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The Big Picture School Model: Understanding the Student Experience

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Abstract

The outdated industrial education system, dropout crisis, and disengagement in the learning process are not new issues within the educational debate and continue to raise concerns among school stakeholders. The role of education should be to encourage students to be creative and foster a love for continuous learning; however, this does not seem to be the case in many traditional school systems. In order to address the growing needs of different types of learners who are no longer engaged in traditional settings, alternative education sites have become a popular answer for some families.

This qualitative case study focuses on one particular alternative learning environment that implements the Big Picture School model of learning in a rural setting. This model emphasizes student-centered learning within a supportive environment that assists students in taking ownership of their learning through a student-interest-based curriculum. The ultimate goal of this type of school is to teach one student at a time through authentic learning opportunities that are student-interest driven.

The purpose of this study is to examine how students experience the Big Picture School model of learning and how the school structures that experience, from the perspective of students. Through participant observations, interviews with students and school stakeholders, focus group sessions with students, and the analysis of school documents, the findings reveal an alternative learning environment that focuses truly on student learning. Listening to students and utilizing their interests to write meaningful, relevant curriculums, while incorporating internships and college course work with high school required academics, and collaborating with community businesses all contribute to higher levels of student engagement and motivation in the learning environment.
The Big Picture School Model: Understanding the Student Experience

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DISSERTATION
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Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by thanking the GVBPS students, faculty, staff, and parents for their generosity and willingness to share their experiences and knowledge with me. So many schools focus on the achievement of students based upon test scores, but at GVBPS, students are much more than a test score or a bubble on scantron sheet. The GVBPS family has made me realize that there are still schools emphasizing a love for learning through creativity, problem-solving, and building autonomy as individualized learners who are able to advocate for themselves. I appreciate each participant’s time, support with this work, and hope that within the pages of this dissertation I have accurately represented you, your words, and the school. You are the ones who made this study possible!

To my dissertation committee, thank you all for your support and guidance with this lengthy process. To my advisor and chair, Joe Shedd your availability and long conversations about alternative and career education made me realize the importance of my work, and I greatly appreciate your constant positivity towards my ideas and writing. To Melissa Luke, who has served many roles during my time at SU as a research advisor, colleague, and friend, thank you for your consistently encouraging words and advice for navigating the world of academe while staying grounded to what is important in life. To George Theoharis, thank you for sharing your passion for teaching and learning in the classroom as well as with research in changing the way people think about education and equity for all learners. I am grateful for having a strong committee of people who continued to believe in me with a similar goal of continuing to work towards improving education.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Many public schools offer students who have low academic achievement and test scores, are disengaged in the traditional learning environment, and/or are thought to be at risk of dropping out the opportunity to complete their secondary education in an alternative learning environment (NYSED, 2015a). In order to enhance students’ achievement and engagement, there are four typically defining characteristics of these alternative education programs. The first characteristic is to make sure the learning environment is comfortable to the student, and the second is to implement instructional techniques and content that have meaning and are relevant to the students’ lives. The third characteristic is to build upon students’ strengths and abilities through an asset driven model. Supporting students’ personal and academic development is the fourth characteristic. The goal of alternative educational programming is to adapt the learning environment to be responsive to students’ diverse needs (NYSED, 2015a). Alternative education focuses on student-centered learning, incorporates learning opportunities in nontraditional environments, provides frequent feedback, and collaborates with community and school resources to provide additional support with youth development (NYSED, 2015a). The alternative model of education works to reengage students who may no longer be motivated to learn by organizing a curriculum based on the students’ interests and needs.

Those who advocate for these alternative approaches support three specific principles that challenge the culture of compliance that dominates so many public schools: humans are naturally different and diverse, they learn most effectively when their curiosity is sparked and encouraged, and they are characteristically creative (Robinson, 2013). These three principles align with the four primary design principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which are often associated with the education of students with disabilities, but are actually meant as guides for
engaging all learners: that learning experiences should be grounded in knowledge about the students to be engaged, that students’ social and academic needs should be weighed equally when creating meaningful content, that learning should be demonstrated and conveyed through student-created products, and that the principal role of adults should be to guide and support students through the process (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2007). Through the creation of individual profiles and the consideration of students’ academic and social needs, teachers become aware of the diversity of their students. In doing so, they are able to foster and support creativity and curiosity through student led projects grounded in students’ interests. Many alternative schools employ these principles and design points, which are said to be successful in encouraging disengaged students to reengage with school (Robinson, 2013).

One example of alternative education that is receiving increasing attention is the Big Picture School (BPS). In Deborah Meier’s foreword for The Big Picture: Education is Everyone’s Business, she states, “Thousands of years of history suggest that the schoolhouse as we know it is an absurd way to rear our young; it’s contrary to everything we know about what it is to be a human being” (Littky & Grabelle, 2004, p. vii). The rigid structure of traditional schooling does not serve all students adequately or appropriately. Big Picture Learning (BPL) is an alternative model cofounded by Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor in 1995 with the ultimate goal of instigating change in the education of students (Big Picture, 2015). Big Picture Schools are learning environments that implement BPL’s theories and philosophies on how to educate students, particularly through the motto of “education is everyone’s business” (Big Picture, 2015). According to Elliot Washor and Charles Mojkowski (2013), productive learning involves rigorous student work that focuses on competence and provides opportunities for students to pursue artistry and mastery. These elements of productive learning are nearly impossible to
obtain when schools are continuously emphasizing student achievement and learning organized around a standardized curriculum and assessed by standardized test scores (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). This rigid structure of assessing students and teachers predominantly on test scores does not adequately indicate achievement or success with teaching and learning, because all students are different and the body of knowledge they will need in the future is constantly changing (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). BLP’s designers insist that the one-size-fits-all model of education disengages students and labels them as “at-risk” when many times they would be more successful in an alternative learning environment that is responsive to their educational and personal needs (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).

The alternative model of BPL challenges the traditional model in order to serve all types of learners by starting with learners rather than the curriculum. Its advocates do not neglect learning standards and outcome measures, but insist that they must be adapted to each learner rather than learners to them. Students must be learning for themselves in the first instance, if they are to be invested in their learning and learn to be life-long learners.

The purpose of this study is to explore the student experience in a school designed according to these principles of alternative education, and develop an understanding about a community of learners that are meant to be engaged and excited about learning as well as being active citizens within their local community. I portray the students’ experiences with learning and becoming college and a career ready at the Green Valley Big Picture School (GVBPS) based upon active participant observations, interviews, focus group sessions, and document analysis. The GVBPS emphasizes the importance of student interest and accountability with the process of learning and developing meaningful curriculums that are relevant to the students’ lives inside as well as outside of school.
Relevance of this Study

