

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Alternative Schools, Leadership, and Resilience: Supporting the Leadership Practices and Preparation of Alternative School Leaders

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9hz894kv>

ISBN

9798189279294

Author

Munoz Daniels, Irma

Publication Date

2026-05-01

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Alternative Schools, Leadership, and Resilience: Supporting the Leadership Practices
and Preparation of Alternative School Leaders

By

Irma Muñoz Daniels

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Erin Murphy-Graham, Chair

Professor Özge Hacızadeoğlu

Professor Frank C. Worrell

Spring 2026

Alternative Schools, Leadership, and Resilience: Supporting the Leadership Practices
and Preparation of Alternative School Leaders

Copyright © 2026

By

Irma Muñoz Daniels

Abstract

Alternative Schools, Leadership, and Resilience: Supporting the Leadership Practices and Preparation of Alternative School Leaders

By

Irma Muñoz Daniels

Doctor of Education

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Erin Murphy-Graham, Chair

Alternative schools serve students who are underserved, excluded, or marginalized within traditional school settings. In California, close to 169,000 students attended alternative schools during the 2024–25 school year, with nearly 85% identifying as students of color. Despite a growing body of literature on effective alternative school design, insufficient attention has been paid to the leadership practices, challenges, and professional development needs of the principals who lead these schools. This qualitative single-case study examined the leadership practices of 16 current, former, or retired alternative school and systems leaders in the San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area, selected through purposeful sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a demographic questionnaire, and the administration of Individual and Collective Hope Scales. Four primary findings emerged. First, alternative school leaders engage in intentional relationship-building with students, staff, families, and communities as a foundational leadership practice. Second, they identify and dismantle structural, procedural, and cultural barriers to student access and success. Third, leaders navigate persistent systemic challenges, including institutional misunderstanding of alternative schools, the amplifying effects of small school size, and significant role overload. Fourth, leaders cultivate resilience and hope through shared moral purpose, relationship renewal, and participation in professional networks and mentorship communities. These findings carry implications for leadership preparation, district policy, and professional development. Alternative school leaders require a distinct and specialized skill set that general administrator preparation programs do not address. Formalized professional development, systemic recognition of alternative schools, and structured mentorship and networking opportunities are necessary to support leaders who enter alternative education.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation represents the culmination of years of study, reflection, and support from many people who have shaped my academic and personal journey.

A mis padres:

Gracias a mis padres, Antonio y Rebeca Muñoz, por enseñarme el valor del trabajo, la humildad y la educación. Con su amor y sacrificio me abrieron los caminos. Todo lo que soy se lo debo a ustedes.

To my husband, Brent Daniels:

Thank you for your patience, love, and belief in me. You have been my grounding force and my greatest cheerleader, reminding me to take care of myself and keep going when the path felt challenging.

To my sister, Cristina Muñoz Brown:

You are one of the reasons I have continued to pursue my education and grow in my career. I have always wanted to be a good role model for you, to show what is possible through perseverance, courage, and belief in yourself. Thank you for motivating me to keep moving forward.

To my advisor, Dr. Erin Murphy-Graham, and my dissertation committee members, Dr. Frank Worrell and Dr. Özge Hacıfazlıoğlu:

Thank you for your insight, encouragement, and thoughtful feedback, which deepened and strengthened this study. Your guidance challenged me to think deeply and stay true to the purpose of this work.

To the Leaders for Equity and Democracy (LEAD) program:

Thank you for taking a chance on me and for believing in my potential. Your encouragement and support made it possible for me to reach this milestone. I am deeply grateful for the time, care, and confidence you invested in me and in my journey.

To my cohort members:

Your collaboration, insight, and mutual encouragement sustained me through every stage of this process. The shared experiences of our doctoral journey make us family.

To all alternative school leaders and especially the participants in this study:

Your commitment to serving students who deserve to be seen, supported, and celebrated gives this work its purpose. This dissertation is dedicated to you and the hope you bring to your communities.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	i
List of Tables and Figures	iv
Chapter 1: Framing Alternative School Leadership	1
Research Questions	2
Problem Statement	2
Statement of Purpose	2
Research Context	3
Overview of Methodology	4
Definition of Key Terminology.....	4
Organization of the Dissertation	4
Chapter 2: Inclusion, Social Justice, and Resilience in Alternative School Leadership	6
Components of Effective Alternative Schools	6
The Evolution of Alternative Schools	7
Culture of Care	8
Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies	8
Definition of Success in Alternative School Settings.....	9
Social Justice Leadership in Schools.....	10
Definition of Social Justice Leadership.....	10
Academic Achievement and Social Justice Leadership.....	11
Professional Development of Social Justice Leaders	11
Social Justice Leadership Through a Critical Lens	12
School Leader Resilience	14
Critical Resilience	16
Conceptual Framework.....	17
Inclusive Educational Leadership Framework.....	18
Risk and Resilience Framework	18
Chapter Summary	21
Chapter 3: Methodology	22
Methodological Approach	22
Research Participants.....	22
Data Collection Process	25
Data Analysis Process	25
Validity and Reliability.....	26
Limitations of the Study	27
Researcher Positionality	28
Chapter Summary	28

Chapter 4: Practices of Alternative School Leaders: Building Relationships and Removing Barriers to Support Inclusion	30
Relationship-Building to Support Inclusion	30
Showing up: Establishing Leadership Visibility	30
Challenging the Maslow Trap: Cultivating Conditions for Learning	32
Fostering Belonging: Routines, Rituals, and Culture-Building	33
Flexibility and Removal of Barriers	35
Breaking and Rebuilding: Leading Flexible Program Design	35
Naming and Disrupting Inequity: Addressing Systemic Bias in Schools	36
Redefining Metrics: Legitimizing Non-Traditional Pathways and Definitions of Success	38
Chapter Summary	39
Chapter 5: Challenges Faced by Alternative School Leaders: Constraints, Tensions, and Systemic Invisibility	43
Constraints, Tensions, and Systemic Invisibility	43
When You Have Multiple Roles: Leader Capacity Overload	43
When No One Sees You: Invisibility and Misunderstandings of Alternative Schools	44
When a Pebble is a Boulder: Impact of Small Disruptions.....	45
Chapter Summary	46
Chapter 6: Cultivating Resilience and Hope: How Alternative School Leaders Demonstrate and Sustain Resilience in Practice	48
Cultivating Resilience and Hope as Alternative School Leaders	48
Hope in Context: Scale Results Among Alternative School Leaders	49
“I Find My People”: Relationship Renewal as Sources of Resilience and Hope ..	52
“Beautiful Orchestra”: Moral Purpose as Collective Meaning Making	53
“No One Gets a Master’s in Alternative Education”: Networks and Professional Communities as Foundations for Development and Support	55
Chapter Summary	57
Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion.....	60
Summary of Findings	61
Relationship-Building to Support Inclusion	61
Flexibility and Removal of Barriers	61
Constraints, Tensions, and Systemic Invisibility.....	61
Cultivating Resilience and Hope as Alternative School Leaders.....	62
Implications for Supporting the Practices and Preparation of Alternative School Leaders.....	64
Alternative School Leaders Require a Distinct and Specialized Skill Set.....	64
Formalized and Specialized Professional Development Is Necessary	65
Districts and State Policy Must Address Systemic Invisibility	66

Resilience and Hope Are Essential and Must Be Cultivated	66
Transferable Models for Inclusive Leadership Across All Settings	67
Limitations and Future Research	68
Summary and Conclusion.....	69
References	71
Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol	79
Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire	81
Appendix C: Hope Scales	84

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

[Table 1: Participant Demographics](#)

[Table 2: Findings and Sub-findings for Research Question #1](#)

[Table 3: Findings and Sub-findings for Research Question #2](#)

[Table 4: Individual Hope Scale Results](#)

[Table 5: Collective Hope Scale Results](#)

[Table 6: Findings and Sub-findings for Research Question #3](#)

Figures

[Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Alternative School Leadership](#)

[Figure 2: Theoretical Alignment of Alternative School Leadership Findings](#)

Chapter 1: Framing Alternative School Leadership

On a Monday morning, Mahalia slid into her seat just as her geometry teacher began passing out the weekly test. She had meant to study over the weekend, but between cooking dinner and caring for her younger siblings, she had not been able to open her book. Mahalia had a learning disability and had found a way to compensate for it. Although she had failed geometry once already and was determined not to again. As she looked down at the test, she was not ready to give up. Yet, she was running out of strategies to try on her own.

Mahalia's story is not unique. For students pushed to the margins of traditional education, alternative schools offer something that comprehensive schools often cannot provide: a place to belong. Hill Collins (2009) observed that "[d]espite tremendous variability in their goals, pedagogy, and overall organization, one reason that alternative schools of all sorts...are successful is that they create safe and free spaces for kids" (p. 95). The California Department of Education (n.d.-b) recognizes a broad range of "school and program alternatives that provide students with the environment, curriculum, and support systems needed to ensure that they achieve their full academic potential." That reach is substantial, as close to 169,000 students attended alternative schools across California during the 2024-25 school year (California Department of Education, 2025b). The students filling those seats are largely students of color, who made up nearly 85% of California's alternative school enrollment, according to a data brief from Stanford University's John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Rivera Zabarain & Ruiz de Velasco, 2024). Understanding who these schools serve, and why, matters now more than ever.

Alternative education is important precisely because the students who need it most are those least well served by traditional schools (Kim, 2006). For students like Mahalia, alternative schools represent a second opportunity, a chance to re-engage with learning in an environment designed around their needs. This matters beyond the individual student. Racialized academic outcomes have persisted across generations in U.S. schools (Hayes-Greene & Love, 2018). Alternative education has the potential to interrupt those patterns by providing equitable access to support, relationships, and resources. The goal is not simply to help students pass a class or earn a diploma, but to develop productive individuals who can build fulfilling lives and contribute meaningfully to their communities. None of this happens without intentional leadership. Alternative school leaders play a central role in shaping the conditions that make student success possible. They set the tone for school culture, build and support staff who understand the specific needs of marginalized students, and make decisions about resources, partnerships, and programming that determine whether a school fulfills its promise. Mahalia's story reflects that possibility. After transferring to a small alternative school, she was matched with a case manager and mentor who helped her develop stronger strategies for navigating her learning disability. She graduated from high school and is currently enrolled at a community college, studying to become a certified nursing assistant. Her path forward required finding the right environment to meet her needs, and leaders committed to building that environment for every student who walked through the door.

Research Questions

Exploring alternative school leadership is essential to strengthening and supporting the students who depend on these settings for their educational success. As such, the research questions in this study are as follows:

RQ1: In what ways, if any, do the practices of alternative school leaders reflect the principles of inclusive educational leadership?

- a. How, if at all, do these practices advance equity and social justice?
- b. In what ways, if any, do alternative school leaders enact and share practices that inform inclusive and equity-centered approaches that may be relevant across all school settings?

RQ2: What are the challenges, if any, of leading alternative schools?

RQ3: In what ways, if any, do alternative school leaders demonstrate and sustain resilience in their leadership practice within their school settings?

Problem Statement

Persistent patterns of student marginalization within traditional high schools continue to necessitate alternative education options (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Alternative schools have emerged as critical spaces for students who are underserved, excluded, or otherwise marginalized within comprehensive high school settings (Lehr et al., 2008). A robust body of literature documents the design elements and pedagogical practices that foster student engagement, sense of belonging, and academic achievement in alternative schools (Jordan et al., 2022; McGee & Lin, 2017; Raywid, 1994). It is the responsibility of alternative school leaders to create the conditions necessary to implement these elements and practices.

Although research has increasingly acknowledged the distinct challenges faced by leaders of alternative schools, insufficient attention has been paid to the support systems and professional development needed to build their leadership capacity (Price, 2009; Price et al., 2010). Resilience is widely recognized as a critical attribute for educational leaders, particularly in contexts characterized by systemic challenges and instability (Chen, 2025). Yet, few studies have explicitly examined the specific dimensions of resilience and hope among alternative school leaders or strategies for cultivating and sustaining them.

Alternative school leaders require a distinct and specialized set of leadership skills to effectively meet the academic, social-emotional, and contextual needs of the students they serve; however, as this study demonstrates, many enter alternative school leadership by chance and without formal preparation specific to alternative education. Leaders must rely on individual resilience and on-the-job learning rather than intentional leadership development, revealing a significant gap in leadership preparation and the existing literature.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the leadership practices of principals in alternative school settings, focusing on how they navigate the unique demands of their roles. Specifically, the study examines how alternative school principals describe the challenges they face, how they respond to these challenges, and the strategies they employ to create conditions that support student success. Central to this inquiry is a

desire to better understand how principals develop and draw on resilience to sustain their work amid challenges and ongoing demands. Principals in alternative school settings face a distinct set of leadership challenges shaped by the marginalization of the students they serve and the institutional stigma attached to alternative education (Lehr et al., 2008). These risks are compounded by limited resources and the need to address the complex social and emotional needs of students in alternative schools, who are often underserved in traditional settings (Wilkerson et al., 2018).

Resilience, as conceptualized in Fergus and Zimmerman's (2005) framework, helps illustrate how alternative school leaders persist in fostering supportive environments for marginalized students. By centering the voices and experiences of these leaders, this study aims to deepen an understanding of the skills, mindsets, and supports necessary to lead alternative schools effectively, particularly in ways that affirm and uplift marginalized student populations. Additionally, the inclusive educational leadership framework (Young & Arnold, 2020) provides a lens for examining how alternative school leaders center equity, access, and belonging in their work. It supports an exploration of how alternative school leadership is shaped by place (i.e., alternative schools), the need to develop alternative school leaders through intentional preparation, and the enactment of inclusive approaches in their daily practice.

Research Context

The San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area is recognized as one of the most diverse metropolitan regions in the United States. According to the Bay Area Census (2020), the population is approximately 36% White, 28% Asian, 24% Latino, 6% Black, and 6% multiracial. This demographic diversity is reflected in the region's public school systems, where students come from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Despite this diversity, persistent structural inequities continue to affect educational opportunities and outcomes, particularly for students from historically marginalized communities (Theoharis, 2024).

The national political landscape has grown increasingly polarized in recent years, shaping local educational discourse and policy decisions. National debates on race, immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, and curriculum content have affected local school governance, even in traditionally progressive regions such as the Bay Area (Superville, 2023). These broader tensions intersect with local challenges, complicating efforts to create equitable and inclusive educational environments.

Alternative schools are educational settings designed to meet the needs of students whose academic, social, or behavioral needs are not adequately addressed in traditional school environments (Lehr et al., 2008). These schools typically offer smaller learning communities, flexible scheduling, individualized instruction, and a combination of academic and vocational support (Jordan et al., 2022; McGee & Lin, 2017). Alternative schools predominantly enroll students who have faced systemic barriers to educational success, including students of color, students from low-income families, students who have experienced school pushout, and students impacted by housing instability or involvement in the juvenile justice system (Perzigian et al., 2017). Understanding the role of alternative schools in the Bay Area requires not only recognition of the region's demographic complexity but also acknowledgment of the broader political and structural forces that shape educational access and equity.

Overview of Methodology

This study employs a qualitative single-case design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to examine the leadership practices, challenges, and support of alternative school leaders. Participants include 16 current, former, or retired alternative school and systems leaders selected through purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach ensured representation of leaders with varied professional pathways and experiences across continuation and alternative school settings. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews, a demographic questionnaire, and the administration of Individual and Collective Hope Scales (Hellman et al., 2025; Pommer, 2024; Snyder et al., 1991). The demographic questionnaire gathered information on participants' preparation and professional backgrounds. The Hope Scales were used to explore leaders' perceptions of their motivation and ability to achieve goals. Semi-structured interviews focused on leadership practices, inclusive and equity-centered approaches, challenges, and sources of professional support.

Data analysis followed an inductive, iterative process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interview transcripts were coded to identify patterns grounded in participants' perspectives. Initial open and in vivo coding informed the development of broader categories and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the analysis, memoing supported ongoing reflection and the identification of emerging themes (Maxwell, 2013). This approach allowed findings to emerge from the data while maintaining a strong connection to participants' lived experiences and the study's focus on inclusive leadership and resilience.

Definition of Key Terminology

Alternative Schools. For the purpose of this study, alternative schools will be used as an umbrella term for the various educational options outlined by the California Department of Education. These schools emphasize smaller, relationship-centered environments, flexible structures, and multiple pathways to graduation. They function as equity-driven spaces that reimagine schooling for marginalized youth through belonging, care, and holistic development (Jordan et al., 2022; McGee & Lin, 2017; Raywid, 1994; Wilkerson et al., 2018). This study focuses on secondary alternative schools for grades 9 through 12.

Continuation Schools. A type of alternative school that offers high school diploma programs for students aged 16–18 who are at risk of not graduating, often due to credit deficiencies, employment, or personal challenges (California Department of Education, 2025a).

Hope Scales. Psychological self-report tools that are used to measure a person's goal-directed thinking and motivation. They determine how well someone can develop a plan to meet their goals and how confident they are in pursuing them. Hope is quantified by two main components: pathways (plans for achieving goals) and agency (motivation to use those plans) (Hellman et al., 2025; Pommer, 2024; Snyder et al., 1991).

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the

study, outlining the problem statement, purpose, context, research questions, methodology, researcher's role, and the definition of key terms. Chapter 2 presents the literature review organized around three key areas: Components of Effective Alternative Schools, Social Justice Leadership in Schools, and School Leader Resilience. Chapter 3 details the methodology, as introduced above.

Chapters 4 through 6 present four primary findings that highlight patterns emerging from the data. The first finding, Relationship-Building to Support Inclusion, highlights how alternative school leaders enact intentional leadership practices that foster trust and affirm relationships with students, staff, families, and communities, thereby promoting a sense of belonging and inclusive school environments. The second finding, Flexibility and Removal of Barriers, emphasizes how alternative school leaders identify and remove structural, procedural, and cultural obstacles that limit students' and families' access, participation, and success. The third finding, Constraints, Tensions, and Systemic Invisibility, illuminates the structural and systemic limits and pressures that overlook or undervalue alternative schools and the work of alternative school leaders. The fourth and final finding, Cultivating Resilience and Hope as Alternative School Leaders, highlights the practices that strengthen leaders' capacity to navigate complex challenges while sustaining their leadership and overall well-being.

Chapter 7 provides an analysis of the findings in relation to the existing literature and theoretical frameworks. It concludes with recommendations to inform the development of professional learning and leadership preparation programs that are responsive to the realities of alternative school contexts.

Chapter 2: Inclusion, Social Justice, and Resilience in Alternative School Leadership

Chapter 2 establishes the foundation for understanding the context in which alternative school leaders operate. The review is organized around three domains. The first examines the components of effective alternative schools, drawing on research that identifies the organizational, instructional, and relational conditions that support student success in alternative settings. The second explores social justice leadership in schools, framing the work of alternative school leaders within a commitment to equity and the needs of marginalized students. The third addresses school leaders' resilience, examining the practices and conditions that sustain leaders as they navigate the structural and systemic pressures unique to alternative education contexts. Together, these domains situate the study within the broader landscape of alternative education and surface the gaps in the literature that this dissertation seeks to address.

Components of Effective Alternative Schools

Ruiz de Velasco et al. (2008) emphasized the significant disparities in the quality of alternative school programs across districts, noting that whereas some districts establish schools with a clear and coherent vision and mission, others offer programs that function merely as “exits to nowhere” (p. 9). Nevertheless, alternative schools have the potential to provide a safe and supportive community for marginalized students, as highlighted by Hill Collins (2009). For alternative school leaders, this requires creating an inclusive environment that addresses the diverse needs of these students. By integrating key elements, alternative schools can become nurturing environments that promote both academic achievement and personal growth.

Gilson (2006) sought to identify the characteristics of effective alternative high schools. Evidence from Raywid (1994, as cited in Gilson, 2006) indicates that small school size, school setting, choice, autonomy, and leadership style are markers of successful alternative schools. Gilson's study strongly supported earlier research on alternative schools and found that research and evaluation in this area are limited. He asserted that “the information regarding current practices and effective methodologies is lacking” (Gilson, 2006, p. 61), highlighting a critical gap in the literature. He recommended that “factors that lead to higher levels of graduation from alternative schools must be identified to propose specific guidelines for the formation of those schools” (Gilson, 2006, p. 49). Gilson advocated for further research on best practices in alternative school settings.

Recent literature validates Gilson's (2006) findings and identifies the components of effective alternative schools. At the organizational level, Jordan et al. (2022) found that policies promoting small class sizes, flexible curricula, and teacher well-being may improve student outcomes and recommend further research. Past researchers have identified the components of effective alternative school programs (Gilson, 2006; Tissington, 2006). However, McGee and Lin (2017) reminded us that there is no national model to guide the design of alternative school programs. They offered a multidimensional framework that includes many components previously identified by Gilson and Tissington. In addition to class size and climate, high-quality instruction,

positive behavior management, and positive adult relationships, McGee and Lin identified data-driven decision-making as central to their framework.

The Evolution of Alternative Schools

Alternative education programs, as we know them today, date to the late 1950s, a period when inclusive education failed to live up to its promise (Tissington, 2006). Initially, alternative education programs offered students a non-competitive and student-centered experience. However, between the 1960s and 1980s, alternative education programs became remedial in orientation. By the 2000s, factors such as increased accountability and poor instructional practices may have contributed to more students being placed in alternative school settings (Tissington, 2006). Despite the wide variation in quality and effectiveness among alternative programs, their fundamental purpose has remained consistent: "to fulfill the commitment to educate all students within the public school system, no matter their circumstances or educational issues" (Tissington, 2006, p. 23). As such, understanding this historical trajectory is essential when examining how school and system leaders design and implement alternative school programs.

