with the curriculum and in ways that are relevant to them, so not going with the recommended resource that gets you to, you know, to the curriculum, perhaps finding ways that they find relevant materials that appeal to them. And, you know, I get the whole idea of we can't be driven by testing. Often these students have been beaten down with it at the same time, though, these kids are often repeating classes, and often I saw kids who were three points away from graduating--being done and being able to move on to

the things they wanted to do. So, I spent time just dissecting what it is you missed. What you have to have--this is important because it makes you smarter. This [learning] is important because it gets you out. And if there's ever a time for drilling, familiarizing the kids with that requirement that's preventing them from being free. I felt it was important, and I would try to emphasize that, and also, I guess I would try to infuse into them some of the things I'd hope that just because you don't fit in the environment doesn't make you a failure. There are all kinds of fascinating ways to live a life that has nothing to do with these particular skills and gives them hope. Kind of, you know, do you know that these people will start at \$19 an hour and train you, and [you'll have] full benefits, and it's nearby, and a lot of these kids need help believing in themselves. So, did I get that all in every day? No, but I would try to infuse those things into my day.

### **AE English Teachers' Awareness of Misconceptions and their Teaching in this Environment**

AE English teachers are aware that Alternative Education is misunderstood in that the layperson who hears AE assumes that students who attend the programs are all discipline problems; however, this is not always the case. As shared by author Tesha Robinson, "Alternative Education should be framed not as a last resort for 'bad' students but as a way to provide positive, intentional support" (2021, Reimagining Alternative Education, subtitle). AE teachers know first-hand the stigma associated with AE and still choose to stay in this arena. These teachers see the need to support the students who find their way to these programs and schools, which typically have small student-to-teacher ratios and allow teachers and students to engage in teaching and learning together. AE

English teachers empathize with, and support AE identified students who struggle with learning due to issues that can impact their lives beyond the classroom. While being empathetic, AE English teachers provide a conduit to other resources, such as social workers and community outreach programs these students may need (Baker, 2021). A participant reflected on how teachers as a group can provide support for students who need that assistance:

Viewing students through an asset-based lens, you know, having kind of a paradigm of 'Okay. Wow, you know this!' This student is capable; they have talents, they are able to succeed if they get the support they need. You know, if we see students that way, then that'll change the way that we [teachers] behave, you know, working with them and making it much more likely that we'll do what we need to do to support that student and help them succeed. (Participant #5)

#### **Theme 5: Equity, Social Justice, Social Responsibility, Authentic**

AE English teachers see the significance of teaching students about social justice and being socially responsible. The AE English teachers use the English curriculum to engage the students in learning how to learn and making connections between the classroom and life. Below are examples of a lesson using a novel and another which engages students in giving back to the community. The goal is to expand students' learning by drawing parallels between past, present and future events, which tie social justice and social responsibility into students' understanding of what is happening in the world. They also put the students in situations where they can see what is happening around them beyond the classroom and decide on what they potentially can do as individuals and as members of society. Two participants shared their reflections on

lessons they provide their students and demonstrate how they try to engage students in understanding events and their context in social justice and social responsibility.

This first quote is from an AE teacher using a novel and field trip to tie in students to social justice and social responsibility from a historical viewpoint to current events and drawing comparisons between past and present events:

There are people worse off than you [but] that's not the point. The point is to introduce again, to introduce that humanity back into the program and get them out of their own heads so that they see life once they graduate where they haven't before. Right now, everything is going to be, you know, through experience.

This second quote is from an AE teacher who used direct life experiences to teach social justice and social responsibility through students physically engaged in giving back to a community charity:

I connected the students with a local charity that some of them had already used. Anyway, I think a great way to teach social responsibility is to get socially responsible people in front of your kids and to model it. And by making that connection with some of these people. I know the kids benefited in the form of warm jackets—groceries for their kids or their baby. But I also know two of the students ended up working, you know, their first job with this organization whose purpose was to improve the society of the town. So, again, kind of building those opportunities. To hear from community leaders and to familiarize kids with the law, which you know the laws of our society, gives them a better idea of how to live a socially responsible life too.