The examination of the BPS alternative learning environment is important to the discourse around educational reform and student achievement, because it focuses on students and teachers building meaningful curriculum that incorporates students’ interests and needs along with teachers’ guidance towards meeting required academic goals. Student achievement is dependent upon students’ engagement and motivation within the learning environment (Gillet, Vallerand, & Lafreniere, 2012; Kenny, Walsh-Blair, Blustein, Bempechat, & Seltzer, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Despite the growing emphasis on college and career readiness at the secondary level through courses and programs such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), and Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), colleges and employers continue to voice concerns that high school graduates are not sufficiently prepared with the necessary skills or abilities to handle the demands associated with college or workplace environments (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Grundmann, 2013; Hart Research Associates, 2011; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011; Washor & Majkowski, 2013). The BPS student-centered design is meant to alleviate some of the systemic issues within schools that marginalize and push students out of school. Therefore, understanding students’ experiences within this model and their reasoning behind choosing to attend this school over their traditional high school should provide insight towards rethinking and redesigning the high school experience for traditionally marginalized populations of students. Although this study is not designed to compare students’ experiences in the BPS and traditional high schools it may nevertheless shed light on factors that tend to marginalize some students in traditional settings, and thereby understand those settings better as well.
The need to build meaningful relationships with students is a key theoretical tenent of the BPS. One of the many goals of BPS is to construct a school that is “a little more human than most schools” (Littky & Grabelle, 2004, p. 45). Countless schools follow a stiff structure of bells, rules, and policies dictated by adults that have little to do with educating students to be life-long learners who are able to explore their interests and passions. At GVBPS, teachers, administration, and parents strive to organize and implement learning through the student-centered approach. Although BPS learning is not always meant to be fun, it is designed on the premise that students should enjoy being in the learning environment and have an understanding of the relevance of what they are doing and trying to accomplish for their lives. Education, its advocates maintain should be about developing students’ intellectual and social capacities to succeed, not just as professionals, but also as human beings (Dolling, 2015). As useful as an academic degree is in navigating the world of work, if students are unable to understand the “art of being human” (Dolling, 2015), then the education system is failing at truly preparing young people to be engaged in their communities. Dolling (2015) explains the art of being human as a craft that students must refine as much as any other; she emphasizes the importance of students understanding what they find to be most valuable regarding their educational process. In schools, students are preparing to be professionals in the world of work or college, but they are also preparing to be knowledgeable and active citizens within their communities. The BPS is meant to build and cultivate a positive school culture, where students and teachers collaborate in ways that allow students to explore and share information about anything that interests them. Therefore, relationships among school faculty and staff and students are meant to rely on a culture of trust and respect that supports students’ abilities to make decisions about things that actually affect them (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).
The principle that students must own and take responsibility for their own learning is fundamental to the BPS, as it is to many other models of alternative education. But ironically, much of the research conducted on the BPL model and most other studies of alternative education are based mainly on data provided by adults who are documenting the perspectives of adults. The five empirical studies on BPS from 2006-2012 include only one study that focuses on students’ perspectives. Many times, students’ voices are exempt from the discussion when it comes to educational policies and reform, and yet, they have the most to offer in terms of insight, as they are the people most affected by decisions made regarding their education (DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Mitra, 2005).

Therefore, the current study investigates the students’ experiences at the BPS from their perspective. Additionally, I examine the BPL model and in what ways the faculty, staff, and parents structure the student experience, including opportunities for students to structure their own experiences. The following two research questions guide my research: 1) How do students experience the Big Picture School model of learning? 2) How do the Big Picture School model and faculty structure that experience? The findings reveal students who are motivated to engage in learning and have experienced positive learning results, both socially and academically. Students require preparation in all aspects of the social, academic, and career domains (ASCA, 2013), and the BPS is one alternative structure that appears to meet these requirements at this specific learning site.

Glossary

In this section, I include definitions of terminology associated with the educational setting and students at Green Valley Big Picture School, and in the process, provide an introduction to GVBPS itself.
Terminology

101 Students – The equivalent of 9th grade, comparable to “freshman” status, with roughly 15 students

201 Students – The equivalent of 10th grade, comparable to “sophomore” status, with roughly 15 students

301 Students – The equivalent of 11th grade, comparable to “junior” status, with roughly 15 students

401 Students – The equivalent of 12th grade, comparable to “senior” status, with roughly 15 students

Advisor – A certified teacher who oversees student learning and generally stays with the same group of students for all four years of high school. Advisors meet on a daily basis with every student and schedule frequent one-on-one meetings. The advisor is familiar with each student’s academic and social abilities, needs, and interests. Advisors also keep in close contact with students’ family members, and serves as single-contacts for parents regarding their student’s progress, planning of their curriculum, and exhibitions. There is an advisor assigned to each level of students: 101 Advisor, 201 Advisor, 301 Advisor, and 401 Advisor.

Advisory – A portion of time where students meet for an hour in the morning and a half-hour in the afternoon with their advisor and students in the same grade. During this time, students share personal and academic experiences and activities. This is a time for discussing plans for the daily schedule and asking questions about upcoming projects or assignments. It is similar to a homeroom check-in.
Big Picture Learning (BPL) – An alternative model of learning established by co-founders, Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor. It institutes an overarching philosophy of educating one student at a time, and provides professional development and support to individual Big Picture Schools. The Met in Providence, RI was the very first Big Picture School.

Big Picture School (BPS) – Individual learning environments that implement the Big Picture Learning model.

Exhibitions – Student presentations that occur at the end of each quarter and demonstrate each individual student’s progress toward Learning Goals for that marking period. Students present their projects and growth to a panel of their peers, parents, advisor, principal, and other guests. Each exhibition takes approximately 30-45 minutes. Students share their work, sometimes in portfolio format, showing evidence of learning through LTI/shadow days/service learning experiences (see below), the completion of an internship project, exploration of a particular career field or topic of interest, participation in a college course, progress with a newly acquired skill or interest, development in written expression, aesthetic expression, and/or growth in personal qualities.

Exploratories – An hour of time in the afternoons when students explore topics of interest for upcoming projects and assignments.

Interest-based Projects – Projects designed by students and advisors to expand student’s knowledge regarding a particular topic of interest. The five learning goals are included in each project.

Learning Goals – The following five areas are incorporated into each student’s individualized learning plan: empirical reasoning, quantitative reasoning, communication, social reasoning, and personal qualities.
Learning Plan – A document designed by the student and advisor (occasionally parents are a part of the planning) outlining a student’s educational goals and experiences for a specific quarter. All learning plans address the same elements (internships, college courses, language exploration, physical education, independent reading, social reasoning, journaling, aesthetic expression, elective workshops, Regents prep, WorkKeys, personal qualities, and attendance); however, each plan is generated to incorporate the individual interests and needs of each student.

Learning Through Internships (LTI) – According to the Big Picture School model, students attend two days per week at an external internship of their choice that is relevant to their interests and passions.

LTI Projects – Projects formatted in collaboration with the student, mentor, and advisor to provide the student with real-world experience relevant to their interests and that produces a practical, concrete product. The five learning goals are included in each project.

NYS Regents – New York’s standardized high school exams, which are given in the subject areas of English, History/ Geography Social Studies, Math (Integrated Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry), and Science (Chemistry, Earth Science, Living Environment, Physics). The Regents exams are a requirement for graduation diplomas and credentials.

Slack – An app designed for iPhones and iPads that provides real time messaging, file sharing, supporting one-to-one and group conversations.

STEP – Science and Technology Entry Program that aims to increase the number of historically underrepresented and economically disadvantaged students prepared to enter college, and improve their participation rate in mathematics, science, technology, health related fields.
and the licensed professions by providing academic enrichment in the content areas of science and mathematics.

TGIF – A weekly newsletter that highlights the work and activities of students as well as announcements about upcoming events. The staff and faculty are the main contributors to this newsletter that is available on the school’s website and as a hardcopy at the school site.

WorkKeys – An online assessment system designed by ACT to measure job and real-world skills. It connects work skills, training, and skill testing for educators and employers. The tests assess students’ cognitive abilities and personal skills, provide curricula and instructional strategies to improve skills, and profile occupations to match jobs with particular skill sets.

Workshops – Scheduled blocks of time where students meet with a content area specialist to focus on Regents preparation, electives, and/or to complete independent work or projects.

Further information about the BPS and GVBPS is provided in each of the chapters that follow.

Outline of Chapters

In the following chapters, I present research and theory that builds a rationale for the purpose of this dissertation. I contend that listening to students and utilizing their interests to write meaningful, relevant curriculums, while incorporating internships and college course work with high school required academics, and collaborating with community business members all contribute to higher levels of student engagement and motivation in the learning environment.