As noted by Ruiz de Velasco et al. (2008), the designs and structures of alternative schools vary significantly across districts. Early literature described alternative schools as places "for teenagers who dropped out or were expelled from traditional high schools" (Kim, 2006, p. 1). Kim (2006) shared that one commonality among alternative schools is that "students who attend an alternative school did not do well in traditional schools" (p. 2). Kim explored the experiences of staff, students, teachers, and administrators at an alternative school. The study revealed that, although adults demonstrated care for their students, existing power dynamics between students and adults prevented students from feeling respected, valued, and empowered to succeed. Although the adults believed they were engaging in *care* for their students by focusing on behavior, discipline, and test scores, this approach ultimately perpetuated the marginalization these students had experienced in traditional settings. Kim (2006) encouraged educators to engage in dialogue about the nature and purpose of alternative schooling and to work together to provide a "true, meaningful, and equitable education" (p. 15) that dismantles systemic barriers and serves disenfranchised students.

Historically, there has been no single, universally accepted definition of alternative school programs. Although there is no common definition, most early programs were defined within three categories: (a) Type I-Educational, (b) Type II-Disciplinary, or (c) Type III-Therapeutic (Tissington, 2006). Perzigian et al. (2017) and Wilkerson et al. (2018) similarly identified three types of alternative schools: innovative, behavior-focused, and academic remediation-focused. This study explores alternative schools as transformative settings that build on student strengths. This focus aims to redefine and challenge the often negative perceptions of alternative schools, shifting from viewing them as a last resort to recognizing their potential as effective learning environments. Whereas much of the current literature is centered on Type II-Disciplinary or behavior-focused schools and Type III-Therapeutic or academic-remediation-focused schools, further research on Type I-Educational or innovative schools is needed to highlight student strengths and redefine the positionality of alternative schools relative to their traditional counterparts.

Culture of Care

In an ethnographic study of an alternative school serving a diverse student body, Tierney (2020) identified two themes that emerged as students transitioned from a traditional to an alternative school setting. These themes support students' ability to develop a new student identity and sense of belonging in alternative school settings. First, students' ability to reflect on past adverse educational experiences enables them to identify the systems and structures that marginalized them in traditional school settings. Tierney referred to this theme as "developing a critique of normative education" (p. 252). The second key theme, "school as community and family" (Tierney, 2020, p. 254), emphasized the significance of creating a welcoming and supportive environment. Here, students can identify the systems and structures at the alternative school that create an open and welcoming community. Tierney identified two specific components as contributing to a positive school culture: (a) an advisory class focusing on community building and (b) relationships with teachers as "advisors, advocates, and friends" (p. 255). Tierney's study highlights the importance of creating a sense of belonging through positive adult perspectives and relationships with their students.

Like Gilson (2006) and Tierney (2020), Jordan et al. (2022) explored the role of teacher practices that promote a culture of care for students. Jordan et al. termed these teacher practices "care as pedagogy" (p. 736). Care as a pedagogical approach refers to the development of reciprocal care between teachers and students. In addition to these promotive factors, Jordan et al. also identified a negative subtext in their study. Although students benefit from the alternative school's structure and culture of care, they also acknowledged that attending an alternative school carries social stigma.

The culture of care identified by Tierney (2020) and Jordan et al. (2022) reflects the broader set of components that researchers have found to be central to effective alternative schools. These relational conditions that foster belonging, trust, and reciprocal care between teachers and students are products of intentional organizational structures, leadership decisions, and instructional practices. As McGee and Lin (2017) noted, effective alternative schools are built on multiple interconnected components, including school climate, positive adult relationships, and high-quality instruction. The culture of care is an expression of how these components operate together within alternative school settings. Understanding the organizational and instructional conditions that enable a culture of care is essential for examining how alternative school leaders design and sustain environments that serve marginalized students. Equally important to fostering that environment is instructional practice; culturally sustaining pedagogies offer a lens for how teachers engage students' identities, languages, and communities as assets in the learning process.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies

Building on the literature on the importance of caring adults in alternative school settings, Borck (2019) examined an alternative school in Brooklyn, New York, that serves financially insecure students who are "over-age and under-credited" (p. 376). Using an ethnographic and case-study approach, Borck examined how teachers use culturally sustaining pedagogies to connect students' home and school cultures. Borck's research uniquely contributes to the current literature on alternative schools by

centering student voices and highlighting teacher practices. In particular, the author identified teacher practices that facilitate student belonging, resilience, and empowerment—promotive factors contributing to student success in alternative school settings. Further supporting Gilson (2006), Tierney (2020), and Jordan et al. (2022), Borck identified promotive factors such as teacher practices and students' sense of belonging as characteristics of effective alternative schools.

The literature on effective alternative schools consistently underscores the need to create learning environments that are genuinely inclusive and equitable. Both Young and Arnold (2020) and Kim (2006) emphasized the need to provide “true, meaningful, and equitable education” (p. 15). As Young and Arnold’s Inclusive Educational Leadership Framework indicates, “Inclusion is produced by treating others as human beings, no matter their state, condition, or behavior” (p. 11). As such, establishing a culture of care (Jordan et al., 2022) and implementing teacher practices that facilitate student belonging, resilience, and empowerment (Borck, 2019) advance the goal of inclusion.

Borck (2019) further asserted that schools' traditional, standardized curriculum and culture are ineffective educational practices for marginalized students. This critique is central to understanding why alternative schools exist and what they are designed to accomplish. How success is defined within alternative school settings carries significant implications for the students these schools serve. Traditional metrics, such as standardized test scores and attendance rates, may fail to capture the full range of outcomes that matter most to marginalized students and their communities. As a component of effective alternative schools, the definition of success shapes how leaders design programs, allocate resources, and evaluate their impact on the students and communities they serve.

Definition of Success in Alternative School Settings

Alternative schools offer marginalized students opportunities for success. Tierney (2020) presented a multifaceted definition of success based on his research at an alternative school. As co-constructed by the school community, success is “[Y]outh being socially and academically engaged, taking ownership of their education, and making progress towards high school graduation. In addition, youth defined success in the school as students having a sense of belonging within the school” (p. 242). This conceptualization of success is consistent with the existing literature on the elements of effective alternative school programs. Traditional definitions, which emphasize grades, often fall short in these contexts. Instead, success requires a focus on building a supportive and inclusive environment where policies, resource allocation, and curriculum decisions are designed to address the complex needs of each student. This view of success depends on the resilience of school leaders, who must navigate multiple layers of complexity to foster a sense of belonging for every student. Through this definition, I can investigate the strategies leaders use to achieve school goals and address the challenges they face in fostering environments that genuinely support all students.

Having examined the key elements of effective alternative schools, this review now turns its attention to the preparation of the leaders who guide these schools. Specifically, the next domain will center on the role of social justice leadership in

empowering alternative school leaders to create inclusive school environments. To effectively transform schools into equitable places, it is imperative that school leaders be prepared to address the associated challenges.

Social Justice Leadership in Schools

Inequitable outcomes persist within the education system, disproportionately impacting marginalized students. To address these systemic challenges, school and system leaders have adopted social justice leadership as an instrument to address the inequitable outcomes experienced by marginalized students within the education system (Theoharis, 2007, 2024). As explored in the previous domain, many practices employed by effective alternative school leaders, such as fostering a culture of care and implementing culturally sustaining pedagogies, are inherently aligned with social justice principles. This domain provides an overview of the principles of social justice and their relationship to school leadership. Additionally, this section will examine the role of academic expectations as both an element of effective alternative schools and a core social justice value. Finally, this section will discuss professional learning and preparation for social justice school leadership, incorporating multiple perspectives to illuminate the complexities and possibilities of social justice leadership in practice.

Definition of Social Justice Leadership

Research on social justice leadership has progressed through several stages of development, with authors attempting to define social justice and its relationship to school leadership. Although their perspectives differ, there is general agreement that social justice leadership challenges the systemic barriers that lead to marginalization in schools (Bogotch, 2002; Dantley & Green, 2015; Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Theoharis, 2007; Turhan, 2010). Rozich (2020) further defined school leadership for social justice as “an umbrella term to denote leadership that focuses on serving students and families from diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and economic backgrounds so that they can achieve and succeed” (p. 217).

Social justice can be defined as an individual’s right to “a fair opportunity to pursue a self-chosen view of the good life so long as they do so in a way that respects the rights of others” (Turhan, 2010, p. 1358). Turhan, however, contended that creating a precise definition of social justice is not possible, as it must adapt to its current context. Building on Bogotch’s (2002) characterization of social justice as a dynamic, ongoing struggle, Turhan (2010) posited that social justice is not static but rather comes alive in the practices of school leaders. Turhan spotlighted the vital role of social justice in school administration and leadership. The author characterizes social justice in schools as the fight against institutionalized inequities that benefit some students and harm others. Turhan asserted that leadership for social justice includes facilitating high academic achievement and positive relationships with students. Furthermore, Turhan challenged school administrators to institutionalize social justice in schools. The author also reminded us of the broader context within which schools are positioned. Schools reflect the current social culture, and what occurs within them reflects the hegemonic practices of that culture (Patel, 2016). As an example, Turhan pointed out that deficit-centered language often used in educational policy exemplifies how social justice efforts can be colonized by dominant-group perspectives.

I propose that Dantley and Tillman's (2006) proactive definition of social justice leadership as a verb—one that "investigates and poses solutions for issues that generate and reproduce societal inequities" (p. 17)—is particularly relevant to alternative schools. Although it is important to recognize the aspirational ideals of social justice, as emphasized by scholars like Turhan (2010), Dantley and Green (2015), and Patel (2016), alternative school leaders must move beyond romanticized notions and actively dismantle the policies and structures that perpetuate student marginalization. To this end, Theoharis (2007) provides a lens through which principals actively address and eliminate marginalization in schools. Principals focus their leadership practice on mitigating the effects of systemic inequities. Theoharis conducted an empirical study on the experiences of principals who embody social justice values. He found that principals enact social justice by (a) raising student achievement, (b) improving school structures, (c) building staff capacity, and (d) focusing on the school culture and climate. These are the ways through which systems and alternative school leaders can move from theory to practice.

Academic Achievement and Social Justice Leadership

A number of authors have identified academic achievement as a necessary component of social justice leadership (Capper & Young, 2014; Theoharis, 2007; Turhan, 2010; Young & Arnold, 2020). In addition to the components previously identified in the literature on effective alternative school design, I argue that a strong focus on learning and academic achievement is necessary for creating truly effective alternative schools. Rozich's (2020) research on the relationship between social justice leadership and student achievement yielded two findings particularly relevant to an alternative school context. First, Rozich found that school leaders saw equity work through an actionable lens. As a result, these school leaders were able to offer their students an educational experience that resulted in increased achievement. Second, Rozich linked school leaders' mindset to students' academic outcomes. Like Turhan, Rozich rejected deficit-centered language and recommended an asset-based approach. Specifically, Rozich cautions school leaders to avoid the Maslow trap of focusing solely on students' basic needs while neglecting their academic growth. Instead, Rozich (2020, p. 232) encouraged school leaders to be "warm demanders," holding high expectations for students while also showing sincere care and concern.

Professional Development of Social Justice Leaders

To institutionalize social justice in schools, leaders must develop the knowledge base and skill set to challenge the status quo. To this end, the literature discusses the need to support the professional learning of social justice leaders. Rozich's (2020) findings, for example, call upon school leaders to "develop the skills of critical self-reflection, maintain a laser-like focus on students reaching their highest academic potential, and develop a style that is both grounded in sincere care and is capable of supporting a rigorous learning experience" (p. 232). These skills are crucial for leaders to effectively challenge existing inequities and create more just learning environments. Similarly, Huchting and Bickett (2021) explored the need for professional learning for social justice leaders. Within the scope of this literature review, the authors reached consensus on the importance of social justice in school leadership. Given the inequities

in schools, Huchting and Bickett urged school leaders to commit to equity and access for all students.

In their study, Huchting and Bickett (2021) examined the core components of leadership development and social justice and proposed three key areas for professional growth. First, they asserted that social justice leadership must be developed not only on existing research but also on practitioners' experience. Second, the authors encouraged social justice leaders to reflect on their identity and positionality through an intersectional lens. As they explain, "understanding the complexity of identity is critical for effective leadership training" (Huchting & Bickett, 2021, p. 53). Finally, Huchting and Bickett suggested that professional learning must prepare school leaders for the politics and perseverance (i.e., resilience) that school leadership demands.

Huchting and Bickett's (2021) study confirms prior research highlighting the inadequate preparation of social justice leaders. Celoria (2016) examined two sets of professional standards for school leaders and found that both, at best, make only vague references to equity, social justice, and inclusion. In an effort to identify resources that may support the preparation of social justice leaders, Celoria explored three frameworks that can provide tools for school leaders to combat social injustice. Celoria's definition of social justice reflects an inclusive lens that embraces the experience of all students who are marginalized in schools.

Social Justice Leadership Through a Critical Lens

Although the previous authors have embraced social justice as a tool for addressing systemic inequities in schools, some authors offer a critical perspective of the term and its use in practice and academia (Capper & Young, 2014; Celoria, 2016; Dantley & Green, 2015; Patel, 2016; Turhan, 2010). Celoria's (2016) literature review, for example, identified a prevalent misuse of the term, coupled with a lack of meaningful actions to drive social change. In a prior theoretical analysis, Turhan (2010) asserted that contemporary social justice values are shaped by the dominant culture in our society. For example, many school districts prominently feature equity and inclusion in their mission and vision statements, yet these statements are often contradicted by persistent disproportionate outcomes. In fact, Patel (2016) argued that this disconnect between rhetoric and reality highlights how social justice has been co-opted as a vehicle for perpetuating colonialism and racism.

Capper and Young (2014) critiqued social justice leadership in schools and challenged social justice leaders to embrace a more inclusive approach. The authors identified five points to illustrate their perspective. First, they critiqued the limited way the term "inclusion" is understood and applied, noting that it frequently focuses primarily on students with disabilities. The authors proposed a definition of inclusion that encompasses all marginalized students.

Scholars have yet to explore the similarities and differences in the inclusion/integration of students of color, students who are linguistically diverse, students labeled with a disability; students from low-income families, including those who experience homelessness; and students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). (Capper & Young, 2014, p. 159)

Despite the known benefits of integration and inclusion, the authors argued that there is continued pressure to segregate students. They cited the continued reliance on alternative schools as a prime example, raising concerns that, given their structure, they perpetuate existing inequities.

Another point of contention relates to students' intersectional identities. Although some literature focuses on single identity markers, Capper and Young argued that more work is needed to extend thinking to encompass students' differences and their intersecting identities. Regarding academic achievement, the authors postulated that social justice leaders have sent mixed messages about its role in social justice leadership. Capper and Young presented prior research that yields conflicting findings regarding the role of student learning and achievement in social justice work. However, as this literature review shows, several authors have identified academic achievement as a necessary component of social justice leadership (Capper & Young, 2014; Theoharis, 2007; Turhan, 2010; Young & Arnold, 2020). Despite contradictions in the literature, Capper and Young asserted that developing coherent, equity-centered policies, measured in part by student achievement, can support social justice leaders in adopting effective policies and practices that have the greatest impact in addressing inequities. Finally, Capper and Young challenged the notion that social justice leaders must embrace a "superhero" persona. They advocated for a shift away from this individualistic approach, urging leaders to embrace collaborative leadership practices.

Building upon their critique, Capper and Young outlined a path toward achieving the ideals of social justice leadership. First, the authors encouraged social justice leaders to agree upon a standard definition of inclusion and its benefits for all students—one that extends beyond a narrow focus on students with disabilities to encompass and recognize students' intersectional identities. Second, as previously discussed, student achievement must be the primary goal of social justice leadership. Finally, Capper and Young called upon social justice leaders to collaborate with others to advance social justice practices that can truly make an immediate and lasting difference for students.

Like Capper and Young (2014), other authors not only critique but also offer alternative frameworks for implementing social justice principles (Dantley & Green, 2015; Patel, 2016). Patel, for example, advocated for a moratorium on the use of social justice in educational research. This pause would allow for a reassessment of how social justice principles can be applied more effectively in schools. Dantley and Green, on the other hand, offered a four-part framework to conceptualize radicalized social justice leadership, calling for accountability grounded in four tenets. In the first part of their framework, Dantley and Green aligned with authors who contend that social justice values have been watered down. Instead, they called on leaders to channel their anger at current systemic inequities to fuel their efforts for change. Second, Dantley and Green argued that social justice leaders must embody historical and prophetic imagination. Like Guinier and Torres' (2003) magical realism in *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy*, prophetic imagination offers school leaders new opportunities to create a new vision of social justice. The third and fourth tenets lead us to the preparation of school leaders. Dantley and Green held leadership preparation programs and their graduates accountable for upholding social justice values within the communities they serve. The authors warned against upholding

social justice without accountability—what they call the “social justice jacuzzi”—a state that yields little change in the status quo.

Applying a critical lens is necessary to understand how social justice can be effectively enacted in alternative schools and to guide alternative school principals' leadership. To fulfill the promise of alternative schools for marginalized students, alternative school leaders must not settle for the comfort of the “social justice jacuzzi” (Dantley & Green, 2015, p. 831) and instead embrace an active definition of social justice that challenges and destabilizes the status quo. As documented by Theoharis (2007, 2024), school leaders face risks and encounter resistance in their efforts to enact social justice in their schools. Having discussed the components of effective alternative schools and the role of social justice in alternative school leadership, we will next explore how these leaders enact resilience in their daily work as they face resistance.

School Leader Resilience

Dantley and Tillman (2006) proposed a definition of social justice leadership that emphasizes its practical application. Although social justice can take various forms, the authors specifically addressed research, scholarship, conference presentations, and teaching in their work. In addition to these areas, I propose that school leadership and resilience are important components of social justice praxis. When implementing social justice practices in schools, leaders at the site and system levels often encounter resistance and barriers to change. Social justice leaders effectively manage these challenges through resilience strategies (Theoharis, 2024) that support their work. In this context, we will delve into resilience, explore different models of school leader resilience, and discuss the intentional practice of critical resilience as an essential tool for school leaders.

The concept of resilience has been studied and defined through various contexts and perspectives. Early literature defined resilience as the return to normal functioning after a stressful or anxiety-provoking situation (Rutter, 2007; Ungar, 2006). Resilience has been used as an all-encompassing term to describe a person's ability to manage and adapt successfully to negative and/or stressful situations (Malik & Garg, 2018; Limon et al., 2022). Various authors have defined resilience as the ability to “bounce back” after facing adversity (De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020; Isaacs, 2012; Johnson, 2021; Malik & Garg, 2018; Wells & Klocko, 2018). Resilience models have been developed to explain how people are influenced by adversity and how they adapt and thrive. Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) developed a model that illustrates how resilience factors can change a person's path from adversity to success.

Resilience models that reflect an educational context have also been developed, recognizing the unique challenges and stressors faced by school leaders. In 2005, Patterson and Kelleher introduced the resilience cycle model to describe the four stages a school leader experiences after adversity. The four stages are: (a) deterioration, (b) adaptation, (c) recovery, and (d) growing. In the deterioration stage, the school leader experiences denial, grief, and anger. In the adaptation stage, most school leaders bounce back by taking “personal actions to turn things around” (Patterson & Kelleher, 2005, p. 64). In the recovery phase, the school leader continues an upward path toward the status quo. During this phase, the school leader returns to normal working conditions, their previous level of functioning, and their leadership responsibilities.

Finally, during the growing stage, the school leader learns from adversity and develops greater resilience.

Isaacs (2012) offers another model of resilience to assist school leaders in responding to adversity in their schools. Isaac's model identifies five characteristics of resilience: (a) proactive, (b) positive approach, (c) focus, (d) flexibility, and (e) organizational skills. According to Isaacs, resilient individuals take a proactive approach to problem-solving, anticipating challenges, and taking initiative rather than waiting for problems to arise. They have a positive attitude and see adversity as an opportunity to grow. These resilient individuals have focused on achieving their goals and are organized. Furthermore, they possess high flexibility and the ability to tolerate ambiguity.

Whereas these definitions and models illustrate how individuals overcome challenges, they largely credit resilience to a person's own efforts and qualities. As defined by Patterson and Kelleher (2005), school leaders reach the adaptation stage of their resilience cycle through "personal actions." Similarly, Issac's (2012) model of resilience comprises characteristics that a resilient person must inherently possess. These models and definitions fail to acknowledge the impact of systemic inequalities on an individual's resilience. Campa (2010) explained,

First, it tends to place the responsibility of achieving success primarily on the effort of the individual without considering the cultural, economical, historical, and political contexts of schooling.....Second, this perspective presents the attributes that contribute to resilience as static: Individuals either have these, or they do not (p. 431).

Sutton and Gong (2021) agreed with Campa's critique, asserting that "resilience is not only an internal, individual endeavor" (p. 39). They challenged the notion that resilience is solely a matter of personal determination, recognizing that the challenges school leaders face, especially those committed to social justice, are often deeply rooted in systemic inequities. As they stated, "We acknowledge that the challenges school leaders face cannot be whisked away under a rug of personal grit and determination" (p. 40).

To better understand the role of resilience in school leaders' work, it is necessary to acknowledge the impact of systemic inequalities on resilience. Campa (2010) proposed critical resilience as such a framework. Critical resilience embraces four primary principles. First, it builds upon the common definitions of resilience. Second, it examines the role that power plays within families, schools, and communities. Third, it acknowledges the importance of social, cultural, economic, and historical contexts. Fourth, it focuses on the intersection of race, class, gender, and age. Sutton and Gong (2021) further found that "resilience was not merely an internal act of 'pulling oneself up by their bootstraps' but rather utilizing different sets of strategies, dispositions, and relationships that create a mutually supportive network" (p. 40). This emphasis on collective resilience, on drawing strength and support from others, is particularly relevant for social justice leaders, who often face isolation and pushback as they challenge the status quo.