In both examples, teachers engaged students in learning about and understanding different facets of social justice and responsibility. By teaching AE identified students how to engage in their experiences, these teachers prepare AE identified students for life after school, which includes them building connections between past, present and future knowledge that the students are interested in learning about and can engage with to understand their pending responsibilities in life better.

AE teachers also shared that they believed it was essential to teach students about responsibility and encourage them to learn about and understand the world around them.

This AE English teacher explained the process in their classroom:

I foster--try to cultivate or foster a learning environment that is fair, equitable that it has this positive social connection, and that embraces all the cultures and the diverse backgrounds that are represented in the classroom, and I try to encourage. I think I encourage, or I reinforce, also, accountability, meaning--to the individual student in fulfilling, that basically what a civic duty is and that their actions are ultimately going to affect, whether in a negative way or a positive way, the whole society.

### **AE English Teachers and Social Justice**

When Alternative Education English teachers engage in their work, they may not necessarily reflect on it as social justice work, yet their work can be considered as such. In the focus groups for this study, social justice was seen as providing context for students to learn about equity versus equal in life, teaching them to use their voices to express themselves. The AE English teachers also said they felt it was their responsibility

to be their advocate and support while preparing to maneuver through life and work as an adult. As shared by one focus group participant:

I do love what we do because I'm a teacher, a mentor, a coach, and a counselor on the same day. I feel like I have the opportunity to fill the void in the students' lives when they need it most, and most of all, I get to be their advocate. (Participant #9)

As revealed in the focus groups, AE English teachers' dedication to working with AE identified students is evident. As social justice leaders, these individuals take time to teach students the subtle nuances between *equity* and *equal* in life using literature and life experiences to engage students in understanding social justice for themselves. Using practical experiences like field trips to museums, AE English teachers are not telling students what to think but showing students how to use what they have learned throughout their school career to understand the past and inform their present. AE English teachers guide their students in learning about social justice and using the SJ lens to see the world as it relates to them. Whether using material from the Civil War/Reconstruction era of American history or the holocaust era of World War II, these teachers express the need to engender empathy in their students. As explained by one participant:

Each of us here you know, as a human being, as a member of you know the global society develop our sense of empathy. I think it's something that some people naturally, have--a great sense of empathy and curiosity about others who might lead lives different from their own. Or, you know, who might have a greater awareness of people or groups who may be experiencing challenges. So, I think that one of the important ways that I address this in the classroom would be like engaging students with reading texts or in group discussions, even if it's casual,

like kind of like the quote of the day that another participant mentioned, even just finding little everyday ways like this to help students to become more aware of, what life looks like for other people and ways that we can all come together and collaborate to make the world a better place for everybody. right now is going to be, you know, through experience. (Participant #5)

This dedication to serving AE identified students shows AE English teachers value what they do. As explained by another researcher, "What we choose to teach, how we interact with students, and how we treat families — all of it plays a crucial role in how children come to see the world and how they engage with it" (Baker, 2020, para. 6). As shared by other focus group participants:

What I approach every day is how do I make sure that these alternative students receive the same education that my children receive. And that's sort of my *modus operandi* to make sure that they are as well educated as those that are not in the Alternative Education setting. (Participant #3)

I was often marginalized and segregated from the rest of the population. I was often reminded how I couldn't do things because of my English or my lack of English, and I made it my life, basically, goal to ensure that nobody else out there goes through the same experience in school. I made it a goal to ensure that I could advocate and give a voice to those students that don't have one. (Participant #1)

### **AE English Teachers Discussing Equity and Equality**

AE English teachers have an opportunity to address issues of social justice in their classes. Participants in the study addressed the concern that students do not necessarily understand what *equity* and *equal* mean. During a lesson, they hear students say that

“things aren't just or aren't equitable” (Participant #6). To clarify students’ understanding of the two, AE English teachers develop curricula that take into account the need to provide a context for these two words. One participant gave a specific example about this topic. In brief, the example below is that of a teacher instructing a diverse group of students:

There’s a teacher standing in front of his students. His students are a bird, a monkey, a penguin, an elephant, a fish in a fishbowl, a seal, and a dog. The teacher asked everybody to take the same exam [which is] ‘Please climb the tree.’ It is just saying everything that needs to be said. How can we in education think we can make everything the same? How can the penguin climb the tree as well as the monkey or the fish in the bowl? We need to pick up our students where they are. The goal of education is to make them successful participants in our communities in this world and give them a place. Help them to find a place that they can thrive in and make positive contributions in this world and be who they are. How do they think for themselves? We need to pick them up either educationally or emotionally or whichever way where they are. We can't expect an elephant to climb a tree as well as a monkey. (Participant #2)

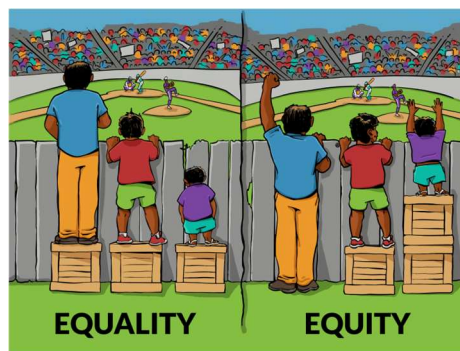
Another participant reflected on her research regarding social justice, equity, and equality in education. This participant suggested that we have to look within ourselves and determine our biases, identify them, and make an effort to negate them. Further, it is necessary to review curricula to find materials representative of student populations and use them to enhance student learning. This participant’s comments were also about teachers needing a growth mindset and a belief that students can thrive and succeed in

school and life. The concern of this participant is that teachers who work with special populations, such as Alternative Education, cannot meet their students' needs. These teachers may not know how to scaffold lessons, differentiate instruction, or identify and use appropriate strategies to assist students in learning. Figure 4, as the example, is shared by this participant to explain their perception of equity and equality is below:

The illustration [is] that of a baseball game, and there's a fence, and you have a tall man, a boy, and then a toddler, and they're all standing on the same size little [box]. And, of course, the tall man could see it. The second child could just see it, but then you have the smaller [child] who can't see the baseball game at all. And that is *equality* because they're all receiving the same exact accommodation in this case. But that's not *equity* because you still have students that cannot see the baseball game. (Participant #1)

#### Figure 4

*Illustrating Equality VS Equity*



*Note:* Angus Maguire created the rendition of this illustration for Interaction Institute for Social Change on January 13, 2016. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

### **Analysis and Synthesis of Findings**

In considering how and why English teachers act as social justice leaders in alternative education programs, there is an understanding among them of their connectedness and engagement to their craft and with students while preparing them for life after high school as socially responsible individuals. Discovering why AE English teachers take on the responsibility for their students while teaching them to understand societal issues becomes a part of this research. AE English teachers share their sense of obligation to ensure these students develop the necessary skills they are unable to learn due to the AE identified students' inability to access learning.

Exploring how AE English teachers see engagement, these teachers viewed their work with curriculum and students, their role, why it is necessary for their students, and why they choose to be in AE. They do not talk about themselves as leaders but as teachers trying to make a difference for students using English as the means to understand that what students learn matters for life after school. In developing curricula for these students, AE English teachers try to impart through literature and literacy skills (reading, writing, and speaking) that AE identified students need and can relate to. These teachers also use practical lessons in life skills to prepare them to be able to understand that fairness and equity are not readily come by and that they need to be able to function even when life is not fair. As the teachers present it in these focus groups, social responsibility is teaching the students how to cope with life and be a part of society. AE is the setting where these teachers take on many roles and act as guides and leaders without saying they are leaders. Yet these AE English teachers provide leadership for AE identified students who, they believe, need to understand the connections between what

they learn in school and being authentic, which gets through to the students. Providing authentic or real-world experiences is what students will understand and embrace. Thus, these teachers lead through instruction, authentic and transformative pedagogy, and using a social justice lens to guide students in learning that is relevant to them.

### **Summary**

The experiences of the Alternative Education English teachers in this study were rich with information on what they do as teachers and how they see their role as they craft their work in AE while working with AE identified students. The work by the AE English teachers changes to meet the needs of the students who need something different. Creating curriculum, teaching life skills, and defining social justice and responsibility in a fashion that AE identified students can understand and become the lenses through which these teachers lead whether they realize that is what they are doing or not. The data from this research shows that English teachers play an essential role in student learning. However, in AE, the English teachers provide students in these programs and schools with guidance and the tools to continue developing as life-long learners beyond their completion of school.