Chapter Two summarizes the limited literature associated with the BPS model of learning, college counseling and career education, and alternative education, along with existing
literature on dialogue and student voice, tracking, detracking, preparation for colleges and careers, and the roles of teachers and school counselors. These additional strands of literature build a case regarding the importance of these concepts in the educational setting as they relate to student engagement and motivation. I incorporate Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory (SDT) into the literature review creating a conceptual framework for the role of motivation in the learning environment, and its effect on student engagement.

Chapter Three describes my methodology as a qualitative researcher employing the case study approach. Through participant observations, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, I collected and analyzed data simultaneously using constant comparison and comparative pattern analysis. I explain the research design, researcher as instrument, selection of site and sampling, data sources and collection, and the analysis of data. The strategies for establishing trustworthiness and ethical considerations are also included within this chapter.

Chapters Four through Six present the data and findings from the study. Chapter Four illustrates two main themes under the question, who is Green Valley Big Picture School (GVBPS)? The themes are 1) the structure of GVBPS and 2) student interest and motivation. The theme concerning the structure of GVBPS breaks down into subthemes: small space, engagement in learning, and GVBPS feels different from a traditional school setting. The subthemes of the second main theme are incorporating student interest, work effort, and the importance of motivation.

Chapter Five shows the data and findings that answer the question of who are we at GVBPS? Two main themes discuss family and the supportive learning environment at the school site. The theme of family has two subthemes of family-like atmosphere and family involvement,
while the second theme of the supportive learning environment has two subthemes regarding the student relationships with faculty and staff, and the student relationships with peers.

Chapter Six reveals data and findings that address *who am I at GVBPS?* The two main themes of this chapter are student identity and college and career readiness. This chapter focuses on the students’ responses and experiences that are assisting in their development of identities through their current interests and projects. College and career readiness includes three subthemes of internships, college courses, and plans for after graduation, which present how students are experiencing and thinking about their futures either at college or in the world of work.

Chapter Seven discusses an analysis of findings and their connections to prior research and theory. This chapter includes the implications for practice and educational reform as well as the limitations of the study. I close with a call for further research on the student experience in alternative learning environments like the BPS, and the incorporation of a comprehensive curriculum in traditional school settings. Further study of these topics, specifically from the students’ perspectives, will assist in adequately and equitably preparing all students, not just to be college and career ready for life a graduation, but also to be life-long learners, who are productive, creative citizens within their communities.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter includes the literature in which I ground this research project. I have organized this into seven sections. I begin by presenting a conceptual framework and review of empirical and theoretical literature relevant to the fields of education and psychology with the purpose of outlining a rationale for the current study. Second, I use the literature to describe the Big Picture School program. Third, I review empirical studies on the Big Picture School learning model, college counseling and career education, and alternative education that implement the case study approach as a framing for the methodology of my research. Then, I include three major strands of literature that create a context for this study and supplement the concept of listening to and using students’ voices to drive instruction and promote learning. The three strands of literature are: a) dialogue and student voice, b) tracking, detracking, and preparation for colleges and/ or careers, and c) the roles of teachers and school counselors.

I used the Syracuse University’s library website, Summons Common Search, and the Education and Dissertation/ Theses databases to locate literature significant to student motivation and engagement and the Big Picture School model of learning. In the Education database, I searched for peer-reviewed articles within the Education Full Text, Education Research Complete, and ERIC, all databases published by EBSCO, and ERIC ProQuest published by ProQuest. I looked for studies using the following main search terms: secondary alternative education, alternative learning environments, student voice and choice, learning through student interests, comprehensive curriculum, tracking in secondary schooling, college and career readiness, counselor role in college and career readiness, teacher role in college and career readiness, Self-Determination Theory in education, Big Picture School, and Big Picture Learning.
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framing for this study draws on literature from the field of psychology and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. SDT, “an empirically based theory of human motivation, development, and wellness” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182), concentrates on identifying types of motivation rather than measuring the amount of motivation when predicting performance outcomes. According to SDT, a person’s motivation is more about the quality than the quantity when assessing and predicting outcomes of performance (Deci & Ryan, 2008). An abundance of research on intrinsic motivation supports the conclusion that basic psychological needs must be accommodated before any effective functioning can occur (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Liu, Wang, Tan, Koh, & Ee, 2008; Pink, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vallerand, 2000). If students’ basic psychological needs are not addressed, then how can they be expected to be intrinsically motivated to engage in the learning environment or committed to producing favorable outcomes?

Psychological needs play a critical role in motivation and psychological outcomes, and intrinsic motivation continues to show the most positive outcomes and consequences (Vallerand, 2000). Genuine motivation is generated through autonomy, mastery, and purpose (Pink, 2009), and motivation is central to the SDT in the distinction between autonomous motivation and controlled motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Gagne & Deci, 2005). Autonomous motivation involves both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which is dependent upon the value a person has identified with a given task and how it will integrate with their sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2008). While controlled motivation relies on external regulation of one’s behavior contingent upon a reward or punishment, and the personal internalizing and energy of completing the action (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The current study provides an opportunity for the analysis of autonomy,
relatedness, and competence from the student perspective, which contributes to the limited research of SDT in educational settings, primarily within alternative settings such as the BPS.

Self-determination theory differentiates motivation by types more so than by the amount (Deci & Ryan, 2008), which presents a debate within the educational setting concerning what motivates students to engage in learning. The role of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation in the classroom is controversial as many schools implement extrinsic rewards to promote student engagement and learning; however, research shows intrinsically motivated students have a greater sense of well-being and performance (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The necessity of this kind of research on motivation and student engagement stems from the increasing disengagement of students in traditional learning environments (Emeagwali, 2011; Washor & Majkowski, 2013). According to Emeagwali (2011), “about 49% of the kids are bored every day, 17% every class. That’s two-thirds of the kids who are bored at least every day” (p. 25). Student disengagement is a problem and impedes upon students’ preparation and success for life after high school. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) point out that in order to increase student learning “classrooms that capitalize on the power of self-determination can substantially increase achievement and motivation” (p. 32). Deci and Ryan (2008) contend that the quality of a person’s motivation is more important than the amount of motivation they exhibit; therefore, I situate the BPS model and GVBPS specifically in terms of what types of motivation students’ exhibit or perceive as having within the learning environment and the effects it has on their work. I designed the investigation of GVBPS to address the types of student motivation and their perceptions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on their work by observing and talking with students in individual interviews and focus group sessions about their projects and the amount of effort they put into their assignments.
In an educational setting, Gillet, Vallerand, and Lafreniere (2012) investigate school motivation as a function of age in children aged 9-17 years from early elementary to the end of high school. Furthermore, Gillet et al. (2012) determine teacher and parent autonomy support represents a mediator of age effects, and study the relative role of each kind of autonomy support in the process. Autonomy support occurs when parents and educators consider a child’s perspective by providing them with choices and opportunities to make decisions without pressuring them to do so (Gillet et al., 2012). The sample of 1,606 students, with the average age of 13, completed questionnaires that asked about their motivation to engage in various school activities (going to school, doing one’s homework, and listening to the teacher) and why they usually engaged in those activities (Gillet et al., 2012). Motivation to engage in school activities were assessed using a scale adapted from studies by Ryan and Connell (1989) and Vallerand and O’Conner (1991), along with a five point Likert scale for scoring motivation (Gillet et al., 2012). All analyses were performed through a structural equation modeling with EQS 6.1 (Bentler, 1993), and examined by means of the chi-square test.