Critical Resilience

Critical resilience offers us an opportunity to revisit Capper and Young's (2014) critique of the *superhero* identity often associated with social justice leaders. The myth of *superhero* leaders unfairly places the responsibility of solving systemic problems on the shoulders of school principals and educators. Capper and Young called upon social justice leaders to work collaboratively and challenge the notion of resilience as an individual effort. The conceptualization of heroic school leaders, however, is not a novel idea. In 2002, Bogotch explored two paths that connect educational leadership with social justice. One path illustrates school leaders' work toward building socially just, collaborative, and community-based schools. On the other hand, the author also presented a path that "illustrates how single-minded visions for a just school society emerge through the heroic efforts of individual educational leaders" (Bogotch, 2002, p. 138). This path romanticizes the individual leader as a transformative figure who single-handedly overcomes obstacles and achieves remarkable results. Their true stories illustrate leadership paths that rely on collective community efforts as well as individual vision and commitment. The following emerging research on school leader resilience demonstrates how collective and individual efforts work in tandem.

Sutton and Gong (2021) directly challenged the pervasive myth of the *superhero* principal, pushing back against the "common narrative...that 'superhero' principals can overcome the odds of systemic inequalities as well as the day-to-day challenges of their many roles by just summoning greater internal strength, coping skills, and resilience" (p. 38). Building on Campa's (2010) work on critical resilience, Sutton and Gong introduced a resilience framework that includes strategies for both individual acts (physical and cognitive) and collective efforts (social and cognitive). The authors identified three dimensions of resilience: (a) physical, (b) cognitive, and (c) social. The physical dimension refers to the overall well-being of school leaders. As a result of work-related stress, school leaders often neglect both their physical and mental health. The cognitive dimension recognizes school leaders' responsibility to have a vision for their schools. On a daily basis, school leaders must make decisions that impact the lives of their students and staff. The social dimension spotlights the need for school leaders to build support networks. Like Capper and Young (2014), Sutton and Gong emphasized the importance of collaborative work. Further, they asserted that "Resilience is strengthened through individual and collective work, but resilience alone does not necessarily lead to change...Critical and collective resilience is a key ingredient for leaders who seek systemic change" (Sutton & Gong, 2021, p. 42).

The frameworks outlined by Campa (2010), Capper and Young (2014), and Sutton and Gong (2021) provide valuable insights into conceptualizing resilience as a deliberate, intentional behavior rather than an inherent trait. These frameworks underscore resilience as both a skill set and a collection of strategies that can be cultivated and invoked to navigate the complexities of social justice leadership. Building on this perspective, Theoharis's (2007) empirical study captured the stories and experiences of principals who developed proactive and coping strategies to sustain their social justice work. In a later work, Theoharis (2024) reconceptualized the resilience of social justice leaders into two areas: professional and personal strategies. Like previous authors, Theoharis' research validates the both/and nature of resilience.

In their study of first-year principals, Halevi and Schechter (2023) examined the resilience of beginning administrators. Their qualitative study aimed to determine first-year principals' resilience-boosting and resilience-undermining factors. Boosting factors are positive or protective, while undermining factors pose risk. Halevi and Schechter's analysis of data from 61 interviews with 21 school principals identified five resilience-boosting and five resilience-undermining factors. All 21 principals reported work overload as the cause of stress, one of the five undermining factors. For 15 of the 21 principals, who had entered the principalship during the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, this experience emerged as the second most significant undermining factor. To a lesser degree, the principals also reported difficulties in dealing with key players, a lack of administrative knowledge, and staff rejection as undermining factors. Conversely, 15 of the 21 principals indicated a supportive school environment as the most significant resilience-boosting factor. Eleven principals identified staff acceptance as the second-best resilience-boosting factor. To a lesser degree, the principals reported that previous experience, short-term successes, and student interactions were resilience-boosting factors. The authors suggest that these findings inform the development of mentorship opportunities for beginning principals. These findings align with the recommendations of Capper and Young (2014) to work collaboratively and with Sutton and Gong's (2021) social dimension of resilience.

In another qualitative study, De Bruyn and Mestry (2020) explored the narratives and careers of female school principals to identify resilience factors in the principalship. Four themes emerged from interviews with 15 Black female school principals, two of which—formative experiences and mentorship—align with the previously cited literature. Fourteen of the 15 principals identified early formative experiences as sources of resilience. These principals shared that challenging childhood experiences, such as growing up in poverty or living under apartheid, fostered resilience. Indeed, this finding reflects the tenets of critical resilience. All of the principals interviewed in this study indicated that they valued mentoring and leadership learning. Like Capper and Young (2014), Sutton and Gong (2021), and Halevi and Schechter (2023), mentorship and professional learning have been identified as sources of resilience for school leaders.

Conceptual Framework

The three domains examined in this literature review — the components of effective alternative schools, social justice leadership, and school leader resilience — converge around a shared concern for how leaders create and sustain equitable learning environments for marginalized students in the face of structural and systemic constraints. Two conceptual frameworks guide this study and organize that convergence. Young and Arnold's (2020) inclusive educational leadership framework informs the first two domains, providing a lens for examining how alternative school leaders design inclusive environments and enact social justice leadership in the service of students who have been historically marginalized by traditional schooling. The risk and resilience framework (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) addresses the third domain, offering a structure for understanding how alternative school leaders navigate the pressures, tensions, and systemic invisibility that characterize their work while sustaining their capacity to lead. Together, these frameworks situate the study's findings

within a theoretical foundation that honors both the relational and structural dimensions of alternative school leadership.

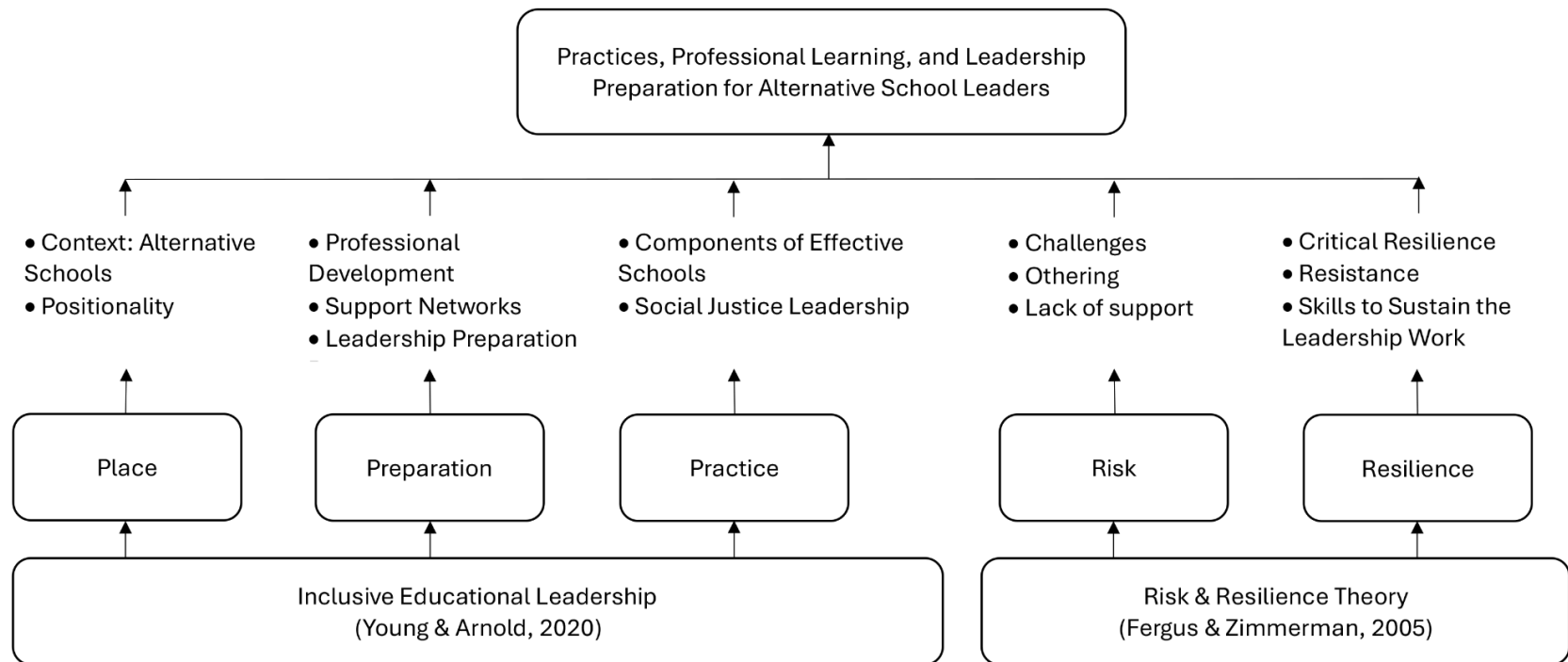
Inclusive Educational Leadership Framework

This study utilizes the inclusive educational leadership framework (Young & Arnold, 2020) to provide structure and context, highlighting the stories, perspectives, and actions of school leaders in alternative school settings. The framework introduces three areas of emphasis—place, preparation, and practice—each corresponding to elements examined in this study. The first area of emphasis, place, is defined by Young and Arnold as not only a physical location but also the positionality of leaders within the school system. Therefore, alternative schools serve as the context and place for this investigation. I examine alternative schools, the factors that contribute to their efficacy, and the leadership styles and positionality of alternative school leaders within the broader educational landscape. As noted in the literature review, effective alternative schools must establish inclusive and equitable learning environments. Thus, the next area of emphasis, preparation, highlights the importance of equipping school leaders with the skills and dispositions to foster inclusive learning environments, including social justice practices. The final area of emphasis, practice, is crucial for examining the actions alternative school leaders use to foster environments of belonging and learning. Through their inclusive educational leadership framework, Young and Arnold (2020) charged leaders to “make schools places that function for all the students and adults who learn and work within them” (p.7).

Risk and Resilience Framework

Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) proposed a theoretical framework that characterizes resilience as the ability to overcome the negative impacts of risk by developing effective coping mechanisms. Their work identified various risks inherent to social justice leadership, including encountering resistance, lacking support, and feeling discouraged. Through the lens of this framework, the literature review has underscored how social justice leaders practice resilience to address these challenges, ultimately enabling them to sustain their efforts in the service of marginalized students.

Combining risk and resilience theory with an inclusive educational leadership framework sheds light on how alternative school leaders create conditions for student success. The risk and resilience theory offers a lens for examining findings related to the resilience of alternative school leaders. Simultaneously, the inclusive educational leadership framework highlights how alternative school leaders contribute to restructuring students' educational experiences to mitigate marginalization (Young & Arnold, 2020). The work of alternative school leaders involves the intersection of place, practice, and preparation. In this intersectional space, resilience plays a crucial role in sustaining the inclusion ideals of alternative school principals. They must foster resilience for themselves and the students they serve. According to Fergus and Zimmerman (2005), resilience is defined as the “process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with risks” (p. 399). Drawing on resilience theory, this study identifies strategies that alternative school leaders employ to sustain their work and vision.

Figure 1*Conceptual Framework for Alternative School Leadership*

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 reviewed the literature on effective alternative schools, social justice leadership, and school leader resilience. The literature showed variation in the design and quality of alternative schools and identified gaps in the preparation and support of alternative school leaders. Research on effective alternative schools has emphasized small school size, flexible structures, culturally responsive practices, and strong relationships as key elements supporting marginalized students. The literature also noted the lack of a common definition of alternative schools and the stigma often associated with these settings. These findings support examining alternative schools as contexts that can promote equity. The literature on social justice leadership defines leadership as efforts to address inequities and improve outcomes for marginalized students. Scholars emphasized academic expectations, collaboration, and structural change, while also identifying tensions between equity-focused goals and everyday practice. The research also highlighted limited preparation and professional learning for leaders. Finally, the literature on resilience suggested that sustaining leadership requires both individual and collective strategies. Relationships, mentorship, and professional networks were identified as important sources of support. These findings indicate that resilience is shaped by both personal and systemic factors. This study is guided by the inclusive educational leadership framework and risk and resilience theory to examine the preparation, practices, and experiences of alternative school leaders, as well as the role of resilience and hope in shaping their work.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study is grounded in a social constructivist epistemology (Crotty, 1998), which holds that meaning is constructed through interactions between individuals and their social worlds. Knowledge is seen as subjective and shaped by cultural, historical, and contextual experiences. In this study, the experiences of alternative school leaders are understood as socially constructed realities, deeply influenced by their interactions with the systemic inequities that impact their schools and their relationships with the communities they serve. With this in mind, I seek to understand the following:

RQ1: In what ways, if any, do the practices of alternative school leaders reflect the principles of inclusive educational leadership?

- a. How, if at all, do these practices advance equity and social justice?
- b. In what ways, if any, do alternative school leaders enact and share practices that inform inclusive and equity-centered approaches that may be relevant across all school settings?

RQ2: What are the challenges, if any, of leading alternative schools?

RQ3: In what ways, if any, do alternative school leaders demonstrate and sustain resilience in their leadership practice within their school settings?

Methodological Approach

A single-case study methodological approach is used to address these questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design enables an in-depth exploration of alternative school leaders, acknowledging the complexity of each participant while allowing for cross-analysis to identify common themes and variations. This methodological approach aligns with the social constructivist stance (Crotty, 1998), which values participants' lived experiences and recognizes the role of context in shaping leadership and resilience in alternative school settings.

Research Participants

The study focuses on public school districts and county offices of education in the San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area. The research involves school leaders with direct experience working in alternative school settings. It includes current site, district, and county administrators, as well as former or retired leaders who have served in similar roles. By engaging participants with firsthand knowledge of the unique challenges and opportunities in alternative schools, the study provides a nuanced understanding of leadership practices that foster student success in these settings.

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and broad outreach strategies to identify school leaders with experience in alternative education. The California School Directory published by the California Department of Education was used to identify and recruit a diverse pool of participants. A mass email was sent with information on the study's purpose, eligibility criteria, and contact details for those interested in participating. In addition, I used my professional networks to identify potential participants. The goal was to purposively select 15–20 participants to ensure that a range of experiences and perspectives is represented in the study. Ultimately, 16 alternative school leaders agreed to participate in the study. By gathering views from different perspectives, the study captures both

the conditions in which leaders operate and the leadership strategies used to foster more supportive environments for alternative school communities.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Role in Alternative Education	Years in Education	Years in Alternative Education
Sharon	Female	White	MA	Former Principal	11-15 Years	4-6 Years
Carmen	Female	Latinx	MA	Principal	1-5 Years	4-6 Years
Kevin	Male	African American	MA	Principal	6-10 Years	4-6 Years
Anita	Female	White	MA	County Office Leader	21+ Years	11+ Years
Alma	Female	Latinx	MA	Vice Principal	6-10 Years	1-3 Years
Kelly	Female	2 or More Races	EdD	Principal	16-20 Years	11+ Years
Daniel	Male	White	MA	Former Principal	16-20 Years	7-10 Years
Patrick	Male	African American	MA	Principal	16-20 Years	4-6 Years
Naomi	Female	Asian American	MA	Assistant Principal	11-15 Years	1-3 Years
Jessica	Female	White	MA	Principal	11-15 Years	4-6 Years
Linda	Female	Latinx	EdD	County Office Leader	11-15 Years	7-10 Years
Kaia	Female	White	MA	County Office Leader	16-20 Years	7-10 Years
Karol	Female	White	MA	Retired Principal	21+ Years	7-10 Years
Erika	Female	2 or More Races	JD	Retired Principal	11-15 Years	1-3 Years
Minh	Female	Asian American	MA	District Leader	21+ Years	1-3 Years
Stella	Female	2 or More Races	MA	Principal	6-10 Years	4-6 Years

Note. Data from the self-reported pre-interview demographic questionnaire in Qualtrics XM.

Data Collection Process

Data collection for this study began with an online demographic questionnaire administered via Qualtrics XM. The questionnaire served as an initial data collection tool and included an embedded informed consent process. Participants reviewed and acknowledged their consent to participate prior to accessing the survey. This process ensures that participation is voluntary and aligns with ethical research standards for research.

The demographic questionnaire gathered background information to contextualize participants' leadership experiences in alternative school settings. Items include gender identity, age, race and ethnicity, years of professional experience in education, and years of experience in alternative school leadership. These data support a deeper understanding of the diversity of leaders represented in the study and inform the interpretation of interview findings.

In addition to demographic information, the questionnaire includes two measures designed to capture participants' perceptions of hope in their leadership practice: an individual Hope Scale (adapted from Pommer, 2024) and a Collective Hope Scale (Hellman et al., 2025). The Individual Hope Scale focuses on leaders' personal sense of agency, motivation, and pathways for addressing challenges in their work. The Collective Hope Scale examines participants' perceptions of shared purpose, collective efficacy, and the extent to which hope is fostered within their school communities. These measures provide complementary insight into how hope functions as both a personal and organizational resource for alternative school leaders and inform subsequent semi-structured interview protocols.

Following completion of the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were scheduled with each participant. Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in length and were conducted virtually via Zoom to accommodate participants across multiple school districts and counties. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded. Recordings were then transcribed using Otter.ai. After transcription, I reviewed each transcript for accuracy and completeness, making corrections as needed. During and immediately following each interview, I engaged in handwritten memoing to document emerging insights, reflections, and preliminary interpretations. This process supports reflexivity and informs ongoing data collection and analysis.

Together, the demographic questionnaire, hope measures, and semi-structured interviews provide rich and contextualized data to support the examination of leadership practices, challenges, and resilience among alternative school leaders.

Data Analysis Process

Data analysis occurred through an iterative process that began alongside data collection. As interviews were conducted and transcribed, I engaged in ongoing memoing to document emerging ideas, patterns, and reflections related to alternative school leadership, inclusive practices, and leader resilience. This process allowed insights from earlier interviews to inform later data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013).

All interviews were audio-recorded through Zoom and transcribed using Otter.ai. Transcripts were reviewed and edited for accuracy prior to analysis. Final transcripts were uploaded and organized in MAXQDA XM. The analysis relied on inductive coding

of interview transcripts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Each transcript was reviewed multiple times to identify segments connected to the research questions. Initial codes were developed from participants' language and experiences. This approach allowed patterns to emerge from the data rather than being imposed in advance.

Through cross-participant comparison, codes were refined and combined. The coding structure consists of four parent codes, each with three child codes. The first parent code, Relationship-Building to Support Inclusion (RQ1), reflects how leaders used relationships to support inclusive school environments. This code includes three child codes: Establishing Leadership Visibility, which reflects leaders' presence with students, staff, and families; Cultivating Conditions for Learning, which focuses on creating safe and responsive learning environments; and Fostering Belonging through Routines, Rituals, and Culture-Building, which examines the role of routines and shared practices in supporting belonging.

The second parent code, Flexibility and Removal of Barriers (RQ1), reflects how leaders designed programs to reduce barriers to learning. This code includes three child codes: Leading Flexible Program Design, which focuses on changes to schedules, pacing, and instruction; Addressing Systemic Bias in School, which captures efforts to identify and interrupt inequitable practices; and Legitimizing Non-Traditional Pathways and Definitions of Success, which reflects the implementation of alternative pathways, holistic measures, and diverse indicators of student growth.

The third parent code, Constraints, Tensions, and Systemic Invisibility (RQ2), reflects the challenges leaders faced within district and policy contexts. This code includes three child codes: Invisibility and Misunderstanding of Alternative Schools, which describes limited awareness of alternative school work; Impact of Small Disruptions, which examines how small decisions and actions can produce unintended negative effects on relationships, school culture, and student outcomes; and Leader Capacity Overload, which captures demands related to staffing, priorities, and student needs.

The fourth parent code, Cultivating Resilience and Hope as Alternative School Leaders (RQ3), reflects how leaders sustained their work. This code includes three child codes: Moral Purpose as Collective Meaning Making, which examines shared moral purpose that sustains alternative school leaders in their work; Relationship Renewal as Sources of Resilience and Hope, which describes motivation from ongoing connections with students, staff, and families; and Networks and Professional Communities as Foundations for Development and Support, which examines the role of professional learning, mentorship, and networks.

The above codes were developed through an inductive process. Initial open codes were generated directly from participants' language and experiences. These open codes were then compared across transcripts and sorted into broader categories, or buckets, based on shared meaning. Through an iterative approach, these categories were refined into themes that reflected patterns across participants. Finally, themes were organized into the parent-and-child coding structure described above.

Validity and Reliability

This study incorporates several strategies to support the validity and reliability of the findings. First, the participant sample includes alternative school leaders with

diverse demographic backgrounds and professional experiences. Participants vary in gender, race and ethnicity, age, and years of experience in education and leadership. This diversity strengthens the study's credibility by ensuring that multiple perspectives are represented, reflecting the varied contexts and pathways into alternative school leadership.

Second, the sample size contributes to the trustworthiness of the findings. Sixteen participants were selected through purposeful sampling to ensure that all had direct experience leading alternative schools. As data collection progressed, recurring patterns and themes began to emerge across interviews. By the final interviews, no substantially new themes were identified, indicating that data saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018) had been reached. This suggests that the sample size was sufficient to capture the range of experiences and practices relevant to the research questions.