Alternative Education programs and schools continue to change and adapt as they provide learning environments that assist students in their growth. AE English teachers continue to follow their calling to teach AE identified students to learn *how to learn* to thrive while trying to be a part of society.

## CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the findings from this study concerning Alternative Education English teachers as they engage with their craft and with students in preparation for life after completing school. This chapter offers insights into AE English teachers' engagement in instruction and as Social Justice leaders. While SJ, as a theme, is evident in the focus group discussions, it is strengthened by supporting ideas from critical theory (CT) with the premise that marginalized students can grow through an understanding of literature and literacy as they inform their current context. To clarify, philosophically, CT indicates that AE English teachers' work assists students in understanding their future role in life as they become socially responsible members of society (Beattie, 2003).

In addition to inclusion in the discussions, CT and social justice (SJ) are themes used to support the teachers' work, are embedded in a school's overall community, and are part of a holistic framework for teachers and students (Beattie, 2003). The AE English teachers in this study included discussions about their work which incorporates developing English curricula and shows an interconnectedness of ways in which beliefs and ideas about society are presented to students who are disengaged from learning and need re-engagement in education. Furthermore, this chapter provides insights and reflections as well as this researcher's conclusions and recommendations for future research on Alternative Education English teachers.

### **The Aim of the Study**

This qualitative study aimed to explore how AE English teachers engage in their craft and as social justice leaders in AE programs or schools while engaging students in preparing to become socially responsible in life after completing school.

### **Proposed Solution**

There is a need to build teacher preparedness programs that support AE English teachers, both novice and veteran, in the work they do. In addition, these teachers need to be able to nurture potential English teachers for future roles in AE English, as there can be burnout and turnover among teachers currently serving in AE settings (Petty et al., 2012).

The existing literature on teacher development discusses the evolution and implementation of teacher training programs that equip teachers to function in their chosen content area and career. There are also specific courses for teachers who wish to work in areas of high need, including special education and English as a Second Language. There needs to be a provision for teacher training in preparation for individuals who want to teach in Alternative Education. AE English teachers are left to their own devices to train themselves and piece together what they need to do their work, including adapting textbook materials, tying them in with current literature, and developing meaningful and up-to-date curricula for their courses.

Specific to Virginia, where this study was implemented, there are no teacher preparation courses for those who choose to work in AE programs and schools. For AE English teachers to have the tools they need to prepare for their work in this arena, they need to have similar support as those who teach in other high needs areas.

### **Evidence that Supports the Solution**

In this study, AE English teachers were asked about their engagement in their craft and with students. They described their work and how they create engaging and meaningful learning for their students and themselves (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). There is a gap in the research literature regarding AE English teachers' work as social justice leaders and how they engage students. Moreover, there is a need to recognize how these teachers work in the AE arena as leaders (Burns & Miller, 2017). Alternative Education English teachers and students are visible to each other in their academic environment. However, AE, in general, can be seen as a place to put students; however, ineffective teachers may be placed in AE, away from a traditional school setting (Kodero et al., 2011). The AE English teachers in this study recognized and identified that the students they work with need extra engagement effort to prepare them for what comes next after finishing school. AE English teachers instinctively see what is happening with their students, who, otherwise, are considered challenging. These teachers make a path forward for and with the students they teach. Providing AE English teachers with additional teacher training opportunities and support staff who can help them bring students to a point of thriving would benefit the teachers and the students equally.

### **Potential Barriers and Obstacles to A Proposed Solution**

In Alternative Education, teacher turnover can affect the development and continuity of the programs and schools. This study's use of focus groups relied on access to all AE English teachers in a region. The data acquired from the study was self-reported by AE English teachers and provided their perceptions of what they do. Locating teachers for a study of this nature relies upon current information available about the programs

and schools. In addition, these programs and schools are not consistent in their format. Their program or school design adapts based on the needs of the school division and its students, and the AE English teachers must be able to adapt to changes that VDOE proposes for traditional schools. An example of how AE would need to adjust is through modifications to state sponsored standardized test requirements that all students in Virginia must take and pass (VDOE, 2017). If an area in English is changed to emphasize various adjustments in literature or writing standards, AE English teachers must adjust their curricula and content to meet the standards beyond what is prescribed for traditional English courses (Capper & Young, 2014; VDOE, n.d.-a). In addition to the fluctuation of AE programs and schools, teacher education programs and school divisions adjust their requirements for teacher certification. There are currently no certifications for AE teachers (VDOE, n.d.). Another hurdle is funding for teacher education programs and staff development, which can and do change from year to year depending on the needs of the state and the school divisions. In curricula, the Department of Education for Virginia (VDOE) sets the material to be covered in public schools. This material does change depending on what VDOE determines is needed to adjust what is to be taught in the public schools (VDOE, n.d.-a).