Gillet and his colleagues found that students’ intrinsic motivation and self-determined extrinsic motivation to engage in school activities declined until the age of 15, and then began to increase over the remainder of their years in school (Gillet et al., 2012). They found that non-self-determined extrinsic motivation also decreased until age 12 and then stabilized, neither increasing nor decreasing thereafter. According to Gillet et al. (2012), evidence showed age to be linearly and negatively related to teacher and parental autonomy support, as well as age to be quadratically and positively related to only teacher autonomy support. As students become older, their autonomy increases as their parents and teachers provide them with more opportunities to take ownership for decisions about their education. The role of the mother autonomy support
appeared less prevalent than the role of the teacher, and the relationships between father autonomy support and school motivation were not significant with the consideration of mother and teacher autonomy support (Gillet et al., 2012). The importance of developing students’ intrinsic motivation and self-determined extrinsic motivation toward school is evident, and more research is necessary to ensure that all students sustain optimal forms of school motivation for success (Gillet et al., 2012).

Motivating students to engage in learning is a problem, particularly for urban teachers when there is an absence of strong organizational supports (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). Through the culmination of a large body of research collected by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, Bryk et al. (2010) examine over ten years’ worth of data collection and analysis of school visits, and discussions with colleagues, members of the CCSR Steering Committee, Chicago educators, policy makers, reformers, and scholars. This intense investigation of the Chicago public schools’ structure and organization reveal factors associated with improvements in student engagement and learning based on student outcomes from several hundred Chicago public elementary schools over seven years (Bryk et al., 2010).

The findings present five essential supports for improving student outcomes: leadership, student-centered learning climate, focused and coordinated instruction, faculty’s professional capabilities, and close relationships with parents and the community (Bryk et al., 2010). Leadership is a key role in school improvement, and principals are responsible for supporting their staff and faculty towards improving instructional work in the classroom (Bryk et al., 2010). A student-centered learning climate is a safe and orderly environment where teachers’ support academic and personal growth of students (Bryk et al., 2010). Focused and coordinated
instruction is evident through an organized curriculum that provides various learning opportunities and experiences for students (Bryk et al., 2010). The quality of human resources in schools is pertinent to the recruiting and retaining of highly qualified teachers, who develop a culture of shared responsibility and support for learning within their professional capabilities (Bryk et al., 2010). The final support, close relationships with parents and the community, has a direct effect on students’ motivation and participation in school, since teachers learn from students and design learning to support students’ cultures, which ultimately strengthens their connections with their community (Bryk et al., 2010). A school district’s ability to maintain each of these five supports represents the essential work of a district that effectively serves all students, and change is produced overtime (Bryk et al., 2010).

The studies by Gillet et al. (2012) and Bryk et al. (2010) provide a framework for understanding factors that affect student engagement and motivation in the learning environment. Although Gillet’s et al. study focuses on student responses to a questionnaire; it limits their responses to choosing a number on the Likert scale without further description. Byrk’s longitudinal study emphasizes the adult perspective of what is working and not working for students in schools. The importance of learning being student-centered and having an organized structure for the learning environment are evident, and within these studies, the setting was a traditional classroom. However, the practices that are producing student success are not consistent in all schools across the nation. In most cases, alternative learning environments implement these strategies as a last resort to reengage students with the learning process. The BPS is one alternative model of schooling that focuses on these strategies by putting students at the center of their learning as a way to motivate and engage them in the learning process as lifelong learners.
The Big Picture School: Alternative Learning Model

The search for scholarly work on the Big Picture Schools (BPS) yielded only five empirical studies and seven conceptual literature articles specifically related to the BPS learning model. Many hits for articles in the databases provided studies focusing on the big picture concept within educational settings, primarily through the analysis of physical education. Locating articles on student voice and choice, curriculum, tracking, college and career readiness, and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) were not as challenging as trying to find empirical studies on the BPS. The majority of the scholarly articles and studies related to the SDT came from the publication section on the SDT website. Scholarly articles regarding student voice, choice, curriculum, tracking, and motivation came from using the Education Research Complete and ERIC ProQuest search engines.

Due to the limited empirical research on the BPS, I searched the general dissertation database on Syracuse University’s library website. The SU dissertation database revealed no dissertations on BPS, but the general database produced three dissertations from 2006, 2011, and 2012. All of the BPS studies were qualitative and implemented the case study approach with the incorporation of observations, interviews, and document analysis as methods for collecting data. Each of these studies had five participants. These Big Picture Schools, primarily in NY and RI, participated with a focus on the perspectives of teachers and administrators in four of the studies, while only one study investigated the student perspective and mentor relationship through internships. I created a research chart organizing the five empirical BPS studies, including a study by Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (2010) on Chicago’s organization for school improvement, and Gillet, Vallerand, and Lafreniere’s (2012) study on intrinsic and extrinsic school motivation as a function of age framed through the SDT. The additional two
studies provide supporting evidence of educational reform in schools that leads to an increase in student performance, along with the influential role of motivation in the learning environment, and support the conceptual framework for the current study. Since there is a limited number of empirical studies on the BPS model of learning, particularly from the students’ perspectives, I include sections on general literature from areas within the field of education that are appropriate and necessary for grounding the present study in existing scholarship.

**BPS background information.** In 1995, Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor co-founded the Big Picture Learning (BPL) model, and began their first Big Picture School (BPS), the Met in Providence, RI, with the purpose of initiating change in the U.S. education system. Both men had extensive time in the field of education with a combined 30 years of experience serving as teachers and principals in public schools. The BPL approach to instruction requires dedication to educating one student at a time, and emphasizes life-long learning (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). They argue that learning is personal, and the traditional method of instruction where a teacher delivers a lecture or lesson in the front of room is becoming less and less effective in public schools. Learning must be interactive and relate to students’ interests and lives in order for them to take ownership of it. Littky and Grabelle (2004) express how “most kids are not making any democratically inspired decisions throughout their entire 12 years of schooling” (p. 12). They insist that students must have opportunities to reach goals that relate individually to each student’s interests and are applicable to his or her life inside and outside of school. The BPS began with intentions of providing these types of opportunities to students who are considered “at-risk” or “did not fit” the conventional methods of schooling; however, these educational practices and opportunities are appropriate for all types of learners. Currently, the numbers of Big Picture Schools across the globe are over 60 in the U.S., 27 in Israel, 25 in Australia, 13 in
the Netherlands, and 1 in Canada, which includes the original MET in Providence, Rhode Island, where this all began (Big Picture Brochure, 2014).

The 3 basic principles of BPS. Allowing opportunities for students to be actively involved and make choices about his or her learning, the BPS implements a learning model that has three basic student-centered principles. The first principle, learning is based on each student’s interest and needs, which is lacking in most public schools and leads to high levels of disengagement (Washor & Mojkowski, 2013). The second principle emphasizes that curriculum must be relevant to the student and allow him or her to do real work in the real world (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). The third principle focuses on the student’s growth and abilities, which measures the quality of the work and how the students’ work changes their thinking (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).

Staying true to BPS principles. The popularity of BPS is growing, and Caroline Hendrie (2004) poses the question of whether or not BPL is able to stay true to its alternative vision for high school while ‘scaling up” in new places. In an interview with Jeff Park, a principal at a BPS, who started two schools from scratch, Hendrie (2004) finds that a major challenge for the school leaders of BPS is how to stay true to the principles, while still preparing students for the rigid structure and demands of standardized tests and the college admission system. The schools acknowledge the urgency for results, but emphasize that a close relationship between advisors and students creates opportunities for students to design their own pathways for learning and preparation after high school. Similarly, this preparation for life and learning is exactly what Washor, Mojkowski, and Foster (2009) address when looking at how educators support students in developing habits and practices of literacy that are life-long and not just short-term “measureable results” that do nothing for them in the future (p. 521). Many schools
prescribe reading to students as a task that must be completed at a specific point in time; however, it would behoove schools to associate reading with learning based on individual interests and in searching for information or further understanding of a particular topic. Washor, Mojkowski, and Foster (2009) claim that schools are designed poorly to learn and respond to student interests; and therefore, create a barrier towards student achievement and the production of supportive relationships between advisors and students. The design of curriculum and implementation of instruction needs to change in public schools in order to address the needs of all students. Students need to be at the center of creating curriculum and instruction that will be relevant and have meaning to their lives.