Third, inter-rater reliability procedures were used to strengthen the consistency of the coding process. Three neutral raters who were not connected to the participants or the study context were recruited to review the coding process. These raters were provided with the codebook, detailed definitions of each code, and a shared set of sample transcripts. The raters calibrated their interpretation of the codebook through discussion to ensure consistency and alignment in the coding process. They independently coded the sample data and then met with me to compare interpretations, discuss discrepancies, and refine code definitions. This collaborative process ensured consistency in code application and enhanced the dependability of the analysis. Together, these strategies contribute to the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Limitations of the Study

This study includes several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the participant sample is geographically bound to the San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area. Although this region offers a diverse and politically complex educational context, the findings may not be generalizable to alternative school leaders in other regions with different policy environments, demographics, or resource structures.

Second, there is considerable variation in how alternative schools are defined across districts and states. The term "*alternative school*" can include continuation schools, community day schools, independent study programs, and other non-traditional educational settings (California Department of Education, n.d.-a). To mitigate this limitation, this study establishes a clear operational definition of alternative schools for participant selection and data analysis. However, differences in local program structures and district expectations may still influence how leaders interpret and enact their roles.

Finally, researcher positionality and potential bias represent an important limitation. As a current principal of an alternative high school in the Bay Area, I bring professional knowledge, experience, and commitment to this field. Although this positionality supports deeper contextual understanding and rapport with participants, it also introduces the possibility of bias in data interpretation. To address this, several strategies are used, including maintaining handwritten memos and engaging in the inter-rater reliability process. In this study, the researcher's positionality is treated as a resource that informs interpretation while being critically examined.

Researcher Positionality

Crotty (1998) asserted that ontology operates in conjunction with epistemology to shape theoretical perspectives, suggesting that "ontological issues and epistemological issues tend to emerge together" (p. 10). This intersection has facilitated an examination of my own ontological and epistemological approaches. My leadership journey is deeply rooted in my experiences as an English learner and the daughter of immigrant parents navigating the U.S. public school system. These formative experiences shaped my commitment to education and fueled my passion for advocating for students who have been historically marginalized and underserved. With over 20 years as a site leader—most of them as a high school assistant principal—I have worked with diverse student populations, always striving to create inclusive and supportive learning environments. This dedication ultimately led me to my current role as the principal of an alternative high school, where I continue to champion the needs of students and families often overlooked by traditional systems. My work in alternative education, particularly during challenging times, has strengthened my commitment to advocacy and deepened my interest in examining the unique qualities and skill set required of school leaders to serve alternative schools effectively. Understanding how leaders can create equitable, responsive, and sustainable school environments remains at the heart of my work.

Borrowing from Theoharis (2007), the design of this study is informed by my own experiences as an alternative high school principal. Theoharis explained, "Combining in one study an examination of my practices and experiences with those of other principals provided for a deeper and broader understanding of the issues and strategies discussed" (p. 225). As Theoharis suggests, my own experiences as an alternative school principal inform the analysis in this study. Furthermore, Theoharis' (2007) research focused on the experience of principals as the unit of analysis. Similarly, this study centers on the stories of alternative school and systems leaders.

Although my positionality as a practitioner-researcher provides valuable insight, it also presents potential validity threats, particularly the risk that my interpretations may reflect my own perspectives rather than those of participants (Maxwell, 2013). I have taken deliberate steps to address these threats. To guard against the threat of selective data, I collected rich data through lengthy semi-structured interviews and verbatim transcriptions of all participant responses. Verbatim transcription preserves participants' exact language and meaning, reducing the likelihood that my interpretations impose my own framing on their accounts (Maxwell, 2013). To address the threat that a narrow or homogeneous sample might limit the credibility of findings, I purposefully recruited participants representing a variety of roles, years of experience, and school contexts. This variation serves as a form of triangulation, allowing me to examine whether patterns in the data hold across different participant perspectives rather than reflecting a single viewpoint (Maxwell, 2013).

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological approach used to examine the leadership practices, challenges, and resilience of alternative school leaders. Grounded in a social constructivist epistemology, the study employed a qualitative single-case study design to explore how leaders enact inclusive educational leadership within

complex school contexts. Sixteen current, former, and retired alternative school leaders from the San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area participated in the study. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of professional experiences and perspectives in alternative education. Data were collected through a demographic questionnaire administered via Qualtrics XM, which included measures of individual and collective hope, followed by semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed using Otter.ai, reviewed for accuracy, and supported by handwritten memoing to document reflections and emerging insights

Data analysis followed an iterative and inductive process. Transcripts were coded in MAXQDA XM, beginning with open coding and progressing toward broader categories and themes. The final coding structure included four parent codes: Relationship-Building to Support Inclusion; Flexibility and Removal of Barriers; Constraints, Tensions, and Systemic Invisibility; and Cultivating Resilience and Hope as Alternative School Leaders. Strategies to support validity and reliability included diverse participant representation, data saturation, and inter-rater reliability with neutral reviewers. Limitations included the geographic focus on the Bay Area, variation in definitions of alternative schools, and the researcher's positionality as a current alternative school principal. Together, these methods provided a rigorous and contextually grounded foundation for the findings presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Practices of Alternative School Leaders: Building Relationships and Removing Barriers to Support Inclusion

This chapter presents findings from the study organized around two central arguments that address the overarching research question: In what ways, if any, do alternative school leaders' practices reflect the principles of inclusive educational leadership? Both findings are examined through the lens of Young and Arnold's (2020) framework for inclusive educational leadership, which provides a foundation for analyzing how leadership practices in alternative schools align with and contribute to broader understandings of inclusion and equity, while also illuminating the intentionality behind the practices that participants described.

The first finding establishes that alternative school leaders enact inclusive educational leadership through deliberate relationship-building practices that foster trust, affirm connection, and create the conditions for students to experience belonging. The second finding extends this argument by demonstrating that relationship-building alone is insufficient; alongside it, these leaders sustain efforts to identify and dismantle the structural, procedural, and cultural obstacles that have historically excluded students from meaningful learning. Together, these findings make a single, integrated argument in response to the research question — that inclusive educational leadership in alternative school settings is enacted through the simultaneous construction of belonging and the removal of barriers that prevent it.

Relationship-Building to Support Inclusion

The leaders in this study consistently described relationship-building as a deliberate practice through which inclusion is enacted. Research on alternative schools has established that relationships are central to supporting students who have been underserved or pushed out of traditional settings (Borck, 2019; Jordan et al., 2022; Tierney, 2020), and the data from this study illuminate the specific leadership practices through which those relationships are cultivated and sustained. What emerges across the data is a coherent answer to the research question: these leaders reflect the principles of inclusive educational leadership by making themselves known and accessible, by designing environments that hold both academic and social-emotional demands in productive tension, and by building school cultures in which belonging is actively constructed. These three dimensions of place and practice — visibility, conditions for learning, and culture-building — are expressions of a commitment to inclusion as a daily, relational act.

Showing up: Establishing Leadership Visibility

Leadership visibility emerged as a foundational practice, one through which leaders make themselves known, accessible, and responsive to students, staff, and families. Rather than working from behind closed doors, these leaders positioned themselves at the front lines of daily school life. Young and Arnold (2020) charged inclusive leaders to make schools function for all who learn and work within them, and visibility emerges as one mechanism through which that commitment is enacted. It aligns with Theoharis's (2007) finding that principals who enact social justice do so in part by attending deliberately to school culture and climate, a process that begins with

how leaders show up and are experienced by their communities. Gilson (2006) similarly identified leadership style as a marker of effective alternative schools, suggesting that how leaders present themselves and engage with their communities is central to school culture and inclusion.

Physical presence emerged as a deliberate leadership choice among the leaders. They stationed themselves at entry points, moved through classrooms, and engaged with students and staff throughout the day. Vice principal Alma noted,

I tell staff the greatest thing we can do for our students is to show up, but also welcome them at the door. Because when you welcome them at the door, it's an immediate gauge of how their day is. And so if I welcome a student, and they're a little off, I can check in, and then I can offer some additional resources. Do you need the health center? Do you need five minutes of a quiet space? Great. Go to my office. You're concerned about your grades? Great. Let's meet with a counselor. And I think when we show for students in the everyday, in the minute details of it all, that's effective leadership with regards to our students.

Principal Patrick emphasized that principals should be "greeting the students at the door" and going "inside the classrooms to see what's going on." Principal Stella similarly noted, "I think it is important to be outside in between classes, greeting kids, getting into classrooms." This pattern of physical presence reflects what participants understood as a core expression of care and accountability to their school communities.

Beyond physical presence, the leaders revealed a consistent link between visibility and the quality of the relationships it enables. Principal Carmen described observing "how the students interact with the principal" as a key indicator of school culture, specifically, whether students "view them as someone who uses their positional power to support them." Principal Kelly connected visibility directly to trust, "just being very present as best you can and really work on relationships...when they can trust you, they will walk with you to wherever you lead them." District leader Minh framed visible leadership in terms of modeling: "For me, it has always been about visible leadership. It's what you model." Principal Kevin shared, "You have to be a transformative leader to have transformed changes and outcomes for your students." These perspectives align with Theoharis's (2007) finding that principals enact social justice through sustained attention to school culture and climate, and with Turhan's (2010) assertion that social justice leadership includes facilitating positive relationships with students as a core function.

For many participants, leadership visibility extended beyond students to include staff, families, and district stakeholders. Vice principal Alma noted that she applies the same approach with staff: "I meet them at the door every day." District leader Minh described sharing vision across multiple groups — teacher leadership, counselors, and board members — to ensure the school's work is understood and supported: "The more that we can show what we do, the more it demystifies our work." County Office leader Kaia emphasized the importance of co-constructing and communicating vision collaboratively: "You co-construct and empower your community to shared leadership." Retired principal Erika described advocacy as central to visibility: "Being a leader really means being an advocate...you have to be collaborative, and you have to make the

initiative to go out there and really get out of your comfort zone." These practices reflect Rozich's (2020) finding that leaders view equity work through an actionable lens, and Young and Arnold's (2020) framework, which positions leaders as responsible for creating conditions of inclusion that extend outward to all members of the school community, including families and staff. Theoharis (2007) further supported this, identifying the development of staff capacity as one of the primary ways social justice is enacted in schools.

Challenging the Maslow Trap: Cultivating Conditions for Learning

A range of intentional practices aimed at creating environments in which students could engage academically, socially, and emotionally emerged among the participants. They revealed that alternative school leaders prioritize academic rigor while building trusting relationships with students and fostering positive school cultures. This dual focus aligns with Rozich's (2020) caution against the *Maslow trap*, the tendency to prioritize students' basic needs at the expense of academic growth. Participants in this study provide evidence that both needs must be addressed.

A consistent thread among the participants was maintaining high expectations for students while addressing their social and emotional needs. Former principal Daniel noted that "having high expectations of students was really important," while retired principal Erika emphasized the need to "meet kids where they are, because they're all at different learning levels." Principal Jessica stated plainly that "all students have the capacity to learn," and Principal Stella described the school's goal as helping students "re-engage with learning, have them start to believe in themselves." Retired principal Karol grounded this in a foundational belief: "I do really have this deep founding belief that students can all succeed." These perspectives reflect what Rozich (2020) describes as being a "warm demander", holding high expectations while showing sincere care and concern, and reject the deficit-centered orientations that both Rozich (2020) and Turhan (2010) warned perpetuate student marginalization. Principal Stella shared,

We have some kids who show up on day one, and all they need is a reset or a small school. And we have some kids for whom it takes an entire semester of us following them around, trying to coach them, engage them, and break down their walls. But I think they have to see us as different. They have to see us as we're never going to give up on them. And every day is a new day, and they can mess up as many times as they need to mess up; we're going to be here ready to work with them the next day.

This belief reflects the kind of unconditional commitment that Young and Arnold (2020) identified as foundational to inclusive practice.

The organization of schools and their daily systems are crucial for supporting students. Vice principal Alma spoke of "creating protocols, processes, procedures, structures that support them in the everyday to really move our students forward, whether it be academically, socially, or emotionally." County Office leader Linda emphasized that decisions should be driven by the question, "What does this [student] need, and then what's the capacity we need to build for adults?" Principal Stella described using funding to hire additional mental health therapists, reflecting a

commitment to addressing the full range of student needs. Principal Kelly described the small school environment as an asset: "We're such a small school, and we offer so much extra support that we're able to help them reach what they didn't know was even possible." Jordan et al. (2022) found that policies promoting small class sizes and flexible curricula may improve student outcomes, and that the practices described by participants provide evidence of how leaders create and maintain those conditions. McGee and Lin (2017) placed data-driven decision-making at the center of their multidimensional framework for effective alternative schools; County Office leader Linda's emphasis on "student-centered decisions and actually looking at data to inform that" reflects this orientation.

The study participants emphasized the importance of instructional quality and the development of students' academic identities in creating a positive learning environment. Principal Kevin emphasized the need to "look at the quality of the instructional program" and to "model a continuous love of learning," adding that effective leaders help students "build their self-awareness...and promote their critical thinking." District leader Minh linked strong instruction to students' futures: "Are we preparing them when they leave your classroom for post-secondary success?" Assistant principal Naomi described a specific academic goal: "Every child who crosses our doors should leave improving several years in their reading literacy rates." Retired principal Karol stated that "understanding curriculum and instruction is absolutely critical to alternative education." These practices extend the literature (Gilson, 2006; Tierney, 2020) by illustrating how leaders, not only teachers, shape the instructional conditions of alternative schools. Capper and Young (2014) and Theoharis (2007) both identified raising student achievement as a necessary component of social justice leadership; the instructional priorities described by participants situate academic identity development as an equity practice, not only as a performance metric. Borck (2019) found that traditional, standardized curricula are ineffective for marginalized students; the leaders in this study describe an instructional program that centers relevance, critical thinking, and student voice as the foundation of academic engagement.

Fostering Belonging: Routines, Rituals, and Culture-Building

Through consistent routines, meaningful rituals, and intentional culture-building, the leaders in this study worked to create schools where students, from their first day forward, encountered evidence that they were a part of an inclusive and welcoming community. These practices reflect Tierney's (2020) finding that a sense of "school as community and family" is a defining feature of effective alternative schools, as well as Borck's (2019) emphasis on culturally sustaining practices that facilitate student belonging and resilience. Overwhelmingly, fostering belonging was among the most frequently and passionately described dimensions of the participants' leadership.

Several leaders described student orientations as a deliberate act of community-building and inclusion. County Office leader Anita explained, "a practice of very deliberate onboarding...this was actually a very deliberate act of creating belonging." Principal Patrick described what participation in orientation signals: "During orientation, I pretty much tell you exactly what to expect at our school, and I can tell the students who go through orientation, because they're usually successful." Principal Stella described a structured intake process, four times per year, in which new students and their families

are welcomed with food prepared by staff: "the staff all donate their time and food...we invite families in." Vice principal Alma added that students attend "a student orientation where we take them on a tour of the campus," ensuring that from their first day, students feel known and expected. Tierney (2020) identified the advisory class as one of two specific components contributing to positive school culture in alternative settings, and the onboarding practices described here function similarly, as a structured welcoming into the community.

Whereas onboarding practices mark a student's entry into the community, recurring routines and rituals sustain that community over time. Former principal Sharon described the use of restorative circles, noting that,

A real focus on restorative justice was essential. Students knowing that they would have a voice and that their voice would be heard in processing harm done in the community was one of the most important aspects of the way the community functioned. Next, it was building that trust in how we showed up for kids, and having adults and teachers sit in circle. It is what eventually let students let their guard down, trust the space, and be vulnerable.

Principal Kelly described a monthly celebration of community values — "we celebrate each month one of the six C's [character, citizenship, communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking] and bring in food" — as well as enrichment programs in gardening, culinary arts, music, and meditation that give students spaces to connect beyond the classroom. Assistant principal Naomi described opening the gym during lunch: "I let them put music on the speakers, and hordes of kids come in there...creating that space for them, knowing that they're still children who need to move their bodies." Former principal Daniel described a weekly men's group and daily classroom circles as central to community life. These practices align with Jordan et al.'s (2022, p. 736) concept of "care as pedagogy," relationship practices that foster reciprocal trust between adults and students, and with Tierney's (2020) identification of teacher-student relationships as "advisors, advocates, and friends" as central to alternative school culture. Theoharis (2007) also found that improving school structures is one way principals enact social justice; the routines described here reinforce that structures of belonging are as important as academic structures in inclusive leadership.

Recognition practices and identity-building were prominent tools for affirming students and reinforcing a positive school culture. Vice principal Alma described recognizing student birthdays, holding quarterly awards nights, and calling attention to "bright spots"—students making positive contributions to the school community. Assistant principal Naomi described a recurring award cycle tied to themes such as joy, resilience, and improved reading scores. Former principal Sharon described the intentional construction of school identity: "identity for students and for staff around what it means...to be a [student at our school] was a big part of the work." Principal Stella described administering a belonging survey each semester "to gauge how students feel about us and what we can do to make them feel more belongingness." These practices reflect Borck's (2019) finding that practices facilitating student belonging and resilience are among the strongest promotive factors in alternative school settings, and Tierney's (2020) finding that students' ability to develop a new student identity is one of the

defining processes of transition into alternative schooling. These practices demonstrate that restorative justice, belonging surveys, recognition rituals, and shared school identity are among the tools that alternative school leaders use to build their schools' cultures.

Establishing visibility, cultivating conditions for learning, and fostering belonging through routines and culture-building are interconnected practices that, together, signal to students that they are known, valued, and expected to succeed. Yet relationship-building alone does not fully account for how these leaders advance inclusion. Alongside, alternative school leaders engage in a parallel set of actions directed at the structures, policies, and systems that have historically limited student access and participation. Embracing flexibility and removing barriers are ways these leaders identified and dismantled the obstacles that impede students' access to equitable educational experiences.

Flexibility and Removal of Barriers

Whereas relationship-building establishes the conditions under which students can engage in learning, the practices examined in this section reveal a parallel and equally deliberate set of practices aimed at the structures, policies, and systems that have historically limited students' access, participation, and success. Cultivating trust and belonging matters; so does ensuring that the structures surrounding students do not undermine what those relationships make possible. Together, these two dimensions of leadership practice reflect what Dantley and Tillman (2006) described as the active work of social justice leadership: not simply aspiring toward equity, but investigating and dismantling the conditions that reproduce it. Three interconnected dimensions of this work emerged from participants' accounts: designing flexible programs, confronting systemic bias, and legitimizing non-traditional pathways and definitions of success. Together, they respond to questions about how these leaders advance equity and social justice and what their practices might offer leaders across all school settings.

Breaking and Rebuilding: Leading Flexible Program Design

The capacity and willingness to design flexible programs emerged as a defining characteristic of alternative school leadership. Unlike traditional settings, where structures tend to be fixed and standardized, the leaders in this study described a fundamentally different relationship with time, space, credit, and curriculum. Gilson (2006) identified autonomy as a marker of effective alternative schools, and the leaders illustrate how that autonomy is exercised in concrete and consequential ways. Effective alternative school leaders draw on creativity, flexibility, and a student-centered approach to build programs that traditional schooling has been unable to provide.

The leaders described how they designed and adapted school structures, including schedules, credit systems, and instructional approaches, to ensure students could access more pathways to success. County Office leader Anita expressed the freedom this work requires:

Efficacy comes from being able to innovate in the margins. I've now got 20 years of waking up in the morning and being like, there's a problem, let's go fix it. We have enormous freedom in the [alternative education] space, an enormous opportunity to say, 'You know what? This isn't working. Let's change it.' We get to

play with space and time. We get to play with credits. We get to play with proficiency. We get to play with pedagogy.

Former principal Sharon described building "a different credit accumulation structure" and "customizing supports and interventions for small subgroups of kids." Principal Kevin emphasized the importance of helping students "recover their credits, but also not limit their further access to college and career pathways later on." Assistant principal Naomi captured the underlying principle: leaders need "at minimum, the flexibility to imagine something different and to be open to something different, and that a schedule can look different and in fact should look different." These practices reflect Jordan et al.'s (2022) finding that flexible curricula at the organizational level may improve student outcomes, and extend it by showing how leaders generate and sustain that flexibility. Many leaders described flexibility as an ongoing, responsive practice that requires constant adjustment to students' needs in the moment. Principal Sharon described her guiding question as, "If that system isn't serving our kids, what do we need to do to change the structures?" County Office leader Linda emphasized the importance of building staff capacity for this type of thinking: "train and support your staff, to build their capacity to...think differently is also really critical."

Several participants framed flexibility not only as a practice but as a core leadership disposition, a way of seeing and approaching the work that distinguishes effective alternative school leaders from those who default to traditional models. Retired principal Erika emphasized the need to "be out there looking at different ways to be able to meet these kids." Principal Stella described effective alternative school leaders as people who are "willing to try new things even if they don't work, because you're never going to find things that work unless you try." County Office leader Kaia stated, "You have to be super flexible in all areas." And County Office leader Anita described this disposition as a form of wisdom that must be cultivated: "figuring out the needs of your student body and being willing to...break and rebuild your school on the regular." It resonates with Capper and Young's (2014) call for social justice leaders to move away from fixed, individualistic approaches and embrace adaptive, collaborative ones. As the participants suggest, this disposition has something to offer leaders well beyond the alternative school context.

Naming and Disrupting Inequity: Addressing Systemic Bias in Schools

Designing flexible programs expands access, but the leaders revealed a deeper level of the work in alternative schools: the direct recognition and disruption of the systemic biases embedded in school structures, policies, and practices. Bogotch (2002) characterized social justice as a dynamic, ongoing struggle, and for the leaders in this study, that struggle is immediate and context-specific. Turhan (2010) characterized social justice leadership as the fight against institutionalized inequities that benefit some students and harm others. This dimension of leadership practice most directly addresses how alternative school leaders' practices advance equity and social justice by locating the problem not in students but in the systems that surround them.