### **Evidence that Challenges the Solution**

There is a concern regarding teacher burnout and turnover in general education. This issue also exists in AE, which is much more impactful because of the smaller targeted staffing for these programs and schools. Further, the impact on the AE programs and schools can be seen in how challenges are addressed in hiring qualified teachers for

AE; it is possible that quality candidates may not be available to work in AE (Petty et al., 2012).

There are also inconsistencies between policy and regulations that affect AE instruction. For AE English teachers to be able to continue their work and provide a stable teaching and learning environment, they need to have clear policies and guidelines to follow. Where several different sets of policies and regulations can contradict each other from the leadership of school divisions, the state, and Federal departments of education, there are missed opportunities for clear support of successful teacher engagement in their work as they work with students (Capper & Young, 2014).

### **Implementation of the Proposed Solution(s)**

AE English teachers are affected by school and school division leadership. These teachers are invested in their careers and want to be able to engage in their work unfettered by outside issues, such as policy changes that affect their curricula and fear of budget cuts which affect their livelihood (Capper & Young, 2014). The AE English teachers who exist can reach out to English teachers in the general education setting and nurture potential AE English teachers who have somewhat similar ideals about supporting marginalized students in AE programs. While encouraging other potential AE English teachers, these teachers need to advocate for themselves and their work to provide a consistent teaching and learning environment. They also need to be a part of the solution and propose what they need to continue being successful in their arena. Support for AE English teachers needs to be provided to avoid teacher burnout, such as targeted instructional training for AE. With additional training and support from the leadership of

the school and school division, these teachers can grow and thrive as they work in an area they feel is rewarding (Petty et al., 2012).

### **Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solution**

The main stakeholders related to the solutions are the AE English teachers and school division administrators, who are responsible for directing the AE programs and schools. Secondly, there are support staff, which include social workers and mental health professionals, and guardians and parents of the students who support the AE English teachers in reaching the students to engage them in learning. Thirdly, there are community stakeholders, which include community organizations that offer support to the students and their families, such as charities, clinics, and social services departments, as well as community businesses. These stakeholders can also provide supports such as volunteering to assist teachers and students in creating community projects that benefit businesses, communities, and students.

### **AE English Teachers**

AE English teachers are a small group of individuals in small AE programs and schools. On average, the AE English teachers who participated in this study are part of AE programs and schools with two-person teams. The reason for this small number lies in the evidence provided by VDOE (2022) that AE programs and schools have small student-teacher ratios and are small by nature. Universities with teacher training programs must provide targeted training for AE English teachers due to their unique situation and the population they serve. School divisions must provide staff development specific to AE programs and schools. Additionally, to prepare for AE teachers leaving this

arena, these teachers need to nurture English teachers who can potentially step into AE to continue engaging students in learning.

### **Administrative Leadership**

The leadership of a school division and specifically AE programs and schools, need to work in conjunction with each other to support the AE English teachers and the AE identified students. In Virginia, policies and regulations, which are based on guidelines from VDOE, provide the scaffolding that supports teachers who support students. The leadership must be observant and proactive in keeping teaching staff in place at AE programs and schools. This vigilance includes being prepared to manage the budgetary needs of AE when it involves staffing and training. This support from leadership can make a difference in how successful AE can be on a local level if there is a clear goal in sight—providing teachers who can engage students in learning (Capper & Young, 2014).