**The 3 Rs of education at BPS.** The structure of the BPS model focuses on learning around “the three Rs,” which are rigor, relevance, and relationships (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Schools are promoting rigor in the sense that the more rigorous the effort, the more college-ready students will be, and Big Picture Schools provide authentic rigor to student work that is meeting this need (Washor & Mojkowski, 2007). Littky and Grabelle (2004) point out that teachers “cannot have a relationship with or make things relevant for or expect rigor from a kid [they] don’t know” (p. 39). They argue that our education system leaves no time for teachers to understand the student as a whole-person or the effects of outside conditions on their learning in school. There is a distorted conceptualization of rigor in most schools, and schools must first enhance students’ abilities before rigor is applicable to their learning (Washor & Mojkowski, 2007). The conventional methods of teaching and lack of relevance need to shift to a more student-centered approach for learning in order to increase student motivation and engagement within the learning environment with an ultimate goal of creating life-long learners.
**BPS program structure.** Classrooms are comprised of one certified teacher who is an advisor to a cohort of 15-16 students, who stay together all four years of high school (Levine, 2002). In the high school landscape of sustaining highly qualified teachers at BPS, each advisor holds a teaching certification in a specific subject area, and students rotate to different advisors during their scheduled workshop times to receive instruction for specific subjects. Each student becomes part of a small group that includes the advisor, an adult mentor outside of school, and a parent or adult advocate who functions as additional support for the school community (Big Picture Brochure, 2014). Each student collaborates with their advisor to design a personalized curriculum that reflects and expands on their interests and goals (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).

Students are required to attend three days a week at the school for academic instruction, and during the other two days, students are working at internships or taking college courses in a career field of their choice. Every quarter, students must exhibit their work to their advisor, peers, parents, mentors, and the community, and through this type of programming students’ work is highly collaborative in building professional and academic networks (Big Picture Brochure, 2014). The results lead to students who are self-taught through a community of learners where everyone helps motivate each other to achieve success (Levine, 2002; Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Within this successful model of schooling, learning is always student-centered and has yielded an on-time graduation rate of 90% (Big Picture Brochure, 2014).

**Learning to learn at the BPS.** Transforming the public schooling system into a successful one is a daunting task (Bergstrom & Soares, 2006), but is not impossible. At BPS, leaving to learn is a part of the learning culture. The idea of learning occurring outside of school through internships is a radical focus on learning innovation skills in context (Bergstrom & Soares, 2006; Washor & Mojkowski, 2013). The primary responsibility of the internship is on
the student, and this instills the principle of students taking control of their own learning. Bergstrom and Soares (2006) on the concept of college and career readiness state, “Big Picture students go onto college in higher percentages than their peers and demonstrate an ability to apply knowledge to new situations” (p. 24). Even though it may be difficult, public schools could begin implementing the learning through internships method during the senior year, although the integration of academic and experiential learning should begin much earlier in the students’ schooling (Bergstrom & Soares, 2006; Washor & Mojkowski, 2013). Schooling needs to come back to being about the students, and preparing them, to not only be college and career ready, but also in becoming life-long learners.

**Empirical case studies on BPS.** The information and statistics on the BPS website are intriguing and appealing, and bring a sense of hope and restoration to the concept of learning. Although BPS is an alternative form of schooling, the student-centered instructional methods appear to be logical and practical. Since the start of BPS in 1995, only a few empirical studies are available on this model of instruction and learning, and those studies primarily focus on the adults’ perspectives. Most of the available literature on BPS is in the form of news articles, press releases, educational magazine articles, and conceptual articles.

Emily Klein, an assistant professor at Montclair State University, presents case studies on the original BPS, the Met in Providence, RI. Over a two-year span, Klein’s larger case study of the Big Picture Company includes the participation of five advisors, four principals, two student mentors, a former advisor, both co-founders of BPS, and three staff members. From the larger case study, Klein employs multiple case studies on the advisors’ experiences with professional development and the school’s approach to sustaining learning communities. She utilizes data from the larger case study involving the analysis of documents, extensive interview sessions, and
numerous site visits to formulate an understanding of how advisors are experiencing the designs and strategies of the BPS and the implications of the school’s philosophy on its professional development (Klein, 2007). Data analysis involves an extensive review of field notes, interview transcripts, and other related documents through the strategies of taking notes in the margins of her field notes, writing analytic memos, and paying close attention to emerging themes and patterns within the data (Klein, 2007). Klein reviews how the comprehensive program assists in creating a culture where teachers are not only teaching, but also learning through a multiple case study approach. The learning goals of the school, which are consistent with the BPL model (Levine, 2002; Littky & Grabelle, 2004), help to frame her research study:

- Communication: How do I take in and express ideas?
- Social reasoning: What are other peoples’ impressions on this?
- Empirical reasoning: How do I prove it?
- Quantitative reasoning: How do I measure, compare, or represent it?
- Personal qualities: What do I bring to this process? (Klein, 2007, p. 180)

The learning goals provide students with the chance to reflect on their learning and its relevancy to their lives. Klein (2007) identifies through the data that an advisor must have an extensive body of general knowledge, in order to guide students through their academic subjects while relating it to their project topic. It is possible that students will choose topics that are unfamiliar to the advisor, and then the advisor becomes the learner along with the student. This ultimately creates a culture of community learning and being learners together. The findings reveal the BPS to be a close-knit community of learners with advisors who are nurturing and sustaining this culture of learning, and who have taken active steps to formalize their professional practices (Klein, 2007). The five professional development practices at BPS are a
mentoring buddy system, networking, observation days, reading relevant educational case studies, and participating in instructional workshops (Klein, 2007). The mentoring buddy system of teachers and their ability to network cultivates a positive climate of sharing ideas and concerns in a safe and supportive environment for students and adults. The observation days, case studies, and workshops provide opportunities for teachers to develop their teaching and learning skills in order to best instruct students in their classes.

The multiple case studies on the five advisors by Klein (2007) emphasize the need for quality professional development and training for teachers preparing to teach at the BPS. Klein’s (2007) review of literature critiques traditional professional development that typically ignores the needs of teachers, does not take into account pedagogy, or acknowledge the differences among teachers and the importance of being interdisciplinary. These concerns with teachers’ professional development are valid, however Klein accounts for only the adult perspective on these issues, not how adults’ needs might vary by student and student needs. Teachers need to have access to professional communities of practice in order to address changes in the learning and teaching of content and skills to all students (Klein, 2007). She calls for more research regarding what strategies sustain and build professional communities of practice (Klein, 2007).

In 2008, Klein presents an article concentrating on the same five participants from her larger case study in 2007; however, this particular article highlights three advisors at different stages in their career regarding their learning, unlearning, and relearning of information within the Big Picture community. Klein (2008) implements the same procedures for data analysis by reviewing field notes, transcripts, and related school documents, as well as through writing analytic memos and looking for patterns within the data. The results of this analysis show how the advisors work collaboratively with students and are constantly learning, unlearning, and
relearning information with each student project. The teachers share how the information is relevant to the students’ lives and interests, which is different from other more traditional methods of instruction (Klein, 2008). A challenge the school faces is that it “must rely on its own internal professional development program to make up for its lost tools” (Klein, 2008, p. 94), since most conventional classroom techniques are not valued within this model of learning. Public schools could learn from this model of schooling and implement some, if not all, of these strategies and practices into their own teaching and classrooms to increase student motivation and engagement in learning (Washor & Mojkowski, 2013). Klein (2008) acknowledges that an alternative learning environment like the one at BPS provides valuable insights towards handling the challenges of professional development for teachers and learning “how to teach from the ground up” by “unlearning traditional notions of teaching and learning” and is necessary for any type of school reform (p. 95). She extends her call for further research and support for increasing professional communities for teachers.