Several leaders described taking an explicit and direct stance toward the systemic inequities their students face. Principal Carmen articulated her purpose in these terms:

My purpose is to interrupt moments of injustice for our students and leverage the positional power I have to serve the students and to serve their families. In terms of my leadership, my ultimate purpose is that we are human beings and we're in this location, in this place, which is school, where they're with us the majority of the time, to love and care for our youth who are going to be our future.

County Office leader Kaia described the work as requiring an understanding of context:

"My core purpose is to help kids and families that have been marginalized by the system understand the system they're operating in, understand that they've been pushed out not because they're bad, but because the system is rigged against them."

County Office leader Anita identified a structural inequity embedded in our state's educational policy: "We have a rule in [our state] that says you have to have a continuation high school, but you don't have to have anybody who's qualified to run a continuation high school, which is an institutionally sanctioned gentrification of our kids."

Beyond naming inequity, the leaders revealed concrete actions they take to address bias within their schools and districts. Principal Kevin described implementing "equity walkthroughs" to provide teachers with "notes of reflection" about the instructional practices in their classrooms. Former principal Daniel described establishing a "student Racial Justice Task Force" and conducting substantial equity training with staff. Principal Jessica described working to remove barriers created by factors outside students' control: "There are extreme, extenuating external circumstances that are preying upon our students...through no fault of their own. So it is my goal to remove those barriers." Principal Stella noted the demographic disparity that motivates this work: "We have a very different demographic here than the overall demographic of our district. So it is very clear to me who we are not serving at our big schools." Principal Patrick connected this work to a personal commitment: "I really want to see our black and brown students succeed...I'm really trying to even the playing field by at least trying to get them a high school diploma. Whatever it takes." These practices reflect Theoharis's (2007) finding that principals who enact social justice focus on improving school structures and building staff capacity as simultaneous and reinforcing commitments, both of which are visible in the actions described here.

Several participants engaged with questions of race, power, and their own positionality as described in the literature on social justice leadership. Principal Kaia, a White woman leading a predominantly Latino school, reflected, "Sometimes alternative schools can be sort of white savior-ish, and so thinking about approaching it with humility and an eye to providing resources and opportunities instead of teaching people how to be." Assistant principal Naomi grappled with the complexity of navigating racial dynamics from her own racial standpoint, noting the difficulty of holding both care and equity when power and identity are implicated. These reflections align with Patel's (2016) argument that schools reflect the hegemonic practices of the broader culture, and with Dantley and Green's (2015) call for social justice leaders to engage in honest accountability about power and privilege in their own practice. The leaders demonstrate recognition of their own positionality and approach their work with the humility that the literature suggests is essential.

Redefining Metrics: Legitimizing Non-Traditional Pathways and Definitions of Success

In addition to designing flexible programs and addressing systemic bias, the participants discussed redefining success for students in alternative settings and actively validating the pathways to achieve it. This dimension of practice most directly addresses whether and how these leaders enact and share practices that inform inclusive, equity-centered approaches relevant across all school settings. The argument implicit in what these leaders do is that the metrics and pathways sanctioned by traditional schooling are themselves a form of exclusion. Dismantling that exclusion requires creating new measures, not simply advocating for students within the traditional ones. Tierney (2020) offered a community-constructed definition of success in alternative schools that encompasses academic and social engagement, ownership of one's education, and a sense of belonging, a definition that stands in contrast to narrower, grade-based metrics. The leaders in this study operationalize that definition, building systems and narratives that reflect the full range of what their students can and do achieve.

There is a noticeable tension between the metrics imposed by the state and districts and the more holistic measures that leaders believe better reflect their students' growth. County Office leader Anita articulated this tension:

There is enormous pressure to be measured by traditional school metrics, and often that winds up with [alternative education] folks feeling like they're either losers or being defined as losers. Define your own metrics in a way that is meaningful, and then shape the narrative about how to tell your superintendent that this is how you should judge my school.

County Office leader Linda offered alternative sources of data: "I believe in making student-centered decisions and using data to inform them. It doesn't have to be traditional data. Data could be what you're seeing day-to-day in the classroom. In alternative schools, a lot of our traditional data systems aren't helpful." She went on to describe building enrollment trackers and student monitoring systems designed to capture what traditional measures miss. Retired principal Karol described a growth-oriented standard that reflects this alternative logic: "They might be making progress at different rates and in different ways, but I really wanted to see progress." County Office leader Anita captured the depth of the challenge: "Every single person who comes into [alternative education] is dragging a traditional school background with them, and most of the time they don't have any way of understanding or talking about what success would look like." These practices respond directly to Gilson's (2006) call for research identifying the factors that lead to higher graduation rates in alternative schools, extending that call by showing how leaders themselves can construct the measures by which such success is recognized and communicated.

Redefining metrics alone is not sufficient if the pathways available to students remain narrow. The data reveal that alongside the reconstruction of success metrics, leaders actively build and promote routes that move students toward meaningful futures through channels that traditional schooling may not acknowledge. Principal Kevin described efforts to ensure that credit recovery did not foreclose opportunity, establish

an "adult school pipeline," and connect students to vocational education and community college pathways. Former principal Daniel described bringing drug and alcohol intervention specialists into the school day and connecting students to community organizations, treating these as legitimate educational services rather than peripheral supports. Principal Jessica stated, "We tell them that a non-traditional pathway is completely okay, and we have programs that involve mentors and field trips to intern sites and trainings." Retired principal Erika described advocating for students to access classes at comprehensive sites and fighting back when students were denied re-entry: "Because not everybody does school the same." County Office leader Anita offered a framework that unifies this mindset: "the [alternative education] mode is like more ways to win. How can you demonstrate competency or mastery through this door or this door or this door? And you get to choose which one you want to walk through."

The work of redefining success and expanding pathways does not stop at the school's edge. Several leaders described a broader goal: to position their schools as legitimate and generative models of practice with something to offer the wider educational system. Principal Carmen articulated this vision: "Alternative schools can be a model for learning and a model for understanding and best practices that would leverage some change at the comprehensive or the big sites." Multiple participants noted that their schools had received formal recognition, including state model school designations. Principal Stella described her school as both "a model school" and "a model [professional learning community]." The use of restorative circles and fostering a culture of belonging provide further examples of inclusive and equity-centered approaches. These efforts suggest that leaders who do this work well are generating knowledge that, as Principal Carmen notes, has the potential to transform practice across all school settings.

Chapter Summary

The central question this chapter set out to answer was whether and how alternative school leaders' practices reflect the principles of inclusive educational leadership. These leaders, in fact, enact inclusive educational leadership through two distinct dimensions of practice. The first is relational: they build trust, visibility, and cultural conditions through which students come to experience school as a place made for them. The second is structural: they interrogate and dismantle the policies, programs, and systemic biases that have historically made school challenging for vulnerable students. Much of the literature on alternative schooling has emphasized the relational dimensions of effective practice (Tierney, 2020; Borck, 2019; Jordan et al., 2022), whereas the structural dimensions have received comparatively less attention. This chapter contributes evidence that the leaders themselves understood structural change as inseparable from relational care. To build trust with a student and then leave unchanged the structures that excluded them in the first place does not reflect true inclusion. The practices described here reflect an understanding that equity requires both dimensions to be active at once.

There is also a broader implication for educational leadership beyond alternative settings. The leaders in this study operated in contexts that, by design, afforded them greater flexibility and autonomy than their counterparts in traditional schools. But the practices they describe—leading with visibility, cultivating conditions for learning,

fostering belonging, designing flexible structures, confronting systemic bias, and legitimizing non-traditional pathways—do not require an alternative school context to enact. They require a particular perspective toward students, structures, and the purpose of schooling. That perspective, and the practices it generates, represents a contribution that alternative school leaders are well-positioned to offer the broader field. Chapter 5 examines what stands in the way of that contribution—the constraints, tensions, and conditions of systemic invisibility that these leaders must navigate to do this work.

Table 2 below illustrates and defines the findings, sub-findings, and sample quotes for this chapter.

Table 2
Findings and Sub-findings for Research Question #1

Main Finding	Sub-Finding	Sample Quotes
Relationship-Building to Support Inclusion Intentional leadership practices that build trust and affirm relationships with students, staff, families, and communities to promote belonging and inclusion.	Establishing Leadership Visibility	"Just being very present as best you can and really work on relationships...when they can trust you, they will walk with you to wherever you lead them." (Kelly, principal)
	Cultivating Conditions for Learning Actions taken by alternative school leaders to create responsive environments that address students' academic, social, and emotional needs to promote a readiness to learn.	"creating protocols, processes, procedures, structures that support them in the everyday to really move our students forward, whether it be academically, socially, emotionally, just providing those supports for teachers to make sure that they can do what they need to do for our students." (Alma, vice principal)

Main Finding	Sub-Finding	Sample Quotes
	Fostering Belonging through Routines, Rituals, and Culture-Building Use of predictable routines, meaningful rituals, and inclusive cultural practices to build connection, strengthen relationships, and create a sense of belonging.	"Students knowing that they would have a voice and that their voice would be heard in processing harm done in the community was one of the most important aspects of the way the community functioned." (Sharon, former principal)
Flexibility and Removal of Barriers	Leading Flexible Program Design	Leaders need "at minimum, the flexibility to imagine something different and to be open to something different, and that a schedule can look different and in fact should look different." (Naomi, assistant principal)
Identifying and reducing structural, procedural, and cultural obstacles that limit access, participation, and success	Actions taken by alternative school leaders to design and adapt structures, schedules, and instructional approaches to meet diverse student needs. Addressing Systemic Bias in Schools Actions taken by the alternative school leader to recognize and confront policies, structures, and practices that propagate inequities.	"My core purpose is to help kids and families that have been marginalized by the system understand the system they're operating in, understand that they've been pushed out not because they're bad, but because the system is rigged against them." (Kaia, County Office leader)

Main Finding	Sub-Finding	Sample Quotes
	Legitimizing Non-Traditional Pathways and Definitions of Success	"Every single person who comes into [alternative education] is dragging a traditional school background with them, and most of the time they don't have any way of understanding or talking about what success would look like."
	Recognizing and promoting alternative pathways, holistic measures, and diverse indicators of student growth.	(Anita, County Office leader)

Chapter 5: Challenges Faced by Alternative School Leaders: Constraints, Tensions, and Systemic Invisibility

Constraints, Tensions, and Systemic Invisibility

Alternative school leaders operate within a paradox. They are charged with serving the students most marginalized by the traditional educational system, yet the systems in which they work frequently overlook, underfund, and misunderstand the schools they lead. In response to the second research question, "What are the challenges, if any, of leading alternative schools?" The participants revealed that the answer is as much structural as it is operational. The challenges are embedded in the design, positioning, and resourcing of alternative schools within school districts. Three interconnected conditions define this structural burden: alternative schools and their leaders are rendered systematically invisible and misunderstood; the small size of these schools amplifies every disruption, causing individual incidents to carry institutional weight; and leadership itself becomes so concentrated that it produces overload. Taken together, these conditions generate compounding pressure that shapes not only how leaders spend their time and energy but also whether their schools can sustain the work at all.

These structural conditions do not exist in isolation from the broader findings of this study. The same systemic forces that determine which students arrive at alternative schools — and under what circumstances — also shape the conditions in which leaders receive and serve them. Earlier discussion established the relational and advocacy work at the core of alternative school leadership; the present finding reveals the terrain on which that work unfolds. Grounded in the risk and resilience framework developed by Fergus and Zimmerman (2005), this analysis examines the specific risks that alternative school leaders navigate in order to sustain their schools and the students within them.

When You Have Multiple Roles: Leader Capacity Overload

The most consistent pattern across the data was the concentration of multiple professional roles within a single leader. Principal Carmen explained, "I am the principal, I am the curriculum leader, I am the disciplinary person, I am the budget person. I am the facilities manager. I am the Dean of Students. I am the attendance person." Principal Kevin oversaw five distinct alternative education programs simultaneously, acknowledging that each deserved 100% of his attention but received only a fraction. Former principal Sharon captured the weight of the role in sharing, "I felt very much like I was a principal all the time," pointing to something beyond ordinary workload. It is the responsibility felt by school leaders to serve in their roles even when they are technically off-duty.

Funding challenges emerged as another dimension of leader capacity overload. Participants described a wide range of resource conditions — from chronic underfunding to comparative sufficiency — consistent with Ruiz de Velasco et al.'s (2008) documentation of wide discrepancy in alternative school program quality across districts, attributing variation in part to differences in how districts perceive their alternative education obligations. Principal Stella stated that the work her school does is important, but "it's misunderstood, and it's not properly funded." Retired principal Karol

described the budget justification process as a recurring ordeal, requiring her to marshal data to support the argument that her students deserved services:

As you start talking about lower numbers, the more CBOs or superintendents start questioning...do you really need that? It doesn't seem like you need that. And I can't tell you how many meetings I've had to schedule time and energy and have data points to show...Why? Why do these kids deserve this?

Principal Kevin noted that his school served students with Individualized Education Plans and 504 Plans at nearly three times the rate of the neighboring traditional high school, while having far fewer resources to support them. On the other end of the spectrum, County Office leader Kaia reported, "We are blessed. We have very good financial resources. We have [multiple] resource streams." Budget vulnerability, when present, is a direct and material expression of the systemic invisibility described in the preceding section, a consequence of districts failing to see or account for their alternative schools.

The final dimension of leader capacity overload is the most personal. Alternative school leaders work in close proximity to students who may carry significant trauma—students who have, in many cases, been failed repeatedly by other schools before arriving at their door. County Office leader Linda described the emotional nature of the role: "You're so close to kids, and kids are bringing in so much — there's a lot more secondhand trauma." Principal Kelly described one of the most difficult years of her career. It was a year marked by safety concerns, neighborhood complaints, budget cuts, and fractured district relationships. Retired principal Karol characterized these as "really hard, complicated jobs that take a lot of emotional strength and fortitude to do on a day-to-day basis." Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) identified discouragement and the absence of meaningful support as risks that, in this study, are faced by alternative school leaders. They included the gradual erosion of emotional reserves, the labor of providing a counter-narrative, role multiplication, and the daily proximity to students whose needs exceed what any under-resourced school should be asked to meet alone.

When No One Sees You: Invisibility and Misunderstandings of Alternative Schools

The misconceptions surrounding alternative schools have roots in the historical evolution of alternative education in the United States. Tislington (2006) documented a decisive shift: programs that began as student-centered, non-competitive alternatives to traditional schooling became increasingly oriented toward remediation. Nearly every participant shared the belief that their school is misunderstood in the broader community and even within their own districts. Principal Carmen stated, "We continue to have this perception at school that it's where all the bad kids go." Former principal Daniel described a misconception of continuation schools:

... continuation schools tend to be, quote, unquote, dumping grounds or a place to just go to get the credits, like a credit mill...just make it as easy as possible so we can get [students] across the stage. And for me, it's really important to see

that we're actually trying to bring life back into the students who have been pushed away from the traditional system.

Principal Stella noted that colleagues at comprehensive schools often used her school as an explicit disciplinary threat. Despite evidence to the contrary in prior findings, misconceptions continue to overshadow the work of these alternative school leaders.

Several participants reported having a positive, supportive rapport with district leaders and the school board. However, a distinct pattern emerged: participants reported that their schools were more often an afterthought in the districts' decision-making and planning. Principal Jessica described having to act as "a squeaky wheel, sometimes having to remind them, hey, by the way, we're over here." Vice principal Alma reported that no one from her district had visited her school during the entire academic year, reflecting, "When no one comes to see the program, I think that's a message in itself." County Office leader Kaia described a moment when a district memorandum of understanding was finalized without accounting for her school at all. It was a consequence that was not merely symbolic. Her school was unable to return to full capacity after a temporary closure because it had not been included in the planning.

Faced with persistent invisibility and misunderstanding, many participants have assumed responsibility for actively managing the public narrative about their schools. Former principal Sharon described a deliberate counter-narrative strategy, intentionally pushing out positive press because "nature hates a vacuum, and a vacuum gets filled with a horror story that may or may not be true." Principal Patrick declines to use the term "continuation" in public-facing contexts, presenting his school as a credit recovery program to shift community perceptions. County Office leader Anita described her first year as defined, in significant part, by sustained effort to reshape how her students' families perceived her school. Kim (2006) argued that meaningful change in alternative schools requires genuine dialogue about the nature and purpose of alternative schooling. Participants' accounts reveal that this dialogue falls to individual leaders to initiate and sustain. The work of changing perception, like so much of alternative school leadership, often defaults to a single leader supported by a small team of teachers and staff.

When a Pebble is a Boulder: Impact of Small Disruptions

Among the differences that distinguish alternative school leadership from leadership in traditional settings, the consequences of school size may be the most immediate. Alternative schools are, by design, small, amplifying the effects of everything that happens within the building. Former principal Sharon offered a precise description: "a pebble in a pond is a boulder" in a small school, where one student having a difficult day could disrupt instruction across the campus. Jordan et al. (2022) found that policies affecting class size and teacher well-being at alternative schools may produce measurable consequences for student outcomes — a research finding that participants' accounts render in concrete terms. Principal Jessica explained, "If you have one bad staff member or one group of students that's really struggling, it has an outsized effect." When there is a dilemma, there is no parallel classroom to move to, no other administrator to defer the conversation to, and no critical mass of students to maintain instructional momentum while the leader attends to a crisis.

Within the small-school context, chronic absenteeism, for example, compounds the structural vulnerability that participants described. Principal Carmen identified attendance as "the biggest challenge by far." With fewer students per class, each absence carries more instructional and social weight; the absent student does not simply miss content but disrupts the personal connections that the cohort depends on. Retired principal Karol explained that she needed at least one teacher available every day just to keep the classroom open for students. This is not a goal, but a minimum condition for the school to function. Through the lens of Fergus and Zimmerman's risk and resilience framework (2005), chronic absenteeism in an alternative school constitutes a compounding risk that can adversely affect all students, not just those who are absent.

The impact of small disruptions extends beyond daily instruction into the longer arc of institutional culture. Because alternative schools are small, the relationships among leaders, staff, students, and families are more direct and more personally constructed than in larger settings. Principal Kelly described recalibrating her approach each time a new administrator arrives in the district:

It's been a challenge every time there's a change in leadership; I have to start all over again. So whether it's new principals at the two big schools or new leadership in the district office... it becomes like a dumping ground. That's not what we're for, but having to fight about that each year gets frustrating for me.

Former principal Daniel noted that terminating a liked staff member, even one who was not effective, could damage campus morale in ways that would be impossible at a larger school, simply because of the weight individual relationships carry at a small site. Principal Stella offered a counterpoint that is equally important: the school's small size also enables cultural responsiveness. "We are small, so we can make change, we can move quickly, and we can adjust to kids." Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) identified stable relationships and coherent environments as essential protective factors against risk. In the alternative school context, those protective factors are both more powerful and more necessary than in traditional settings — when they break down, the consequences are immediate and far-reaching.

Chapter Summary

A portrait of compounding pressure emerges across participants. Systemic invisibility creates the conditions for misunderstanding, and misunderstanding produces the underfunding and institutional indifference that leave alternative schools without adequate resources or support. Because alternative schools are small, every resource gap is felt immediately and personally — by the staff member who cannot be replaced, by the cohort destabilized by a single absence, by the leader who has no one to confer with during a crisis. And because that leader is also the advocate, the budget analyst, the counselor, and the public relations officer, the weight falls on one person. Capper and Young (2014) called on social justice leaders to move away from the superhero model of leadership and toward collaborative, structurally supported practice. That call also belongs to districts, county offices, and administrator preparation programs. As the

following chapter demonstrates, the leaders in this study have not waited for the system to catch up. They have fostered resilience and hope to sustain their work.

Table 3 below illustrates and defines the findings, sub-findings, and sample quotes for this chapter.

Table 3

Findings and Sub-findings for Research Question #2

Main Finding	Sub-Finding	Sample Quotes
Constraints, Tensions, and Systemic Invisibility Structural and systemic limits and pressures that overlook and/or undervalue alternative schools and/or alternative school leaders.	Leader Capacity Overload	"I am the principal, I am the curriculum leader, I am the disciplinary person, I am the budget person. I am the facilities manager. I am the Dean of Students. I am the attendance person." (Carmen, principal)
	Conditions in which alternative school leaders face high demands, limited resources, and competing responsibilities that strain their ability to respond.	
	Invisibility and Misunderstandings of Alternative Schools	"...nature hates a vacuum, and a vacuum gets filled with a horror story that may or may not be true." (Sharon, former principal)
	Limited knowledge and persistent misconceptions about the purpose, practices, and impact of alternative schools and their leaders.	
	Impact of Small Disruptions	"If you have one staff member or one group of students that's really struggling, it has an outsized effect." (Jessica, principal)
	Understanding that small decisions and actions can produce unintended negative effects on relationships, school culture, engagement, and student outcomes.	

Chapter 6: Cultivating Resilience and Hope: How Alternative School Leaders Demonstrate and Sustain Resilience in Practice

Cultivating Resilience and Hope as Alternative School Leaders

Alternative school leaders serve students who have experienced marginalization, academic disruption, and systemic inequity, often within institutional contexts that offer limited resources. To sustain this work, alternative school leaders must cultivate resilience as a deliberate set of practices embedded in their daily leadership. The fourth finding, *Cultivating Resilience and Hope as Alternative School Leaders*, responds to the third and final research question: In what ways, if any, do alternative school leaders demonstrate and sustain resilience in their leadership practice within their school settings? It examines the practices that strengthen alternative school leaders' capacity to navigate complex challenges while sustaining their leadership and overall well-being.

