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**A Second Chance: A Phenomenological Study of African American Student Perceptions of Urban  
Secondary Alternative Schools**

by

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## **A Second Chance: A Phenomenological Study of African American Student Perceptions of Urban Secondary Alternative Schools**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of African American students in urban alternative schools. Alternative schools have been criticized for not holding students to the same academic standards as traditional schools and for failing to provide the same opportunities for students as traditional schools; thus, the study examined how participants' perceptions of their school environment, educational opportunities and teachers impacts their achievement, motivation and educational outcomes. Findings revealed that participants felt that there is a genuine investment in their success in these environments and that they receive ample support and resources to accomplish their goals.

### **Aim**

The purpose of this brief is to share findings related to how African American students in urban alternative schools perceive their school environments, their educational opportunities and their teachers and how these perceptions impact their achievement, motivation and educational outcomes.

### **Problem or Issue**

Alternative schools, which are usually housed in a separate facility, are typically designed to address the needs of students who are at risk for educational failure as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school (Carver & Lewis, 2010). Many students who attend alternative schools have not been successful in regular schools, often because of behavior, discipline or safety concerns and may be at risk for educational failure (Carver & Lewis, 2010). This research topic is significant because in the large urban school district where the research study takes place, African American students currently make up 62 percent of the district population; yet, they make up 97 percent and 94 percent of the student populations in the two alternative schools studied (Mirvale School District<sup>1</sup>). A 2014 report from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, which analyzes school discipline data, revealed that Black children represented 16 percent of K–12 enrollment in the United States but accounted for 43 percent of the student population who received multiple out-of-school suspensions during the 2011–12 school year (Lindsay and Hart, 2017). The overrepresentation of African American students in this district's alternative schools supports research which reveals that African American males and females

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<sup>1</sup> Mirvale School District is an alias

receive more disciplinary infractions and are suspended and expelled at higher rates than other racial groups (Blake, Butler, Lewis & Darenbourg, 2011; Lewis, Butler, Bonner III, & Joubert, 2010).

### **Questions/Methods**

Data for this study was collected through one-on-one and focus group interviews, classroom observations and field notes. Each study participant was interviewed one time and two focus group sessions were conducted. Each focus group was comprised of three students from the two participating alternative schools. The phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to explore the lived experiences of African American students enrolled in alternative schools. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do African American students in urban secondary alternative schools describe their lived experiences related to success, empowerment and motivation?
2. How do African American students in urban secondary alternative schools perceive the environment/culture and the educational opportunities available to them?
3. How do African American students in urban secondary alternative schools describe the teachers who push them to excel and succeed?

### **Conclusion/Discussion**

The six emerging themes from this study are: a) maturity and self-advocacy; b) a better opportunity/a second chance; c) feeling respected and heard; d) it takes a village; e) relevant and rigorous instruction; and f) no feelings of disconnection or exclusion due to race. During the interviews, study participants recounted how maturity has helped them to see the importance of school, how positive relationships with teachers, staff and administrators have helped them to overcome challenges, and how the resources and support they are receiving have kept them on track to graduate despite obstacles that they have encountered. Study participants also shared that they believe that the alternative school environment is unique in terms of providing them with a “second chance” at obtaining their high school diploma. According to study participants, caring and supportive relationships with teachers, staff and administrators have helped them to overcome challenges that they face and a positive school climate and multiple options and resources keeps them on track to graduate despite obstacles that they encounter. The participants also noted the culturally responsive teaching practices that effective educators in their schools employ. School cohesion, cultural congruity and culturally responsive teaching were theories that surfaced multiple times as factors contributing to the participants’ motivation and success.

### **Research Implications**

Based on the themes that emerged from this study, in order for alternative schools to successfully serve and support all learners, such schools should: 1) establish reciprocal and bidirectional relationships with students, 2) create school cohesion and multiple pathways to graduation based on students’ individual circumstances and needs, and 3) develop a caring and supportive community that implements culturally responsive teaching practices. The findings of this study led the researcher to conclude that it is necessary to validate and affirm the cultural assets and knowledge of African American students in alternative schools, advocate for support and resources that will ensure that they have equitable access to educational opportunities, and provide compassionate and encouraging advocates who will help them forge a successful path to college and career success. Going forward there are additional populations that would be of

interest for future studies. In the future it would be beneficial to understand the lived experiences of African American alternative school students who are younger than 18. The 17 and under demographic may provide insightful information regarding the formation and development of academic identity and academic self-concept in younger students. In the future it will also be important to study and understand the lived experiences of Hispanic students in urban alternative schools. Research indicates that the number of Hispanic students attending alternative schools is increasing; therefore, it will be imperative to find out if these students feel disconnected or excluded in school due to their race and also to find out how to best support their academic and emotional needs in alternative schools.

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### **Author Biography**

Traci Dennis is an EdD candidate in the Drexel University School of Education. She is an urban educator who has focused on social justice for 15 years. Traci is currently an Instructor

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