The co-founders and people working within the BPS have conducted much of the research and literature regarding the BPL model, which is a potential limitation due to researcher basis (Hays & Singh, 2012). However, three dissertations provide an outside analysis and perspective to this alternative form of teaching and learning. Riordan (2006) was the only study I found examining the student perspective on how they experience learning through internships within the BPS design and assistance from mentors, and the future implications on BPS’s curricular design. Riordan (2006) implements the case study approach by observing and interviewing five high school juniors (three males and two females) at the school and internship sites, along with analyzing school documents and maintaining weekly email correspondence with the five participants. This study diverged from a previous project, *Scaling up the Big Picture*. 
Riordan’s (2006) methods for data analysis include writing analytic memos, categorizing and triangulating data sources, and member checking. The results show that several students found little motivation to strive for quality and excellence in their exhibitions (Riordan, 2006). The students’ responses portray struggles with the BPS design that relate to relationship building and working with an advisor who is solely responsible for blending the three Rs (Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships) into students’ curriculums, which is necessary for this form of learning to be productive (Riordan, 2006). The students also express challenges with gaps among their Learning through Internships (LTI) experiences; the school’s learning goals, academic work, and exhibitions (Riordan, 2006). The students acknowledge the importance of their mentor and advisor’s personal involvement, time and interest in working them, and express a desire for their work to be relevant and connect with their LTI experiences and academic work (Riordan, 2006).

The data from students exposes their interest and desire to learn within an authentic BPS model. The students appear to be missing the connections between their academic work and their internships; they do not see relevancy between their academic and internship work, which is an essential tenent to the BPS philosophy. Riordan (2006) recommends the following to BPS designers and reformers: Align supported theory and the theory-in-use, create student-advisor-mentor learning community, reexamine reliance upon relationships, create an orientation and training for mentors, and revisit the school’s culture of assessment. These recommendations impart the need for consistency and regularly asking students, what is valued at your school?
What do your advisors and mentors care about? Riordan (2006) explains that values of the school must be evident in all stages of the learning design, and the student, advisor, and mentor must work collaboratively to facilitate learning and accountability. Additionally, Riordan (2006)
presents three recommendations for designers and practitioners in alternative or experiential education. The first recommendation is to articulate the design, its desired effects, and measure the effectiveness; however, the design must also be flexible. The second is to formulate a system of management, training, and information exchange. The final recommendation is to expand responsibility for learning. All three recommendations are applicable to any learning environment, not just alternative education, as it is important to have clarity with the purpose of the design, establishing strong communication with the system, and understanding accountability and responsibility of all educational stakeholders.

The dissertation on educational leadership within the BPS model by Squires (2011) utilizes the case study approach, and includes five participants (teachers and administrators) from a rural BPS. Drawing on observational fieldwork, multiple interviews, and extensive document analysis, Squires documents a school dealing with the challenges of being a separate entity from the high school in the same school district, opposition from community and school district members, and motivating students to engage in the learning. Three research questions guide the study: how is educational leadership conceived and practiced, who are the educational leaders/who determines who the leaders are, and how does context relate to leadership at this school? The methods for data analysis involve coding and memoing during the collecting of artifacts and documents related to the school in order to generate and organize themes and patterns within the data (Squires, 2011).

Overall, the participants report the leadership at this particular school is “shared, transformative, and servant-like” from a basis of principles on individualization, personalization, and critical reflections (Squires, 2011, p. 208). The findings also reveal the challenges and conflicts associated with leadership, and despite these issues, the leadership at this school
continues to defend and work to improve their school (Squires, 2011). In addition to these findings, Squires (2011) includes the challenges associated with locating an appropriate space for the school, existing within a traditional school system, opposition from the community, and motivating students to engage in learning.

Suchman (2012) instigates the BPS model in her dissertation on five Big Picture Schools negotiating dual accountability systems between BPL standards and assessment, and state-mandated standards and assessments. Three schools from the same district in Rhode Island, and two schools from the same district in New York complete the sample. Suchman (2012) utilizes HyperResearch, qualitative data analysis software, for expediting the processes of coding and analysis of data, along with writing analytic memos. Suchman’s (2012) document analysis, school observations, and interviews with three BPS Representatives, four District Representatives, eight administrators, twelve teachers, and three specialists, exposes that BPS logic values an interest-driven curriculum grounded in students’ internship experiences, which is not valued within the standardization movement of content or testing. Nevertheless, given the realities of accountability, BPS must take action to accommodate the demands of state-mandates, as well as the BPS’s own demanding curriculum design (Suchman, 2012). The professional development at BPS has come about because of the state-mandates that focus on standards, requirements, and norming student work, which has also energized instruction with the participants reporting how they are working to incorporate student learning with an understanding of the standards (Suchman, 2012).

The adult perspective is the focus of Suchman’s study as she explores the structure of assessment and accountability within these five schools. More specifically, Suchman (2012) assesses how the BPS navigates the demands of the state, while staying true to its design, and
emphasizes an understanding of the impact strategic responses of schools to external accountability demands. Furthermore, Suchman (2012) expresses the necessity to examine how those responses affect educational options and innovation within the learning environment. She calls for further research with an investigation of how other BPS models handle state-mandates, an examination of other organizations that operate under normative and coercive pressures that do not align, and questions the normative pressures these schools experience and how schools negotiate the resulting environment (Suchman, 2012).

Among the five empirical studies on the Big Picture School model, only Riordan (2006) and Squires (2011) discuss the lack of motivation some students have within this interactive alternative learning model. Riordan (2006) is the only study portraying students’ perspectives on the BPS learning environment, specifically with the learning through internships. The importance of professional development and learning communities is evident in four of the studies, which include primarily adult perspectives. All of the case studies include the data collection methods of observations, interviews, and document analysis. The methods of data analysis are similar among the studies with coding, writing analytic memos, and categorizing data into emerging themes and patterns. These five studies provide a research framework that is appropriate and applicable to the current study, where I study the student experience within the BPS structure using the case study approach implementing participant observations, interviewing students, parents, advisors, and administration, facilitating focus group sessions with students, and analyzing school documents.

The limitations that appear within each of the BPS empirical studies is the lack of generalizability of the findings to all schools due the specificity of the schools’ structure and validity of researchers reporting; however, each study provides detailed descriptions of specific
schools working to implement the BPS model and contributes to the scholarship on alternative education. The current study expands upon the gaps within these previous studies by increasing the number of participants in the sample with a primary focus on the students’ perspectives of their engagement and motivation in all aspects of their academic, social, and career preparation at GVBPS. This study also presents a site that is showing success with implementing the BPS model in a school that is part of a public school district structure.

The BPS case studies reveal dominance with the adult perspective of learning and professional experiences, and more research regarding students’ perspectives of their experiences with learning are necessary. The studies demonstrate the BPS model as an alternative form of learning for at-risk students that continues to work towards improving learning and instruction through individualized support and the building of meaningful relationships.