Two theoretical frameworks inform the interpretation of this finding. First, Fergus and Zimmerman's (2005) risk and resilience framework conceptualizes resilience as "the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with risks" (p. 399). Their framework identifies promotive and protective factors that buffer against risk and support positive outcomes, providing a lens for understanding how alternative school leaders navigate adversity. This framework rejects the notion of resilience as a static, individual trait and instead situates it as a dynamic process shaped by context, relationships, and resources. Second, hope theory serves as a complementary lens. Snyder et al. (1991) defined hope as a cognitive-motivational construct consisting of two interrelated components: agency thinking, which reflects the motivation and determination to pursue goals, and pathways thinking, which reflects the capacity to generate plans toward those goals. Building on this foundation, Hellman et al. (2025) extended hope measurement to collective contexts, validating a scale that captures shared hope within communities. Together, these frameworks position hope as both an individual resource and a collective capacity relevant to sustaining resilience in leadership.

To examine the relationship among hope, resilience, and social justice in alternative school leadership, individual and collective hope scales were administered to participants. Hope scales are self-report tools used to measure a person's goal-directed thinking and motivation. They help to determine how well someone can develop plans to meet their goals and their confidence in pursuing them (Hellman et al., 2025; Snyder et al., 1991). Administering hope scales helped quantify hope as a psychological resource among alternative school leaders and examine its relationship to resilience and the pursuit of social justice leadership. The results of the hope scales are presented and interpreted below in relation to practices that participants identified as sources of renewal and sustenance.

The analysis presented here builds on the findings discussed earlier, which examined how alternative school leaders enact inclusive, equity-centered leadership and navigate the structural and systemic challenges of their school contexts. Where prior findings surfaced the conditions and barriers these leaders encounter, the present analysis turns to how they endure and are equipped to sustain their work over time. Participant voices are centered throughout, interpreted through the lenses of risk and

resilience theory and hope theory, offering a portrait of resilience that is relational, purposeful, and collective.

Hope in Context: Scale Results Among Alternative School Leaders

Before turning to the relational and collective dimensions of resilience, let us consider the quantitative portrait of hope that participants offered, because it illuminates both the psychological resources these leaders bring to their work and the conditions under which those resources are produced and sustained.

Participants completed both the Individual Hope Scale and the Collective Hope Scale. The Individual Hope Scale, adapted from Pommer's (2024) Teacher Hope Scale, is a self-report instrument that measures leaders' motivation and determination to pursue goals, as well as their capacity to work toward them. The Collective Hope Scale, developed and validated by Hellman et al. (2025), measures perceived shared hope within an organization, assessing participants' beliefs about their school community's capacity to identify goals, develop strategies, and sustain the willpower to achieve them. Both scales use a six-point response format, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), with total scores from 6 to 36. Scores of 6 to 18 indicate low hope, 19 to 23 indicate moderate hope, and 24 to 36 indicate high hope.

Individual Hope Scale scores among participants ranged from 6 to 36, with a group mean of 30.8, placing the cohort firmly in the high hope range (Table 4). Fourteen of the 16 participants who provided scorable responses fell within the high hope range. County Office leader Anita and retired principal Karol both scored 36, the maximum possible score, reflecting the strongest endorsement of agency and pathways thinking across all items. Principal Carmen, former principal Daniel, and principal Jessica each scored 35. One participant, Principal Patrick, scored 6, representing a notable departure from the group pattern. That score warrants contextual interpretation, as individual circumstances, including factors specific to Principal Patrick, may have shaped his responses. Vice principal Alma explained the role that hope plays in her work: "One thing that keeps me going is the hope that the students that we serve are going to find that thing that makes them feel confident, again, feel passionate, feel successful."

Table 4
Individual Hope Scale Results

Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Total
Sharon	6	6	6	6	5	4	33
Carmen	5	6	6	6	6	6	35
Kevin	5	5	5	5	5	4	29
Anita	6	6	6	6	6	6	36
Alma	5	3	6	4	6	6	30
Kelly	6	5	5	6	6	4	32
Daniel	6	6	6	6	6	5	35

Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Total
Patrick	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Naomi	4	6	4	5	5	6	30
Jessica	6	5	6	6	6	6	35
Linda	5	3	6	6	5	6	31
Kaia	5	6	4	6	5	6	32
Karol	6	6	6	6	6	6	36
Erika	4	5	5	6	5	5	30
Mihn	3	6	6	6	5	6	32
Stella	5	5	5	5	5	5	30
						AVG	30.8

Note. Q1–Q6 represent the survey items. Scores range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Total scores of 24–36 indicate high hope.

Collective Hope Scale scores ranged from 23 to 35, with a group mean of 29.4 (Table 5). All 16 participants who completed the collective scale scored within the high hope range. Principal Carmen scored highest at 35, followed by County Office leader Anita at 34 and retired principal Karol at 32. Two participants, district leader Minh with a score of 23 and County Office leader Kaia with a score of 24, scored at the lower end of the high hope range, suggesting some variation in how leaders perceived their school communities' shared capacity to pursue and achieve collective goals. Principal Kevin expressed how collective hope manifests itself in the work of his teachers and staff:

We want to re-engage [students'] sense of safety and belonging, right, that they deserve an education, that they deserve promising futures, that they deserve having this group of caring adults that will always push for them to have more because that's hope, right? It's something that you can't let fizzle out.

Table 5
Collective Hope Scale Results

Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Total
Sharon	6	5	6	5	4	4	30
Carmen	6	6	6	5	6	6	35
Kevin	5	5	5	4	5	5	29
Anita	5	6	6	6	5	6	34
Alma	4	5	6	6	4	4	29

Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Total
Kelly	5	4	6	5	5	6	31
Daniel	5	5	5	5	6	5	31
Patrick	5	5	5	5	5	5	30
Naomi	5	5	5	5	5	5	30
Jessica	6	6	5	4	3	5	29
Linda	4	6	5	4	5	5	29
Kaia	3	3	4	5	4	5	24
Karol	6	5	5	4	6	6	32
Erika	5	5	5	3	4	4	26
Minh	3	3	3	4	5	5	23
Stella	5	4	5	5	5	5	29
AVG							29.4

Note. Q1–Q6 represent the survey items. Scores range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Total scores of 24–36 indicate high hope.

These results gain meaning when read alongside what participants described in their interviews. Leaders who articulated a strong sense of purpose, who named relationships as sources of renewal, and who described their schools as communities of shared commitment also demonstrated high levels of both individual and collective hope. This alignment reflects Campa's (2010) argument that hope, particularly in its collective form, is forged through relationships and shared purpose rather than residing solely within individuals. County Office leader Anita described this dynamic: "If you are willing and able to provide a space for kids that is fundamentally respectful of who they are and their experience, and don't define them as flawed, their hope is just contagious." County Office leader Kaia situated hope explicitly within the labor of leadership:

Hope is the beginning of doing the work. Hope only happens in the context of doing the work, and if I didn't have hope that we could make a difference in the system or change or impact inequities and impact communities and lives, it would be really hard to do this job.

District leader Minh's reflection connected hope to the school environment itself: "Our kids are still coming to school because we create that safety. There's some hope that they see in our schools."

The hope scale findings, read alongside participant narratives, affirm that hope in alternative school leadership is neither passive nor self-generated. It is produced through deliberate, sustained relational practices that renew the leader and create the

conditions under which students and staff can hope. This initial work demonstrates the potential role of hope and the use of hope scales to see how it correlates with other student and school outcomes. Although this sample size is too small for quantitative analysis, the use of the hope scales shows an interesting angle for future research. What follows examines the specific practices through which that hope is generated and sustained.

“I Find My People”: Relationship Renewal as Sources of Resilience and Hope

In response to the research question of how these leaders sustain their work, participants consistently described relationships as a deliberate resource they returned to when the demands of the role became draining. This pattern reflects Sutton and Gong’s (2021) social dimension of resilience, which emphasizes that sustaining leadership requires building and drawing on support networks. For a significant number of participants, time spent directly with students was the most consistent and reliable source of renewal. Vice principal Alma described her approach to preventing burnout: “How I remedy that is I go and spend time with the youth. I find my people. I hang out with the students. I sit with them at lunch.” The deliberateness of that choice, to seek out students as a form of restoration, reflects what Halevi and Schechter (2023) identified as a resilience-boosting factor among school principals: student interactions that remind leaders of their purpose and reinforce their commitment to the work. County Office leader Linda described a similar experience: “What gives me energy is the youth ... When I have an opportunity to connect with youth, it really supports me.” Principal Jessica described maintaining classroom presence not only as an instructional practice but as a source of sustenance: “When I’m at my workplace, if I’m feeling [burnt out], I try to leave my office. I spend time in classrooms with students.” Witnessing student growth, as former principal Sharon described it, was its own form of hope: “To see someone rise, to see someone go out into the world and manifest that future that they had wanted for themselves—nothing’s more hopeful than that.”

Relationship renewal extended beyond students to encompass staff, families, and professional colleagues. Earlier findings connected relationship-building as a practice of inclusion. Here, several leaders described their rapport with staff as equally central to their resilience. Principal Carmen emphasized the importance of connecting with her staff as a source of resilience: “My investment in my staff is equally as important as my investment in students.” She also connected staff relationships to her own sense of effectiveness as a leader, reflecting that her best leadership occurred when she was in genuine consultation with her team: “When I’m doing this job at my best is when I’ve engaged in a consultancy with my team or with others in some way, and we have shared power, and we make a decision together.” This orientation reflects Theoharis’s (2024) reconceptualization of resilience as encompassing both professional and personal strategies—and situates shared leadership as one of them. Principal Patrick described his relationship with staff through an identity he had cultivated deliberately: “I’m like a teacher’s principal, so I believe in our teachers.” Assistant Principal Naomi offered a more systemic perspective on what happens when relationship renewal is neglected: “Taking action without really talking to people, building consensus, creating conditions, attending to culture, can really lead to some unintended consequences. You cannot do too much meaning-making.” County Office

leader Kaia extended this relational stance beyond the school walls: “It’s about being a partner with the community and understanding the assets and strengths that exist in the community that you’re serving.”

These accounts reflect a leadership stance in which relationships are sustained through reciprocity, presence, and shared investment in a common purpose. Campa (2010) critiqued resilience frameworks that locate strength solely within the individual, arguing that they ignore social and historical contexts. The relationship practices described by these leaders suggest an alternative model: resilience drawn from connection to others that can be continuously renewed. The hope scale results are consistent with this interpretation. Leaders who articulated the richest relationship practices also scored highest on collective hope, affirming that the psychological resource of hope is not individually held but socially produced. Taken together, these relationship practices respond directly to the research question: alternative school leaders demonstrate resilience not by withdrawing from the demands of their role but by returning, deliberately and repeatedly, to the human connections that make those demands meaningful and sustainable. Undergirding those relational practices, however, is something more foundational—a moral clarity about why they do the work.

“Beautiful Orchestra”: Moral Purpose as Collective Meaning Making

Alternative school leaders in this study articulated a deep, internalized sense of purpose rooted in a commitment to students who had been pushed out of or underserved by traditional educational systems. This moral clarity served not merely as a personal motivator but as a sustaining force that gave meaning to the difficulties inherent in alternative school leadership. Dantley and Tillman (2006) proposed that social justice leadership is not confined to research or scholarship but must be enacted through daily practice. For the leaders in this study, that enactment began with a clear answer to the question of why they do this work.

The pull toward alternative education was, for many participants, rooted in a recognition of who had been left behind. Former principal Daniel described a commitment that predated his entry into administration: “[I] always had a passion and dedication to working with underserved populations and students that are oftentimes neglected or pushed out of the traditional systems, and that instilled in me a desire to want to get into administration.” For County Office leader Anita, the draw was similarly personal: she described feeling “personally compelled by the idea of working with kids who had been underserved and were struggling,” and went on to articulate her purpose with precision: “My purpose is to create the spaces that bring out that joy and satisfaction in kids who were not well served in other places.” Retired principal Erika offered a parallel framing, describing a purpose that centered on access and recognition: “My purpose was to give them an education that they thought they didn’t have.” These accounts illustrate what Theoharis (2007) identified in leaders who effectively sustain their work over time: they do so because their practices are rooted in commitments that endure adversity. Purpose, in this sense, functions as a promotive factor within Fergus and Zimmerman’s (2005) resilience framework: an internal asset that buffers against the discouragement and resistance that social justice leaders routinely encounter. The leaders in this study did not describe purpose as abstract or aspirational. Principal Patrick conveyed a sense of urgency that grounded his purpose

in specific, lived stakes: "I'm tired of waking up and looking at the news in the morning and saying that another one of my students has died or has committed a serious crime. At the very least, I feel like I have to get them to a high school diploma."

What distinguished the moral purpose of leaders in this study was its collective dimension. Purpose was not held privately; it was distributed across school communities and woven into their culture. This finding aligns with Sutton and Gong's (2021) argument that resilience is not solely an internal endeavor but is strengthened through shared strategies and mutually supportive relationships. The leaders described schools in which a shared vision around student potential informed the work of every adult in the building. Principal Carmen located the source of her school's success not in individual effort but in collective belief: "The reason why we are as successful as we are is because the collective efficacy at this school and in each individual is extraordinary." County Office leader Linda observed a similar dynamic, noting that a "shared vision around the work" was visible in how teachers engaged with students: "You can see that the teachers are invested in the youth, that there are strong relationships." When teachers witness student growth, she reflected, something shifts when they see a youth come in, and then they see that youth improve in some way, or change." Principal Kevin described this collective spirit in these terms:

The beautiful orchestra of the strengths of all of our educators, faculty, and staff makes this place transcend home and academic institution to a place where students are not only excited to come to, but almost are not in a rush to leave, because it is such a source of nourishment on the mind, body, and spirit and soul.

The image of an orchestra suggests that the moral purpose sustaining these leaders was not a solo performance but a coordinated, interdependent act. Capper and Young (2014) called on social justice leaders to resist the myth of the heroic individual and instead work collaboratively. The leaders in this study appeared to have done precisely that by embedding their purpose in the fabric of their schools, so that no single person bore the full weight of the mission.

Closely intertwined with moral purpose was hope as an active, demanding orientation toward what was possible. Several participants explicitly reflected on hope as integral to their ability to sustain equity-centered work in contexts marked by risk and chronic underresourcing. County Office leader Kaia stated, "If I didn't have hope that we could make a difference in the system or change or impact inequities and impact communities and lives, it would be really hard to do this job." She did not romanticize hope, however, adding that "hope is hard work, and belief comes from experience and data." Retired principal Karol identified hope as essential to alternative school leadership itself: "Hope is probably really a powerful component of working in alternative education, because you can always, as the leader or one of the adults working on a complex situation with a student, see that there can be positive outcomes." The leaders in this study demonstrated both agency and pathways toward hope (Snyder et al., 1991). Their moral purpose supplied the agency, the drive to keep going, whereas their work within schools supplied the pathways: specific practices, relationships, and structures through which their commitment to students was enacted. In this way, moral purpose

responds to the research question as a demonstrated practice that these leaders enacted daily and sustained collectively, providing a foundation for resilience that could endure the adversity inherent in alternative school leadership.

“No One Gets a Master’s in Alternative Education”: Networks and Professional Communities as Foundations for Development and Support

Alternative school leadership is a field without a formal pipeline. Unlike their counterparts in comprehensive schools, leaders who work in continuation, independent study, community day, and other alternative settings enter the principalship without specialized preparation, without a dedicated credential, and often without colleagues who understand the particular demands of their context. The absence of a structured pathway into alternative school leadership represents, in the terms of Fergus and Zimmerman's (2005) resilience framework, a significant risk factor, one that increases the likelihood of discouragement and isolation. Professional networks and learning communities, as described by participants in this study, served as a primary protective mechanism against those risks.

The leaders in this study were candid about the structural gap they had encountered upon entering alternative education. County Office leader Anita named it clearly: “No one gets a master's in alternative [education]. We are figuring this out for ourselves, conducting live experiments on our neediest kids, because we refuse to provide any credentialing, expectations, or leadership development.” Former principal Sharon described entering the role with no formal professional network at all: “I had no networks. I had individual relationships with other leaders in the district who were not in alternative [education], but who I trusted and who I felt had my back.”

This preparation gap shaped participants' understanding of the value of the networks they eventually found or built. Professional networks functioned as the primary infrastructure through which alternative school leaders developed the knowledge and support they needed to lead effectively. County Office leader Anita described a statewide association for continuation school leaders as “a powerful and effective professional group” and credited her administrative credential program with helping her “own that narrative and have ways of talking about alternative schools and talking about the successes of our kids and our innovation.” Principal Kevin connected participation in formal programs, including professional affinity groups and association conferences, to his ongoing development as a leader. For County Office leader Kaia, a network of small alternative schools across various states provided a community of peers whose contexts mirrored her own: “Creating a community of other [alternative education] leaders has really been very valuable to me.”

Across participants, mentorship emerged as one of the most consistent and significant protective factors in alternative school leadership. De Bruyn and Mestry (2020) found that all principals in their study valued mentoring and coaching, identifying them as resilience resources second only to formative personal experiences. The leaders in this study exhibited a similar pattern: mentors were cited as sources of guidance, affirmation, and professional grounding across multiple career stages. County Office leader Kaia described mentorship as foundational to her leadership identity:

I had a mentor who said leadership means taking responsibility for something that matters ... I have always had a really good mentor at this job. I have a lot of mentors with whom I discuss my work and get ideas from.

Principal Kevin credited his development within a lineage of mentors who shaped his practice: "Much of that can also be charted with some administrative leads and mentors that I had worked with throughout my time...I worked under the mentorship of a phenomenal educator." His advice to emerging leaders reflected the same value: "Be comfortable with being uncomfortable and putting yourself in professional academic spaces—it is going to help you learn and grow in more capacities than you could initially account for."

Retired principal Karol attributed part of her resilience to sustained collegial relationships built over time: "I always was able to have good, solid friendships along the way in education...having some really strong mentors who were longtime administrators." Retired principal Erika made this recommendation to all alternative school leaders: "Have a coach, somebody that has already been in that situation or has led the work." These accounts align with Halevi and Schechter's (2023) finding that supportive environments and peer acceptance are among the most significant resilience-boosting factors for school principals. In the alternative education context, where formal support structures are often absent, professional mentorship fills this role. For many of these leaders, it was one of the few reliable sources of informed guidance they had.

Beyond individual mentorship, participants described the broader value of professional learning communities—structured or semi-structured spaces in which alternative school leaders could learn from one another, share strategies, and find emotional sustenance in the company of peers who understood the specificity of their work. These communities functioned as what Sutton and Gong (2021) described as the social dimension of resilience: networks that provide not only practical support but the relationship affirmation that sustains leaders across time.

District leader Minh articulated the need for these communities, drawing on her experience as a leader and her role overseeing a group of alternative schools: "Leaders in alternative schools need to be with other leaders in alternative schools across the state, and not just once a year." She described the work of building that infrastructure for the leaders she supervised: "I want my leaders to know that they're doing important work and that they're connected to a larger network." Former principal Daniel described a more informal version of the same practice: "We had a small group of continuation [school] principals that always met every month and connected throughout the month." County Office leader Linda shared, "People love learning from each other, and they want to see what everyone else is doing." She also connected accountability to support, reframing professional development as a systemic obligation: "For every ounce of accountability, you need an ounce of support." For each expectation placed on alternative school leaders, an equal amount of support is needed.

Principal Carmen described a professional community that moved beyond knowledge exchange toward something closer to restoration: "I'm regularly in affinity spaces that nurture my spirit." This language positions the professional community not only as a source of information or collaboration but as a space of healing—particularly

relevant for leaders who navigate the intersections of race, equity, and systemic inequity that Campa (2010) identified as central to critical resilience. Principal Kevin described a parallel experience within an affinity group, "Being part of an affinity space of professional educational leaders—it's a profound and inspiring and healing space that I find very necessary now." These accounts suggest that for leaders whose resilience is shaped by their identities as well as their roles, affinity-based professional communities serve a function that broader networks alone cannot replicate.

The three dimensions of this sub-finding describe a field that has asked its leaders to sustain themselves largely without systemic support, and a group of leaders who have responded by building the networks and relationships that their preparation did not provide. That act of building is itself a resilience practice, one that reflects the collective and critical dimensions of resilience that Campa (2010) and Sutton and Gong (2021) identified as necessary for leaders who seek not only to survive within unjust systems, but to change them.

Chapter Summary

Taken together, these findings address the research question by demonstrating that alternative school leaders sustain resilience through three interlocking practices: renewing relationships, cultivating moral purpose, and building professional communities. Resilience, as these leaders described and demonstrated it, is not a trait they possess but a set of practices they consistently and deliberately engage in, in relationship with others. Moral purpose provides the motivational foundation, giving leaders a reason to persist that is rooted in specific commitments to specific students. Relationships renew that purpose daily, restoring energy and reinforcing meaning through connection with students, staff, families, and community partners. Professional networks and communities provide the structural support that neither the field nor formal preparation programs have offered, filling a systemic gap through collective effort. Individual and Collective Hope Scale results provided quantitative support for what participants described: hope, in this context, is forged through connection and shared purpose rather than held in isolation. Together, these dimensions affirm that alternative school leaders sustain themselves not through individual strength alone, but through the communities of purpose and relationship they build and return to over time.

Table 6 below illustrates and defines the findings, sub-findings, and sample quotes for this chapter.