### **Timeline for Implementation of the Solution**

The timeline for implementing the support needed for AE English teachers may be developed from school division and school-level administrators once a plan can be proposed and a budget approved for the provisions required. Action to provide funding for targeted training can take up to a year to approve. Once that occurs, school division administrators, AE school leadership, and AE teachers can work as a part of the school division and school level leadership teams to create what they determine to be the necessary training for AE to meet the needs of the students served. Training from teacher preparedness programs can vary from offering university credit hours in specific content to locally provided staff development with other stakeholders who can provide

specialized instruction. Examples of stakeholders who can provide staff development include social workers and mental health or substance use professionals who can give the current context for these issues and teach AE English teachers what to look for in their day-to-day interactions with students.

While this timeline is focused on training, it is fluid. It will also allow school division administrators to concentrate on the recruitment of potential candidates for AE English programs and schools to maintain teaching and learning engagement that is stable and consistent.

### **Evaluating the Outcome of Implementing the Solution**

The success of maintaining, supporting, and nurturing AE English teachers while using social justice to support students in AE programs and schools can be evaluated through climate surveys, staff and student records, and reports. The evaluations can also occur as part of a teacher training program courses and staff development with exit surveys. The results from the data collected from these sources can provide information to guide the process of supporting these teachers as leaders and in their work in preparing students for life after school.

### **Practical Implications**

AE English teachers and their programs and schools may benefit from this study. The value of this study lies in the rich data collected from AE English teachers whose voices were heard, and their stories told about their engagement as social justice leaders. Teachers who provide authentic learning for AE identified students in this arena through their crafting of curricula and engagement with students share how they see engagement in what they do. The information provided will add to the existing research on AE but

will be specific to AE English teachers, leadership, and engagement with students in preparation for their world.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The focus of this study was on AE English teachers in a small region in Virginia. However, this study could provide opportunities for other content areas to be researched. Regardless of the content area, social justice in AE is a theme that can be used for a similar study. Using focus groups for this research allows for rich data to be collected from a group with intimate knowledge of AE teaching and how their content area is affected by social justice or vice versa. In essence, the AE arena can benefit from other studies such as this to enhance future program and school staffing initiatives and create opportunities to explore how social justice can affect the overall work of AE teachers. This study also uncovered other potential areas for future research, including AE teacher burnout, retention of AE teachers and leaders, the stigma attached to AE, misplacement of ineffective teachers in AE, and hiring quality teachers who understand AE.

### **Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice**

Teaching and learning for AE English teachers is dynamic and multifaceted. Specifically, instruction and transformative teaching are part and parcel of these teachers' work. For example, through this study, AE English teachers shared how they develop content and curricula that help students understand social justice while being authentic and relevant to AE identified students. They provide students with opportunities to learn about social issues through literature, community projects, and how to be empathetic toward those different from themselves. Moreover, what AE English teachers do is dynamic and authentic learning, which, when combined with all other aspects of their

work in an AE English classroom, provides options for these teachers to show themselves as empathetic social justice leaders in the classroom.

In instruction, AE English teachers are tasked with engaging students in learning that affects them (Bush, 2014). AE English teachers are about guiding and influencing students who are still learning and developing their understanding of their world. With SJ as the common thread, AE English teachers make a concerted effort to design transformative, creative, and authentic instruction in developing AE English curricula. The AE English curricula developed by empathetic AE English teachers illustrate why these teachers are in the AE setting (Kotzé & Nel, 2017). The AE English teachers in this study consistently expressed the significance of being authentic or genuine with their students to reengage them in learning. In addition to being authentic with their students, these teachers continue to hone their craft in instruction to provide a path to success after completing school through AE. These AE English teachers engage and nurture their students while preparing them for their future and making meaningful change as socially responsible members of society. AE English teachers continue to guide and mentor students even after they complete school, acting as an anchor if or when students need assistance in life.

### **Summary of the Dissertation in Practice**

This study explored AE English teachers' engagement in their craft and with their students. AE English teachers in this study were found to be empathetic leaders who work in AE to make a difference with students attending these programs and schools. These teachers believed that teaching and learning must be authentic and relevant for their disengaged students to become engaged in learning.

Information from the participants in the study shed light on what drives the AE English teachers' engagement in their craft. For some participants in the study, it was about making connections between literature and current issues in the students' lives. For others, it was about providing a safe haven in which to learn and figure out life. Overall, the participants explained how they made learning work for the students in their classrooms and reflected on how they thought their work made a difference for and with their students.