**Other Empirical Case Studies**

The following section offers an outline and discussion of empirical literature related to teaching, counseling, and alternative education that concentrates on students’ college and career education at the secondary level. The following studies implement the case study method and data collection techniques of interviews, focus groups, and/or document analysis providing a basis for the structuring of the present study. The case study is an appropriate method choice for the present study, because I am studying the student experience at one specific location (Stake, 2000). The ability to study a “case” within its “real-life” context is a strength to the case study method (Yin, 2006), and in reference to the current study, I am building an understanding of the student experience within the BPS model of learning from the perspectives of students, advisors, administration, and parents, as well as through participant observations and document analysis.
Empirical case studies on college counseling and career education. The quality of information and resources school counselors and teachers provide to students regarding college preparation vary across school districts (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, and Perna, 2009). Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, and Perna (2009) analyze data from a multi-level model of college enrollment and descriptive case studies on 15 high schools in order to identify 9th and 11th grade students’ knowledge about college. The 15 multiple case studies include three high schools in each of five states (California, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Pennsylvania), and differ concerning demographic and academic characteristics (Bell et al., 2009). To begin data analysis, the researchers formulate a case study database including focus group and interview transcriptions, and data from policy analyses, demographic, and academic profiles (Bell et al., 2009). The researchers use HyperResearch software with the coding and categorizing of data allowing themes to emerge (Bell et al., 2009). The inclusion of multiple sources and perspectives ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings and conclusions of the study (Bell et al., 2009).

Three themes within the data reveal that although all students in the study had general knowledge of enrolling in college, 11th graders appear to have more detailed information about the college process (Bell et al., 2009). Secondly, students’ family members are predominantly the main source of information for college followed by the Internet and high school (Bell et al., 2009). Thirdly, the social, economic, and policy context a student inhabits influences the amount of information he or she has about college (Bell et al., 2009). The conclusions of the study establish three areas for further exploration: the influence of online initiatives on students’ college-related knowledge, the availability of information about college for students who have graduated from high school, but who worked and did not immediately go to college, and longitudinal research of students’ college knowledge and outcomes (Bell et al., 2009).
As college enrollment rates continue to increase, there is a need to examine the role of college counseling and how it shapes students’ opportunities with college, since gaps continue to persist among underrepresented groups enrolling in college (Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson, & Li, 2008). School counselors are major stakeholders in providing students with guidance and support with the college process, while also serving in various other roles around the school (Perna et al., 2008). Using 15 descriptive multiple case studies of high schools, Perna et al. (2008) analyze the availability of college counseling, the activities counselors present to promote college opportunities, and the external entities that shape the availability of college counseling at the various schools. Data collection includes multiple sources: demographic and academic school profiles, review of federal, state, and local policies, individual interviews with school counselors and teachers, and focus group sessions with 9th grade students, 9th grade parents, 11th grade students, and 11th grade parents, totaling 596 participants (Perna et al., 2008).

Data analysis occurs using a case study database and the assistance of HyperResearch software to code and categorize the data (Perna et al., 2008). A team of multiple research members evaluates the coding and categorizing of data to guarantee inter-rater reliability (Perna et al., 2008). The findings portray the availability of college counseling as limited due to high student-to-counselor ratio, along with other school and counselor priorities; however, the school counselors engage students in several activities that are college-related and non-college-related (Perna et al., 2008). Interestingly, Perna’s et al. (2008) finds that students do not proactively seek contact with school counselors regarding college application, if their high school has a low college enrollment rate. The external entities that influence and shape the availability of college counseling are the district offices, state agencies, and local colleges and universities (Perna et al.,
2008), and much of the college counseling appears to revolve around the aspects of financial aid and career aspirations.

In preparing students to be college and career ready for life after high school, more schools are working to provide college counseling and career education to all students. The role of work in most peoples’ lives is unavoidable (Hyslop-Margison, 2005); therefore, career programs in high schools are an essential part of students’ preparation for life after graduation (Ali, Yang, Button, & McCoy, 2012). Through a multiple case study approach, Ali, Yang, Button, and McCoy (2012) investigate the effects of the “A Future in Iowa Career Education” (FICE) program implemented at three different rural high schools by means of pre-post test results from students in the FICE program, student evaluations of the program, and students and school personnel focus groups. The total number of participants in the study includes 206 students and school personnel.

Through a critical psychology lens, Ali et al. (2012) finds that in school 1, “vocational skills self-efficacy and career aspirations rose from pre- to post-test” (p. 378), and a possible explanation of this result is the implementation of the FICE program. The school personnel report the FICE program aligns well with the current academic curriculum (Ali et al., 2012). School 2 portrays similar findings to school 1 with an increase in self-efficacy and career aspirations, and these findings may be a result of the growing connections students made over time between the FICE program and their traditional academic curriculum (Ali et al., 2012). The results of school 3 also show an increase in career aspirations and self-efficacy; however, the school implements the FICE program as a three-day workshop for students (Ali et al., 2012). In terms of implications for practice, Ali’s et al. (2012) study contributes to increasing the academic and vocational skills of students with positive support at the individual, school, and community
levels. The design of the FICE program addresses academic and career planning barriers that students have within these three schools.

These multiple case studies on college counseling and career education provide student perspectives on topics related to knowledge and interaction with college and careers. Even though each of these studies provides in-depth and insightful descriptions of college counseling and career education at specific school sites, there are limitations in terms of generalizing the findings to other schools, incomplete participant reporting, researcher bias, and a lack of internal validity. Perna et al. (2008) and Bell et al. (2009) interview students who are aspiring to college; therefore, their input is not generalizable to the whole student body. Bell’s et al. (2009) study calls for further assessment of students’ who have graduated from high school and worked before thinking about college, and my study reveals how students are thinking about working due to their positive experiences during internships instead of applying for college right after high school graduation. Perna’s et al. (2008) study points out that college counseling is limited due to student-to-teacher ratio and that students do not proactively seek guidance with college applications. However, my study offers insight into how college counseling may be more beneficial when working with smaller groups of students. Ali et al. (2012) concentrates on the effects of career programming on students’ self-efficacy skills and career aspirations, as where my study analyzes students’ perspectives regarding their engagement and motivation with college and career preparation at all grade levels. These limitations do not minimize the importance of these case studies’ or their contribution to existing scholarship with college counseling and career education at the high school level. The current study provides an overall view of students’ perspectives through self-reporting methods of interviews and focus groups regarding their college and career preparation at GVBPS.
The case studies on the teaching and counseling of students in relation to college and career readiness show some students have more knowledge than others do, which is not surprising. These studies present information about students’ experiences and perspectives of their high school preparation for college and careers after high school, and some studies show the lack of information students have on these topics. However, as the needs of the workforce become more oriented to people’s abilities to be creative, able to problem-solve, and work collaboratively with others, schools must adapt and provide all students with opportunities to acquire and implement strategies that address those skills (Schwartz, 2014; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011; Washor & Mojkowski, 2013).

**Empirical case studies on alternative education.** The main purpose of alternative education is to provide students who are at-risk of failing, dropping out, or do not fit in the traditional model of learning an opportunity to succeed in a different environment that is responsive to the students’ needs (NYSED, 2015a; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Many times the best practices of alternative education could benefit all types of learners to engage in the process of learning (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). In two dissertation studies that implement the case study approach, Kujawa (2006) and Washington-Cobb (2012) examine students’ perspectives and experiences with alternative education. Both studies formulate an understanding of the effectiveness of alternative education from primarily the students’ perspectives and experiences, but Washington-Cobb (2012) also includes a secondary perspective from school staff members regarding the student experience in alternative education.

A concern about students who attend alternative learning environments is that they are at risk of dropping out of school, and Kujawa (2006) investigates 40 high school students’ experiences in three different schools to create an understanding of their experiences in alternative education.
and how it affects their education overall. The three schools serve as individual case studies of
the student experience at each alternative site. The requirements for participants were to be at
least 18 years of age and within six months of graduation. Forty students volunteered to
participate, 32 students returned surveys, 30 participated in focus group sessions, and nine
completed an in-depth interview and autobiographical sketch (Kujawa, 2006). The analysis of
data took part through methods of coding data from focus group and interview transcripts into
four main themes (Kujawa, 2006). The researcher cut apart and organized typed statements on to
colored sheets of paper, and each color represented one of the four themes. Additional codes
emerged and two main concepts of influences and outcomes became apparent; “influences of the
student, family, school, or community’s relationship determined an outcome unique to each
student” (Kujawa, 2006, p. 43). From interview and focus group data, several factors appear to
influence students’ experiences and educational outcomes, and the four main factors are
individual student characteristics, school climate and culture, family status and values, and
community support.