Table 6
Findings and Sub-findings for Research Question #3

Main Finding	Sub-Finding	Sample Quotes
Cultivating Resilience and Hope as Alternative School Leaders	Relationship Renewal as Sources of Resilience and Hope	"To see someone rise, to see someone go out into the world and manifest that future that they had wanted for themselves—nothing's more hopeful than that." (Sharon, former principal)
Practices that strengthen the capacity of alternative school leaders to navigate complex challenges while sustaining their leadership and overall well-being.	Ongoing restoration and strengthening of connections with students, staff, families, and colleagues that sustain motivation, reinforce purpose, and support continued leadership in alternative education.	
	Moral Purpose as Collective Meaning Making	"The beautiful orchestra of the strengths of all of our educators, faculty, and staff makes this place transcend home and academic institution to a place where students are not only excited to come to, but almost are not in a rush to leave, because it is such a source of nourishment on the mind, body, and spirit and soul." (Kevin, principal)
	A shared moral purpose that sustains alternative school leaders in their work, reflecting a deep commitment to equity.	

Main Finding	Sub-Finding	Sample Quotes
	Networks and Professional Communities as Foundations for Development and Support Engagement in professional networks and learning communities that provide guidance, knowledge, collaboration, and emotional support, strengthening the preparation, growth, and sustainability of alternative school leaders.	"No one gets a master's in alternative [education]. So every single person who comes into [alternative education] is dragging a traditional school background with them, and most of the time they don't have any way of understanding or talking about what success would look like and what meaningful measures in the [alternative education] setting are." (Anita, County Office leader)

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

Alternative school leaders occupy a distinct and underexamined position in the educational landscape. They serve students whose academic, social, or behavioral needs were not met in traditional settings, and they do so within institutional structures that routinely overlook, underfund, and mischaracterize the schools they lead. Despite the consequential nature of this work, the field of educational leadership has produced limited research that examines it directly. This study was designed to address that gap and to make the case that what alternative school leaders do and how they sustain it have implications that extend well beyond alternative education itself.

This study was guided by three research questions: (1) In what ways, if any, do the practices of alternative school leaders reflect the principles of inclusive educational leadership? (a) How, if at all, do these practices advance equity and social justice? (b) In what ways, if any, do alternative school leaders enact and share practices that inform inclusive and equity-centered approaches that may be relevant across all school settings? (2) What are the challenges, if any, of leading alternative schools? (3) In what ways, if any, do alternative school leaders demonstrate and sustain resilience in their leadership practice within their school settings? In this concluding chapter, I provide a summary of the study and its findings as they relate to the research questions and the existing literature, discuss the implications of this research for alternative school leadership, and make recommendations for future research.

A central argument of this study is that examining leadership in alternative school contexts offers something beyond an account of a specific educational setting. Because alternative schools exist at the margins of school districts, often without the structural supports and institutional legitimacy afforded to comprehensive schools, the leaders who work within them must develop and operationalize inclusive, equity-centered practices under conditions of constraint. Studying what those leaders do, and how they sustain that work, yields insights into the nature of inclusive leadership itself. What emerges from this study is not only a portrait of a specific group of practitioners, but a set of observable, transferable principles that the broader field of educational leadership has reason to examine seriously.

This chapter draws on the study's findings to articulate five implications that span the levels of individual practice, leadership preparation, and educational policy. The study's theoretical frameworks anchor the analysis throughout. Young and Arnold's (2020) inclusive educational leadership framework, organized around place, preparation, and practice, provides a structure for examining where the gaps are and what would be required to close them. Fergus and Zimmerman's (2005) risk and resilience framework offers a lens for understanding how the conditions surrounding alternative school leaders function as either risk factors that compound difficulties or as promotive and protective factors that support sustained, effective leadership. Each implication is developed in relation to the theoretical frameworks, the literature, and the findings presented earlier.

Summary of Findings

Relationship-Building to Support Inclusion

The first area of inquiry examined the practices through which alternative school leaders build trust and affirm relationships with students, staff, families, and communities. Interviews revealed that leaders positioned themselves deliberately at the front lines of school life, present at entry points, moving through classrooms, and engaging with community members throughout the day. Leaders described this visibility as the foundation of trust and as the mechanism through which the school's commitment to students became tangible. Alongside this relational visibility, participants documented a simultaneous focus on academic rigor and social-emotional wellness. Leaders described maintaining high expectations for students while addressing their social and emotional needs, rejecting the false choice between academic achievement and a culture of care. Leaders also used onboarding processes, restorative practices, recognition rituals, and shared school identity to actively construct inclusive school cultures. Participants made clear that a sense of belonging was built through consistent, purposeful practice.

Flexibility and Removal of Barriers

Participants also documented how alternative school leaders identify and dismantle the structural, procedural, and cultural obstacles that limit student access and success. Leaders adapted schedules, credit systems, and instructional approaches to meet the needs of students whose circumstances did not fit the structures of traditional schooling. Interviews examined concrete actions leaders took to confront inequitable policies and practices within their schools and districts, including equity walkthroughs, racial justice task forces, and explicit naming of systemic causes of student marginalization. Leaders also challenged narrow, grade-based metrics and recommended alternative data systems, graduation pathways, and community narratives that recognized the full range of what their students could achieve. Several participants described their schools as potential models for the broader educational system, offering evidence that the practices developed in alternative settings are relevant beyond those settings.

Constraints, Tensions, and Systemic Invisibility

The second research question surfaced the challenges faced by alternative school leaders. Participants described persistent misconceptions that surround alternative schools within their broader communities and, notably, within their own districts. Leaders described schools that were mischaracterized as sites for students who could not succeed elsewhere, excluded from district planning processes, and overlooked in resource allocation. Managing the public and institutional narrative about their schools fell to individual leaders, adding a communication burden to their already substantial workload. Participants also described the amplifying consequences of small school size. In alternative settings, a single absent staff member, a struggling student, or a disrupted relationship carries outsized community impact. Leaders described environments in which a pebble, as former principal Sharon put it, becomes a boulder, where even small disruptions can touch the entire school community.

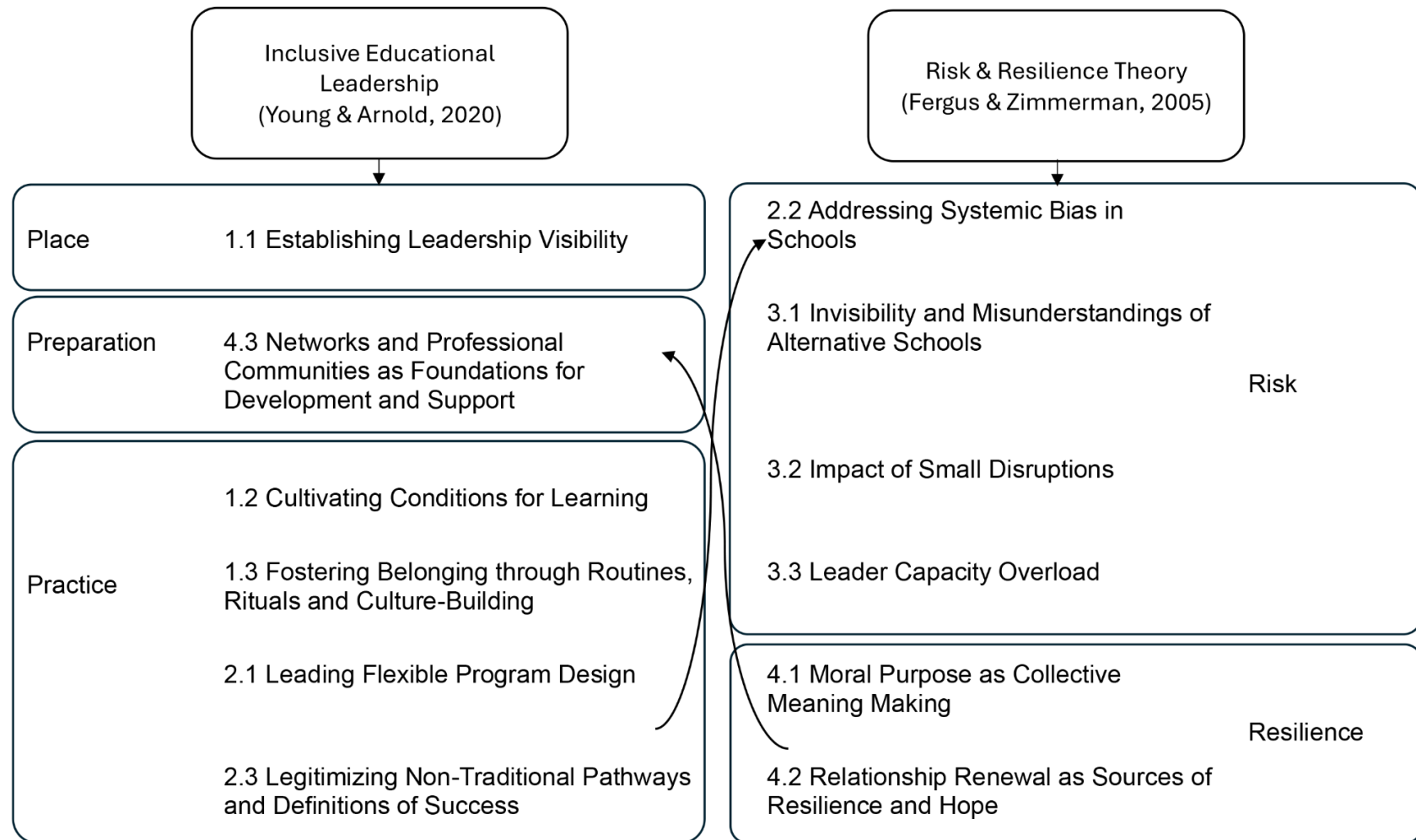
The most consistent challenge across interviews was the concentration of multiple professional roles in a single leader. Participants described simultaneously absorbing the functions of principal, curriculum director, counselor, budget officer, and facilities manager, without the specialist staff that comprehensive schools rely on. Compounding this role consolidation were uneven resource allocation, elevated rates of student need, and the emotional weight of working in close proximity to students carrying significant trauma.

Cultivating Resilience and Hope as Alternative School Leaders

The third research question examined how alternative school leaders cultivate resilience and hope for themselves and their school communities. Participants described the commitment to marginalized students as the primary source of sustaining energy. This moral purpose was distributed across school communities through shared vision, collective efficacy, and the visible presence of educators who believed in their students. Hope theory (Snyder et al., 1991; Hellman et al., 2025) provided a complementary lens: leaders described both agency thinking, the motivation to pursue their goals, and pathways thinking, the capacity to generate and enact strategies toward them. Individual Hope Scale scores confirmed this pattern, with a group mean of 30.8 out of 36, placing the cohort firmly in the high hope range. All 16 participants also scored in the high hope range on the Collective Hope Scale, with a group mean of 29.4.

Participants also showed that leaders drew on their connections with students, staff, families, and colleagues as daily sources of restoration. Time spent directly with students emerged as the most consistent resilience practice: when the administrative dimensions of the role became draining, leaders returned to students as the core of their work. Professional networks, mentorship, and affinity-based learning communities also played a central role in sustaining alternative school leaders. Participants described entering the role without formal preparation specific to alternative education and building their own professional infrastructure in response. The networks they found or created, including statewide associations, district peer groups, and informal mentorship relationships, functioned as the primary source of the specialized knowledge and emotional support that formal preparation had not provided. For leaders whose resilience was shaped by their identities as well as their roles, affinity-based communities served as an essential restorative function.

Figure 2 illustrates the alignment of findings to the theoretical frameworks. The concept map organizes study findings under two theoretical frameworks. Findings grouped under Place, Practice, and Preparation reflect Inclusive Educational Leadership (Young & Arnold, 2020), while findings grouped under Risk and Resilience reflect Risk & Resilience Theory (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Arrows indicate connections between both frameworks and the findings, illustrating how alternative school leaders navigate systemic barriers while building inclusive communities.

Figure 2*Theoretical Alignment of Alternative School Leadership Findings*

Implications for Supporting the Practices and Preparation of Alternative School Leaders

The findings reveal a coherent pattern: leaders of alternative schools have established practices that prioritize relationships, focus on equity, and respond effectively to the needs of marginalized students. They have achieved this without specialized training, consistent recognition from their institutions, or the support structures typically found in comprehensive schools. These findings illustrate what effective leadership in alternative schools entails and suggest that this work holds lessons for the broader field. The lessons from this research could improve the experiences and outcomes of the most vulnerable students in schools.

Alternative School Leaders Require a Distinct and Specialized Skill Set

Among the most consistent patterns across the interviews was the recognition, articulated in varied terms by nearly every participant, that leading an alternative school requires competencies that general administrator preparation programs do not address. This pattern was embedded in the stories participants told about entering the role. Leaders described arriving by chance, learning through trial and error, and developing specialized knowledge independently rather than through intentional preparation. Although there is a shared skill set among all school administrators, alternative school leaders require a unique skill set to be effective.

Young and Arnold's (2020) concept of place is the relevant theoretical anchor here. Their framework positions place not simply as a physical setting but as a dimension of leadership that shapes what leaders must know and how they must act. Alternative schools are not merely smaller or less resourced versions of comprehensive schools. They are, as the literature established, settings with distinct organizational structures, student populations, and purposes. The California Department of Education defines a wide range of alternative programs, but what they share is a commitment to students whose academic, social, or behavioral needs were not met in traditional settings (Lehr et al., 2008). That shared commitment demands a distinct skill set among alternative school leaders.

The participants in this study provided concrete evidence of what that skill set includes. The leadership visibility practices through which participants built trust with students, staff, and families, including greeting students at entry points, moving through classrooms, modeling learning, and co-constructing vision with community members, required knowledge of social-emotional learning, trauma-informed approaches, and community engagement that extends beyond what most comprehensive secondary leaders are expected to know independently. Participants also revealed a simultaneous commitment to academic rigor and social-emotional responsiveness, a combination that Rozich (2020) describes as the "warm demander" orientation. The capacity for flexible program design was equally evident: leaders adapted schedules, credit systems, and instructional approaches in response to student need, exercising the autonomy that Gilson (2006) identified as a marker of effective alternative schools but that requires specific pedagogical and structural knowledge to exercise well.

Participants also described the extent to which alternative school leaders assume multiple professional roles simultaneously, serving as principal, curriculum leader, disciplinarian, and counselor within the same role, often on the same day. The

expectation to perform each of these functions competently and to prioritize among them under pressure is not shared by comprehensive secondary leaders. In comprehensive secondary schools, these roles are distributed across multiple specialists. Theoharis (2007) found that principals who enact social justice must simultaneously raise student achievement, improve school structures, build staff capacity, and focus on school culture and climate. In alternative schools, a single leader is expected to do all four at once, without the instructional coaches, reading specialists, and department heads that comprehensive secondary schools rely on.

Formalized and Specialized Professional Development Is Necessary

The findings demonstrate that, in the absence of formal structures for professional learning, alternative school leaders develop their competence on the job while simultaneously managing the full demands of their school. Young and Arnold's (2020) preparation dimension speaks directly to this gap. Their framework holds that inclusive school leaders must be equipped with the skills and dispositions to foster inclusive environments, and that this equipping requires intentional effort. The literature on social justice leadership development reinforces that argument. Huchting and Bickett (2021) identified three pillars for developing social justice leaders: preparation grounded in both research and practitioner experience, engagement with one's own identity and positionality, and readiness for the political dimensions and perseverance the role demands. Each pillar is visible in what the findings reveal is currently missing for alternative school leaders. Rozich (2020) argued that social justice leaders must develop skills of critical self-reflection and the capacity to hold high academic expectations alongside genuine care, a combination the findings confirm is central to effective alternative school leadership.

The literature on mentorship provides additional grounding. De Bruyn and Mestry (2020) found that mentorship was among the most consistent resilience factors for school principals across career stages. Halevi and Schechter (2023) identified a supportive environment and peer acceptance as the most significant resilience-boosting factors for first-year principals. The leaders in this study confirmed both findings. Most of the leaders shared a common experience of needing to find their own mentors, describing mentorship as a structural necessity that the field has yet to formalize. Participants described professional learning communities and networks as the primary infrastructure through which they developed the knowledge and support that their preparation programs had not provided. Several participants noted that the networks they were aware of were inconsistent, had dissolved, or required significant individual initiative to access, a pattern that reflects the structural fragility of professional learning in this field.

Three pathways for addressing this gap emerge from the interviews. Administrator credential programs should incorporate an alternative education focus, whether as a formal pathway, a concentration within an existing program, or intensive workshops that address the specific competencies identified in the findings. As Celoria's (2016) analysis of professional standards found, equity and social justice are referenced in only vague terms. Induction structures for new alternative school leaders should include formalized mentorship with practitioners who have direct experience in alternative schools, not only with experienced principals from comprehensive settings.

Finally, professional learning communities for alternative school leaders should be resourced and maintained at the district or county office level, rather than sustained through the voluntary labor of individual leaders.

Districts and State Policy Must Address Systemic Invisibility

The challenges documented in this study describe the consequences of institutional practices that marginalize alternative schools in district planning, resource allocation, and policy development. Participants showed that alternative schools are often afterthoughts in district decision-making, receiving attention only when individual leaders advocate loudly enough to be heard. The theoretical framing for this implication is the risk and resilience framework (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Institutional invisibility and the absence of meaningful support are risk factors that compound over time. When alternative schools are not included in district planning, the cumulative impact can adversely affect alternative school leaders. Fergus and Zimmerman described promotive factors as those that buffer individuals and communities against exposure to risk. Sustained institutional attention, including regular site visits, inclusion in planning processes, and equitable resource allocation, would serve as promotive factors for the schools and leaders in this study.

Dantley and Green's (2015, p. 831) critique of the "social justice jacuzzi" is relevant. Districts that embed equity language in mission statements while systematically excluding alternative schools from planning processes are performing equity rather than enacting it. Turhan (2010) identified deficit-centered language in educational policy as one mechanism through which social justice values are co-opted by dominant-group perspectives; participants' accounts suggest that institutional neglect of alternative schools operates through a similar logic. Alternative schools and their students are positioned as peripheral concerns rather than central ones. Addressing this implication requires action at multiple levels. At the district level, alternative schools should be included in all planning processes, budget cycles, and accountability conversations as a matter of standard practice, rather than as an outcome of individual leaders' advocacy. District leaders and school board members should conduct regular site visits, and those visits should be institutionalized rather than dependent on personal initiative.

Resilience and Hope Are Essential and Must Be Cultivated

Participants described how the leaders in this study cultivated resilience through moral purpose, relationship renewal, and professional community. Hope scales results suggest that the participants in this study have developed the internal and collective resources to sustain their leadership. Campa (2010) critiqued resilience frameworks that attribute adaptive success to individual effort without accounting for the structural conditions that necessitate that effort. Sutton and Gong (2021) extended that critique directly to school leaders, arguing that "resilience is not only an internal, individual endeavor" and that the challenges social justice leaders face are deeply rooted in systemic inequities that personal determination alone cannot address. The leaders in this study were high in hope. They were also navigating role overload, institutional invisibility, resource scarcity, and the proximity to student trauma documented across the interviews. The question the findings raise is not whether these leaders are

resilient—they are. The findings question whether the system can continue to rely on that resilience as a substitute for structural support. When resilience is conceptualized as an individual quality, the system that generates the conditions requiring that resilience is absolved of responsibility (Morgan et al., 2023).

Theoharis (2024) reconceptualized social justice leaders' resilience as encompassing both professional strategies, including collaboration, advocacy, and structural redesign, and personal ones, including physical health, relationships, and the cultivation of purpose. The interviews reflect this dual structure. Moral purpose functioned as a collective resource, distributed across school communities rather than held by individual leaders alone. Relationship renewal with students, staff, and colleagues functioned as a daily resilience practice, with time spent directly with students emerging as the most consistent source of restoration. Affinity spaces and professional communities served a restorative function that went beyond knowledge exchange. These are the mechanisms through which resilience and hope can be systematically cultivated for alternative school leaders.

The implication is that districts, county offices, and preparation programs should treat leader resilience and hope as critical capacities to develop. This means building protected time for alternative school leaders to participate in professional communities and mentorship networks. It means ensuring that induction programs for new alternative school leaders address the emotional dimensions of the role alongside its technical demands. The conditions under which hope can be sustained, including relationships, shared purpose, professional connection, and adequate resources, are conditions that institutions can and should create.

Transferable Models for Inclusive Leadership Across All Settings

The practices documented in this study, including leadership visibility, belonging rituals, flexible program design, equity walkthroughs, and non-traditional definitions of success, were developed in response to the demands of alternative school contexts. However, the logic underlying them is not context-specific; it is grounded in a commitment to inclusion that comprehensive schools share. The practice dimension in Young and Arnold's (2020) framework calls on inclusive leaders to ensure schools function for all students, regardless of their circumstances or backgrounds. The leaders in this study have operationalized that charge in ways that are observable and, in principle, replicable. Participants described how leaders used onboarding processes, restorative circles, recognition rituals, and belonging surveys to actively construct a culture of inclusion. Leaders were also shown redefining success metrics, building alternative data systems, and advocating for pathways, including vocational, community college, and adult education routes, that comprehensive schools often deprioritize. Several participants received formal recognition for these practices: state model school designations, visits from researchers and policymakers, and requests to host professional learning at their sites.

The literature on effective alternative schools establishes that these practices are not merely contextually appropriate; they are grounded in evidence of what supports marginalized students. Tierney's (2020) community-constructed definition of success, encompassing academic and social engagement, ownership of one's education, and a sense of belonging, applies to students in any setting. Borck's (2019) documentation of

culturally sustaining pedagogies as a source of student belonging, resilience, and empowerment reflects principles relevant to all schools. Jordan et al. (2022) found that small class sizes, flexible curricula, and teacher well-being are associated with improved student outcomes; the structural conditions that alternative schools create out of necessity are conditions that comprehensive schools could create by design.