In essence, AE English teachers were impacted by their need to authentically lead students to understand what it means to be socially responsible and understand that learning continues beyond completing school. These AE English teachers were explicit in their explanation of why they chose to be in AE. They see themselves as bridges to understanding what social justice means to each of their students. Additionally, AE English teachers believe in the necessity of teaching their students that there are connections between what they learn from English and literature about the past and the effect of what they discover in the present on their future life choices.

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*Appendix A: Bill of Rights for Research Participants*

As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.
2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.
3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.
4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.
5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.
6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.
7. To be told who will have access to information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.
8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research subject.
9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:
  - a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.
  - b. To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related treatment.

*Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol*

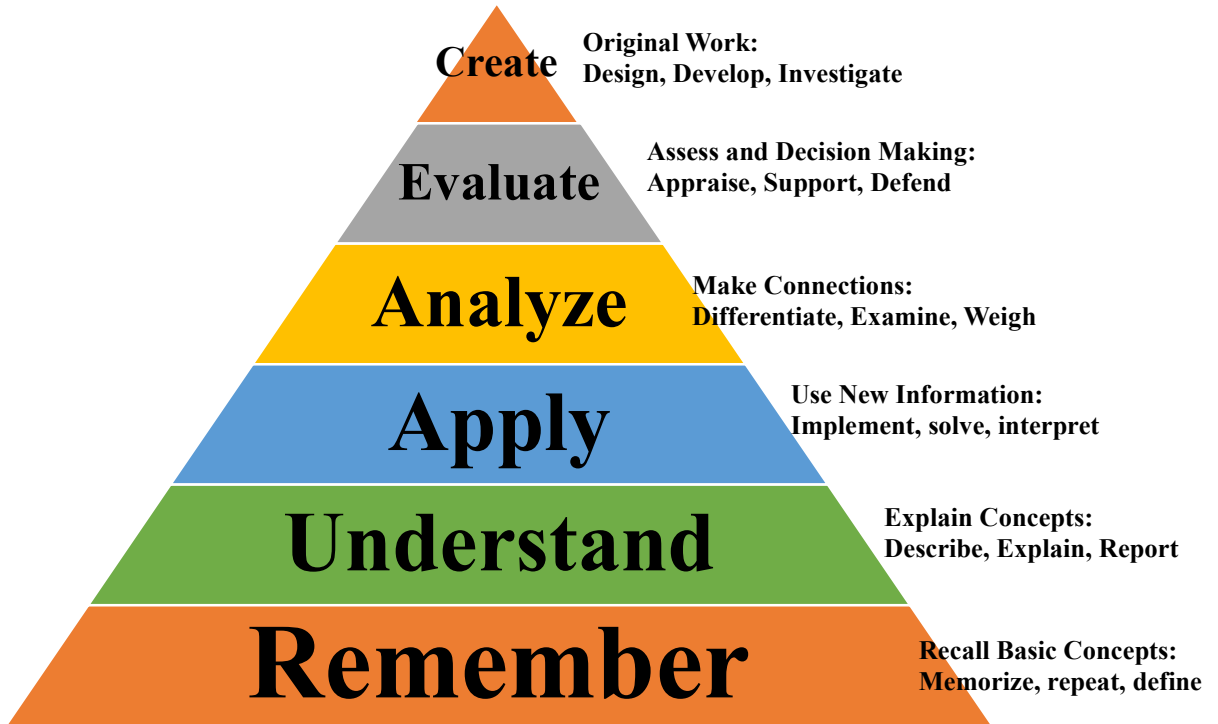
Date:

Participant:

I would like to thank you for agreeing to be a part of the focus group on English teachers as social justice leaders in alternative education programs (AEPs), engaging in their craft and preparing students for life aft high school as they learn to be socially responsible. For this research study, the exploration is on English teachers in AEPs and how they develop and use their craft weaving in social justice and teaching AEP students about social responsibility. Moreover, the purpose of this research explores how AEP English teachers' engage in their craft while making connections that are authentic and relate to teaching and learning that is relatable for them and their students.

I would like to remind you that any information collected for the study such as your comments and any observations made within the focus group will remain as confidential as possible recognizing that the group consists of individuals. I would ask that you read and sign the consent form before we start and if you feel the need to stop, take a break or clarify anything please feel free to do so. If you have any further questions or concerns at any point, you may contact me at [REDACTED]



*Appendix D: Revised Bloom's Taxonomy with Descriptors*

*Note:* Adapted from Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching Model of Bloom's Taxonomy, revised in 2001

## Appendix E: IRB Letter



Office of the Provost  
Research Compliance

DETERMINATION DATE:	06-Jun-2022
TO:	Sherri Simmons
FROM:	Social / Behavioral IRB
PROJECT TITLE:	Alternative Education: English Teacher Engagement with Their Craft and Students
REVIEW CATEGORY:	Exempt
RISK LEVEL:	Minimal Risk
SUBMISSION #:	2003077-01
SUBMISSION TYPE:	Initial Application
REVIEW METHOD:	Exempt Review
DETERMINATION:	Approved

Thank you for your Initial Application submission materials for this project. The following items were reviewed with this submission:

Creighton HS eForm

This project has been determined to be exempt from Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects as per 45 CFR 46.104 (d) 2.

1. All protocol amendments and changes must be submitted to the IRB and may not be implemented until approved by the IRB. Please use the modification form when submitting changes.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. Please include your project title and number in all correspondence with this Board.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained in Creighton University's IRB records.

*Appendix F: Phone Screener Checklist***Introduction**

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, a doctoral student conducting a study for a dissertation on Alternative Education: “English Teacher Engagement with Their Craft and Students.” Do you have a few minutes to answer several questions before becoming a participant in my study?

1. How many years of experience do you have teaching English in alternative education and what grade levels? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How are the classes structured (mixed grade levels or separate)?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Why did you become an English teacher in alternative education?  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Closing Statement**

\_\_\_\_\_, thank you for taking the time to answer the questions in preparation for participating in the focus groups. Based on our interaction by phone, are you interested in participating in the focus groups? \_\_\_\_\_. There will be two opportunities for your participation in the focus group sessions \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

Which date is convenient for your participation? \_\_\_\_\_.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. A reminder and an information letter will be sent via email several days before our session date. What is the best way to contact you? \_\_\_\_\_.

*Appendix G: Focus Group Questions*

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*List of Focus Group Questions*

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Why do you think Alternative Education exists?

What do you specifically do as an English teacher in your particular Alternative Education program?

What does teaching mean to you? Especially in your daily activities in the Alternative Education program and the English classroom?

In your experience, how do you see students' development in the Alternative Education English class?

What does preparing students for life after high school mean to you?

How do you address disengaged students in the classroom?

From your experiences in the alternative English classroom, what is important for students, such as 12th graders, to learn?

How do you communicate the importance of being motivated and empowered to students in the [AE] English classroom?

What does social responsibility mean to you in the Alternative Education English classroom?

What do equity and justice mean to you in the Alternative Education English classroom?

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*Appendix H: Information Letter to Participate in the Focus Group*

Date

Dear Participant,

You were chosen to participate in a Focus Group on “Alternative Education: English Teacher Engagement with Their Craft and Students.” The three focus groups will each consist of up to six alternative education English teachers who are currently teaching or retired from teaching. This study is voluntary, and you can withdraw from it at any time.

There is no risk in participating in this study. If mild emotional risks occur in the process of participation, you may indicate your concern to me. In addition, you can withdraw from the process and contact a doctor. All data will remain confidential and secured. The Focus Group will be conducted virtually via Zoom at a common time outside of the workday within a secured location of your choice. A pseudonym will be used for your name, school site, and district for the Focus Group. You will be asked to keep your video off and use the assigned pseudonym as your name on the Zoom session. In addition to participating in this study, your educational philosophy, beliefs, and values on how English teachers in alternative education engage with their craft and students will contribute to the literature on alternative education and its role in the larger educational arena. There is the possibility that this study will be published and shared as articles, in journals, and as a book. If there are questions about this study, you may contact me at [REDACTED] or my chair member, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] If you have questions about research participants’ rights, you may contact Creighton University’s Institutional Review Board [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Thank you for participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Sherri L Jones Simmons, M.A., M.S.Ed.  
Ed. D. Candidate  
Interdisciplinary Leadership  
Creighton University