The implication is that knowledge-sharing between alternative and comprehensive school leaders should be institutionalized rather than left to individual initiative. Districts should create structured opportunities for this exchange: professional learning days, cross-site visits, and collaborative inquiry communities that include both alternative- and comprehensive-school leaders. The positioning of alternative schools as model professional learning sites, a status several participants described their schools as having achieved, should be recognized as a source of best practice that is relevant across school settings.

Limitations and Future Research

This study contributes to a limited but growing body of research on alternative school leadership. As with any qualitative inquiry, however, the findings must be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. First, the participant sample is geographically bounded to the San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area. The findings are not intended to be generalized beyond the contexts from which they were drawn; rather, they offer a grounded account of leadership practice in one well-defined setting that may inform inquiry elsewhere. Second, the study's definition of alternative schools encompasses a range of program types, including continuation schools, community day schools, independent study programs, and other non-traditional settings that vary considerably in structure, funding, and student population. Although a consistent operational definition guided participant selection, differences in local program design and district expectations may have shaped how participants understood and described their roles. Future work examining specific program types in greater depth may reveal distinctions between sites. Third, researcher positionality represents an inherent limitation. As a current alternative school principal in the Bay Area, I brought professional experience and relational rapport to the study that supported contextual depth and participant trust. That same positionality, however, introduces the possibility of interpretive bias. Memoing and inter-rater reliability procedures were used throughout the analysis to reduce this risk. The findings should be read as an interpretation grounded in the researcher's own experience and standpoint.

Several directions for future research emerge from the findings. The most direct concern is preparation. This study documents that alternative school leaders enter the role without targeted training and construct their professional knowledge largely through experience and informal networks. Research examining the possible designs and outcomes of alternative education pathways within administrator credential programs is needed. Equally useful would be studies that evaluate the impact of formalized mentorship and professional learning communities on the preparation, retention, and effectiveness of alternative school leaders.

The hope scale data warrant further investigation. The results are consistent with the relational and purposeful leadership practices participants described, but they also raise questions. Hope theory positions agency and pathways thinking as malleable

cognitive resources that can be cultivated under the right conditions. Research that examines how hope develops and is sustained among alternative school leaders over time would extend the findings of this study. As Ruiz de Velasco et al. (2008, p. 8) stated over a decade ago, "continuation high schools remain among the most understudied sub-sector of secondary education in California (and nationally)." Given the gaps in the current literature, I argue that there is a continued need to examine the role of alternative schools in providing marginalized youth with opportunities for success, and an even greater need to support the development of alternative school leaders. The five implications developed in this chapter are interconnected dimensions of a single structural problem: alternative school leaders are asked to do distinct, demanding, and socially consequential work within systems not designed to support them. Addressing that problem requires action at every level, from practitioners and preparation programs to district and state policy, and the evidence base for that action is grounded in the experiences of the 16 leaders whose voices anchor this study.

Alternative schools serve as important spaces of learning and belonging for marginalized students. As such, alternative schools must be led by inclusive social justice leaders who are supported to develop the resilience necessary to do this work. The leaders in this study did not wait for the system to provide what they needed. They built networks, sought mentors, constructed their own professional communities, and sustained their commitment to students marginalized by the existing system. That commitment is not a reason to maintain the status quo; it is a reason to build the institutional infrastructure that would make it sustainable. It is also, as this study argues, a reason for the broader field of educational leadership to look more carefully at what these leaders have built. The practices documented here did not emerge from programs designed to support them. They emerged from leaders who, working without those supports, found ways to do inclusion right. That is precisely why their work deserves serious attention.

Summary and Conclusion

A significant body of research exists on social justice leadership and school leader resilience in the context of traditional comprehensive schools. However, little research has explicitly examined these concepts in alternative school settings. Given the gaps in the current literature, I argue that there is a continued need to examine the role of alternative schools in providing marginalized youth with opportunities for success, and an even greater need to support the development of alternative school leaders. The five implications developed in this chapter are interconnected dimensions of a single structural problem: alternative school leaders are asked to do distinct, demanding, and socially consequential work within systems not designed to support them. Addressing that problem requires action at every level—practitioner, preparation program, district, and state policy—and the evidence base for that action is grounded in the experiences of the 16 leaders whose voices anchor this study.

Alternative schools serve as important spaces of learning and belonging for marginalized students. As such, alternative schools must be led by inclusive social justice leaders who are supported to develop the resilience necessary to do this work on behalf of our marginalized students. The leaders in this study did not wait for the system to provide what they needed. They built networks, sought mentors, constructed their

own professional communities, and sustained their commitment to students marginalized by the existing system. That commitment is not a reason to maintain the status quo; it is a reason to build the institutional infrastructure that would make it sustainable.

References

- Bay Area Census. (2020). *Population*. <https://census.bayareametro.gov/population>
- Bogotch, I. E. (2002). Educational leadership and social justice: Practice into theory. *Journal of School Leadership*, 12(2), 138–156.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/105268460201200203>
- Borck, C. R. (2019). “I Belong Here”: Culturally sustaining pedagogical praxes from an alternative high school in Brooklyn. *The Urban Review*, 52(2), 376–391.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-019-00536-z>
- California Department of Education. (n.d.-a). *California School Directory*.
www.cde.ca.gov. Retrieved from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/schooldirectory/>.
- California Department of Education. (n.d.-b). *Educational options - Specialized programs*. www.cde.ca.gov. Retrieved July 28, 2024, from
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/>.
- California Department of Education. (2025a, September 12). Continuation Education - Educational Options. www.cde.ca.gov. Retrieved February 18, 2026, from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/ce/>.
- California Department of Education. (2025b, December 17). Fingertip facts on education in California - Accessing educational data. www.cde.ca.gov. Retrieved February 18, 2026, from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/ceffingertipfacts.asp>.
- Campa, B. (2010). Critical Resilience, schooling processes, and the academic success of Mexican Americans in a community college. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 32(3), 429–455. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986310369322>

- Capper, C. A., & Young, M. D. (2014). Ironies and limitations of educational leadership for social justice: A call to social justice educators. *Theory Into Practice*, 53(2), 158–164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2014.885814>
- Celoria, D. (2016). The preparation of inclusive social justice education leaders. *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development*, 27, 199–219.
- Chen, J. (2025). Principal resilience research from its birth in 2005 to 2024: A narrative review and a conceptual framework. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. 54(3) <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432241294170>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* / John W. Creswell, University of Michigan, Cheryl N. Poth, University of Alberta. (Fourth Edition). SAGE.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage Publications.
- Dantley, M. E., & Green, T. L. (2015). Problematizing notions of leadership for social justice: Reclaiming social justice through a discourse of accountability and a radical, prophetic, and historical imagination. *Journal of School Leadership*, 25(5), 820–837. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461502500502>
- Dantley, M. E., & Tillman, L. C. (2006). Social justice and moral transformative leadership. In C. Marshall & M. Oliva (Eds.), *Leadership for social justice: Making revolutions in education* (pp. 820–837). Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.

De Bruyn, N., & Mestry, R. (2020). Voices of resilience: Female school principals, leadership skills, and decision-making techniques. *South African Journal of Education*, 40(3), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v40n3a1757>

Fergus, S., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2005). Adolescent resilience: A framework for understanding healthy development in the face of risk. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 26(1), 399–419.

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.26.021304.144357>

Gilson, T. (2006). Alternative high schools: What types of programs lead to the greatest level of effectiveness? *Journal of Educational Research & Policy Studies*, 6(1), 48–66 (EJ844648). ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ844648.pdf>

Guinier, L., & Torres, G. (2003). *The miner's canary: Enlisting race, resisting power, transforming democracy*. Harvard University Press.

Halevi, L., & Schechter, C. (2023). Resilient leaders: Resilient determinants when entering principalship. *NASSP Bulletin*, 107(1), 60–86.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/01926365231159070>

Hayes-Greene, D., & Love, B. (2018). *The groundwater approach: Building a practical understanding of structural racism*. The Racial Equity Institute.

Hellman, C. M., Muñoz, R. T., Pharris, A. B., Schaefer, S. M., & Featherngill, J. (2025). Perceived collective hope: Development and validation of a scale.

European Management Journal. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2025.10.003>

Hill Collins, P. (2009). *Another kind of public education: Race, schools, the media, and Democratic possibilities*. Beacon Press.

- Huchting, K., & Bickett, J. (2021). The need for career-long professional learning for social justice leaders in affluent school contexts. *Professional Development in Education*, 47(1), 50–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1787194>
- Isaacs, A. J. (2012). Resiliency and the individual demographics of school leaders: Making a difference in the quality of educational leadership. *Journal of Research in Education (Online)*, 22(1), 128–162. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1098379>
- Johnson, B. (2021). African American female superintendents: Resilient school leader. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 21(4). <https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v21i4.4205>
- Jordan, A. W., Jordan, K. H., & Sutphin, A. (2022). Care matters: student perspectives of mental health determinants in an alternative high school. *Health Promotion Practice*, 23(5), 735–738. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248399211046582>
- Kim, J.-H. (2006). For whom the school bell tolls: Conflicting voices inside an alternative high school. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 7(6), 1–21.
- Kim, J.-H., & Taylor, K. A. (2008). Rethinking alternative education to break the cycle of educational inequality and inequity. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 101(4), 207–219. <https://doi.org/10.3200/joer.101.4.207-219>
- Lehr, C. A., Tan, C. S., & Ysseldyke, J. (2008). Alternative schools: A synthesis of state-level policy and research. *Remedial and Special Education*, 30(1), 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932508315645>
- Limon, İ., Dilekçi, Ü., & Demirler, S. (2022). The mediating role of initiative climate on the relationship between distributed leadership and organizational resilience in

schools. *International Journal of Contemporary Educational Research*, 8(1), 128–144. <https://doi.org/10.33200/ijcer.829411>

Malik, P., & Garg, P. (2018). Psychometric testing of the resilience at work scale using Indian sample. *Vikalpa: The Journal for Decision Makers*, 43(2), 77–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0256090918773922>

Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. SAGE Publications.

McGee, J. J., & Lin, F.-Y. (2017). Providing a supportive alternative education environment for at-risk students. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 61(2), 181–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2016.1254082>

Morgan, R., Moody, L., Debra A. Castillo, & Castillo Planas, M. (2023). Promoting Equity and Inclusion through Critical Resilience Pedagogy. In M. Castillo Planas & D. A. Castillo (Eds.), *Scholars in COVID times* (pp. 131–151). Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501771606.003.0008>

Patel, L. (2016). *Decolonizing educational research: From ownership to answerability*. Routledge.

Patterson, J. L., & Kelleher, P. (2005). *Resilient school leaders: Strategies for turning adversity into achievement*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Perzigian, A. B., Afacan, K., Justin, W., & Wilkerson, K. L. (2017). Characteristics of students in traditional versus alternative high schools: A cross-sectional analysis of

enrollment in one urban district. *Education and Urban Society*, 49(7), 676–700.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124516658520>

Pommer, M. B. (2024). *Preliminary psychometric properties of the Teacher Hope Scale* [Unpublished manuscript]. Berkeley School of Education, University of California, Berkeley.

Price, T. (2009). We can do it: Preparing leaders to lead in alternative education schools. *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal*, 26(4), 1–13.

Price, T., Martin, R., & Robertson, L. (2010). Wanted/needed: Leadership preparation for leaders of correctional education and alternative schools. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 61(4), 299–313. www.jstor.org/stable/23282763.

Raywid, M. A. (1994). Alternative schools: The state of the art. *Educational Leadership*, 52(1), 26.

Rivera Zabaraín, M., & Ruiz de Velasco, J. (2024). Data brief: Alternative school enrollments (2021–22). John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, Stanford University.

https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/sites/gardnercenter/files/media/file/demographic-snapshot-altd-sy2021-22-shcyear-24.1.8fin11_0.pdf

Rozich, E. S. (2020). Understanding the relationship between school leadership for social justice and student achievement. *Journal of Education Human Resources*, 38(2), 213–237. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jehr-2019-0012>

Ruiz de Velasco, J., Austin, G., Dixon, D., Johnson, J., McLaughlin, M., & Perez, L. (2008). *Alternative education options: A descriptive study of California continuation*

high schools.

<https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/sites/gardnercenter/files/media/file/Alternative%20Education%20Options%20Issue%20Brief.pdf>

Rutter, M. (2007). Resilience, competence, and coping. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 31(3), 205–209. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2007.02.001>

Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., Sigmon, S. T., Yoshinobu, L., Gibb, J., Langelle, C., & Harney, P. (1991). The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(4), 570–585. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.60.4.570>

Superville, D. R. (2023). Divisive politics are harming schools, district leaders say. *Education Week*. Retrieved February 18, 2026, from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/divisive-politics-are-harming-schools-district-leaders-say/2023/01>.

Sutton, S. S., & Gong, N. (2021). Rethinking the “superhero” principal narrative. *ASCD Educational Leadership*, 78(7). Retrieved from <https://ascd.org/el/articles/rethinking-the-superhero-principal-narrative>

Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: toward a theory of social justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(2), 221–258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X06293717>

Theoharis, G. (2024). *The school leaders our children deserve: Seven keys to equity, social justice, and school reform* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.

- Tierney, G. (2020). Ideational resources and alternative definitions of success: Reorienting to education and developing identities in an alternative high school. *The High School Journal*, 103(4), 241–261. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2020.0015>
- Tissington, L. D. (2006). History: Our hope for the future. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 51(1), 19–25. <https://doi.org/10.3200/PSFL.51.1.19-25>
- Turhan, M. (2010). Social justice leadership: Implications for roles and responsibilities of school administrators. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 9, 1357–1361. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.12.334>
- Ungar, M. (2006). Resilience across cultures. *British Journal of Social Work*, 38(2), 218–235. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl343>
- Wells, C. M., & Klocko, B. A. (2018). Principal well-being and resilience: Mindfulness as a means to that end. *NASSP Bulletin*, 102(2), 161–173. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636518777813>
- Wilkerson, K. L., Afacan, K., Perzigian, A. B., Courtright, M. R., & Lange, L. E. (2018). Alternative and traditional high school enrollment: An analysis of one urban district. *Journal of At-Risk Issues*, 21(2), 13–19.
- Young, M. D., & Arnold, N. W. (2020). An emerging framework for inclusive educational leadership. In M. D. Young & N. W. Arnold (Eds.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.987>

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Introductory Script

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of leaders in alternative school settings. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to the development of professional learning and leadership preparation programs that are responsive to the realities of alternative school contexts.

For the purpose of this interview, alternative schools/programs are secondary schools/programs that operate outside the traditional comprehensive models.

Your insights are invaluable in helping us gain a deeper understanding of alternative school leadership. Do I have your permission to record this conversation?

- Please rename yourself on screen according to how you prefer to be addressed during the interview.
- The interview will take about 60 minutes. Before we begin, I would like to review the following guidelines:
 - You may decline to answer any question and can stop the interview at any time.
 - There is no consequence for leaving. Participation is voluntary.
 - You may turn off the video once we start the interview and the audio recording.
 - There are no right or wrong answers.
- Do you have any questions?

Introduction Question

Tell me your name, your current position, and about your school(s). In addition to your current position as an alternative school leader, do you have any additional duties or responsibilities?

1. Please tell me a little bit about your career in education, and then how and when you started working in an alternative school.
2. What does effective leadership in an alternative school look like?
 - a. Imagine you are part of a team visiting an alternative school. What would you look at or want to study to determine if the principal (leader) is effective?
 - b. Now, let's talk about your own leadership. How are you meeting or missing the mark on these qualities you have defined as an effective leader?
3. This is a hard and broad question, but what do you think is your purpose as it relates to your work in alternative schools?
 - a. What are the key principles or values that guide/guided your leadership practice?
4. Can you share specific leadership strategies that you enact in your daily practice in an alternative school setting?

5. What policies have/did you enacted to shape the culture of the school so that students feel a sense of belonging?
 - a. Please share examples of how you enact/enacted inclusive or equity-centered practices that might also be relevant across other school settings.
 - b. How do students' needs influence your work?
6. What are some of the challenges you face/faced in leading an alternative school?
 - a. How do these challenges compare to those faced by leaders in traditional schools?
7. How would you describe your relationships with district leadership or school boards, and how do these relationships affect your leadership practice?
8. Can you think of an instance when district-level decisions impacted your ability to lead? Elaborate with one or two examples. How about state-level/federal-level policies?
 - a. What accountability pressures, such as graduation requirements or standardized testing, impact your leadership?
9. What kinds of funding, staffing, or resource allocation issues do you face as a leader of an alternative school?
10. How do community perceptions influence your work as a school leader?
11. Do you feel burned out?
 - a. How do you sustain yourself in this work?
 - b. What strategies, supports, or networks help you sustain your leadership over time?
12. When your job gets hard, how do you keep coming back? Let me give you an example...What hard things happened yesterday?
13. I am interested in school leaders' sense of hope. What, if any, reflections do you have about hope as it relates to your work in alternative schools?
14. Looking back on your leadership journey, what lessons do you think are most important for preparing future alternative school leaders?
15. What kinds of professional development or support networks would you like to see for leaders in your position?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share that I didn't ask about?

Concluding Script

Thank you for sharing your insights and experiences with me today. Your perspective will help me understand the challenges and successes of alternative school leadership. If you have any additional thoughts after this interview, please contact me.

As the next step, I will transcribe and analyze the data collected from this interview and others. If you are open to it, I may follow up with you for clarification or additional insights. Additionally, I will share a summary of the findings with participants later in the study to ensure that your perspectives are accurately represented.

Thank you again for your time and contributions to this important research.

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this study. The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather demographic and professional information from current and past alternative school principals, as well as district leaders who oversee alternative education. Your responses will remain confidential, and pseudonyms will be used in any published results. Participation is voluntary, and you may skip any question you prefer not to answer.

Section 1: General Demographics

Please provide your first and last name.

Please provide your email.

What is your current role?

- Alternative school principal or assistant principal
- District leader overseeing alternative schools (e.g., superintendent, director, coordinator)
- Former or Retired alternative school administrator
- Other (please specify): _____

What is your age range?

- 25–34
- 35–44
- 45–54
- 55–64
- 65+
- Prefer not to answer

What is your gender identity?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Prefer to self-describe: _____
- Prefer not to answer

What is your race/ethnicity? (Select all that apply.)

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Prefer to self-describe: _____
- Prefer not to answer

Section 2: Professional Background

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctoral degree (Ed.D., Ph.D.)
- Other (please specify): _____

How many years have you been in educational leadership (e.g., principal, assistant principal, district administrator)?

- 1–5 years
- 6–10 years
- 11–15 years
- 16–20 years
- 21+ years

How many years have you been involved in alternative education leadership?

- 1–3 years
- 4–6 years
- 7–10 years
- 11+ years

What past positions have you held before your current role? (Select all that apply.)

- Classroom teacher
- Alternative school teacher
- Assistant principal
- Counselor or student support role
- District administrator
- Other (please specify): _____

Which of the following best describes the alternative school(s) or program(s) you oversee? (Select all that apply.)

- Continuation school
- Independent study program
- Charter alternative school
- Court/juvenile justice school
- Innovative alternative school
- Other (please specify): _____

How many students are enrolled in your school or the alternative schools you oversee?

- Fewer than 100
- 100–200
- 201–300
- 300+

**What are the primary reasons students enroll in your alternative school(s)?
(Select all that apply.)**

- Credit recovery
- Behavioral concerns
- School expulsion/referral
- Non-traditional learning needs
- Family/personal circumstances
- Other (please specify): _____

Section 3: Context and Leadership

What is the governance structure of your school(s) or alternative education program(s)?

- District-run alternative school
- Charter-run alternative school
- Private-run alternative school
- County office of education
- Other (please specify): _____

Please rank the following challenges in order, with 1 being the greatest challenge you face as an alternative school principal or district leader overseeing alternative education.

- Student engagement and attendance
- Staff recruitment and retention
- Budget and resource allocation
- District or state policy constraints
- Community perceptions of alternative education
- Other (please specify): _____

Please rate how effective you find each of the following strategies in supporting student success in alternative schools.

- Restorative justice approaches
- Flexible scheduling and credit recovery options
- Community partnerships and wraparound services
- High Academic Expectations
- Culture of Care
- Other (please specify): _____

Appendix C: Hope Scales

Instructions: Please indicate the degree to which you agree with each of the following statements using the scale below.

Individual Hope Scale (adapted from Pommer, 2024)

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Somewhat Disagree, 4. Somewhat Agree, 5. Agree, 6. Strongly Agree.

-
- I can think of many ways to overcome the challenges associated with leading an alternative school.
 - I am motivated to energetically pursue my professional goals as an alternative school leader.
 - I feel energized and accomplished when I think about student growth resulting from my leadership.
 - I have the drive needed to have a meaningful career in education.
 - I am capable of being a great alternative school leader.
 - Discussing leadership challenges with others helps me identify additional ways to improve my leadership.

Collective Hope Scale (adapted from Hellman et al., 2025)

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Somewhat Disagree, 4. Somewhat Agree, 5. Agree, 6. Strongly Agree.

-
- My school can identify shared goals.
 - My school can achieve its goals.
 - My school can identify one or more ways to attain its goals.
 - My school can find resources to achieve its goals.
 - My school has the willpower to achieve its goals.
 - Even when times are tough, my school will actively pursue its goals.

Thank you for your time and valuable insights! If you have any questions regarding this questionnaire, please do not hesitate to contact me.