The results of the study reveal intuitive and talented students who have felt neglected and
disengaged in traditional high school environments. They have personal problems that create
barriers with their learning, and yet, with the support and meaningful relationships they form
with their teachers and staff at an alternative learning site, they are able to earn their diploma and
take control of their lives (Kujawa, 2006). According to Kujawa (2006), it is important to note
that a student’s apparent lack of motivation in the learning environment may not be a clear
representation of their identity, and that listening to students assists in creating a deeper
understanding of the student and his or her needs. Interestingly, all of the students earned a high
school diploma and would have preferred to graduate in their traditional school, but they
acknowledge that the structure of the traditional system does not adequately address their learning needs (Kujawa, 2006).

Washington-Cobb’s (2012) study examines the perspectives of students and school staff on the ways the study program meets the needs of students and how it can improve, what aspects of this alternative education program are effective or not effective, and which strategies used in this program are applicable to traditional classrooms. Washington-Cobb (2012) presents descriptive case studies of eighteen former alternative education students from one specific school district and their perspectives and experiences with this form of learning. The alternative program in this case serves students who are “deemed to be overwhelmingly in need of more acute care than the homeschool believes is tolerable in its educational setting” (Washinton-Cobb, 2012, p. 45). Students who attend this program are constant behavioral problems in the traditional setting and must be able to demonstrate appropriate behavior as well as pass a required professional evaluation before returning to their homeschools (Washington-Cobb, 2012).

The procedures for data analysis are not specifically evident in the researcher’s description of her methodology; however, through data from observations and interviews, Washington-Cobb (2012) presents descriptive profiles of 18 students, which provide 10 additional developing themes. The findings of the study expose that most students’ experiences are positive as long as they have a relationship with a supportive adult (Washington-Cobb, 2012). Moreover, the program is effective in addressing students’ needs, which is evident through smaller classes, mentoring, and rigorous instruction (Washington-Cobb, 2012). The professional staff at the alternative school express that any progress with students in the alternative setting was short-lived when they returned to their homeschools (Washington-Cobb,
which reveals a disconnection between general education and alternative education teachers within this particular school district. The student case studies portray “ten emerging themes: anger, victim mentality, neglect, abandonment, apathy, self-doubt, bullying, academic struggles, relationship with a special adult, and unequal prospects” (Washington-Cobb, 2012, p. 240). This specific alternative learning environment appears to be more about correcting students’ behavior in an effort to get them back in the traditional setting, yet many of these students are academically behind their peers and lack the abilities to stay on task, behave appropriately in social and academic settings, and to comply with authoritative directives from adults (Washington-Cobb, 2012).

According to Washington-Cobb (2012), the alternative setting strategies that would be applicable to traditional classrooms in order to assist students who may have trouble adjusting back to a traditional setting after leaving the alternative school are to provide conflict resolution and anger management counseling, make comprehensive support services available to all students, help students build the skills necessary for academic success, collaborate among faculty and staff to create program evaluations and adaptions, and incorporate an individual student support system across the district. The depiction of this specific alternative learning site reveals a structure that is common among alternative education models with a focus on correcting the behavior of problematic or at-risk students more so than engaging them in the learning process.

The two studies on alternative education deliver learning experiences from the students’ perspectives, which demonstrate the typical portrayal of alternative education as a place for at-risk students who are no longer engaged in the traditional learning environment. The findings being generalizable to other schools, settings, and students are a limitation for both studies, yet the studies offer meaningful contributions to the growing literature on alternative education and
the incorporation of marginalized students’ voices. Another common limitation within these two studies is the researchers’ connection to the topic and sites. Kujawa (2006) is an administrator for one of the schools participating in her study, while Washington-Cobb (2012) is a former educator with experience working with students in alternative settings. The two studies present alternative schools that focus on changing students’ behaviors in order to reenter the traditional classroom setting, which create a debate regarding alternative education as a setting for only students who are at-risk of dropping out or need to learn how to assimilate in a conventional classroom. The BPS model challenges the idea that alternative education is only for troubled students, it offers an alternative learning structure and environment that is designed to allow all types of learners to flourish and engage in the learning process.

Both of these studies present challenges and successes within an alternative learning environment, which are important to the discourse around engaging and motivating marginalized students in the learning. The current study situates the BPS model and GVBPS in terms of alternative education by exploring an alternative learning environment that does not focus on altering student behavior with the purpose of preparing students to reenter a traditional classroom. Instead, my study examines an alternative environment that emphasizes building relationships and engaging in learning through student-interest and student-centered projects. These two studies raise the question of why some alternative settings are more focused on changing student behavior than on student motivation and engagement with learning. Furthermore, these studies guide my research to question how students experience an alternative learning site such as the BPS as well as how this particular model and the faculty structure that experience.
Alternative education involves a design of instruction and support that engages students who are no longer engaged in learning. There are various types of alternative schools such as career academies for educational improvement (Hyslop, 2009), the Khan academy advocating for free, universal education (Khan, 2012), and the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) of New York State (2014) providing alternative and career education to students and adults. Additionally, multiple charter schools across the country are attempting to change the rigid structure of the traditional model of teaching (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). The BPS offers these types of opportunities that allow students to engage with necessary strategies and skills, but further research is crucial for understanding how this model affects the preparation of students to be successful with college and a career as well as becoming life-long learners.

**Empirical case studies as a guiding framework.** The empirical case studies on the BPS model, college counseling and career education, and alternative education create a guiding framework for the current study. The frequency of data collection methods across the 10 studies show nine case studies using interviews, seven studies completing onsite or participant observations and analyzing documents, and four studies utilizing focus group sessions. Due to the limited research on the BPS model, the following sections of conceptual and theoretical literature on dialogue and student voice, tracking, college and career readiness, and the role of counselors and teachers, offer a detailed examination of how these concepts influence students’ experiences and perceptions of learning and preparation for life after high school graduation.

**Dialogue and Student Voice**

The literature regarding dialogue and student voice includes conceptual and empirical works that provide a supplemental structuring for the current study. Student voices are essential to the learning process and a major part of the BPS learning model. Within this section, I present
two subsections on student voice and educational reform, and the importance of dialogue in education. I present how the inclusion of student voices increase engagement and motivation through active participation in making decisions about their learning. Additionally, I discuss student involvement in youth movements and reforms towards producing more equitable and quality learning environments for all students.

One of the main five learning goals of the BPS model is communication, which focuses on the students’ abilities to read, write, speak, and listen well with others, “how do I take in and express information” (Littky & Grabelle, 2004, p. 103). Future employers look for these communication skills, and although each job varies in required knowledge and skills, particularly in the fields of business “oral literacy skills are considered paramount for students…and that prose and informational literacy are critical for all workers” (Stone III, 2014, p. 5). As high schools work to prepare students for life after graduation, encouraging student voice and active participation in making decisions about their learning and the learning environment is influential on their preparation as young adults in the worlds of college and work (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Washor & Mojkowski, 2013).

**Student voice and educational reform.** The improvement and reform of the education system requires voices from all perspectives of people invested in providing an equitable and quality learning experience for all students. Most of the dialogue surrounding the reforms of education involve government agencies and officials, philanthropists with big ideas, and occasionally school administrators and teachers (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2004). However, student voices are rarely included in most discussions, research, and literature about what is best for students in preparing them for success after they graduate (Mitra, 2005). Research shows student voice initiatives and projects that incorporate students in more than just deciding when to have a
pep rally or a school dance are influential in preparing students as active participants in their schools and communities (DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Fielding, 2001, Mitra, 2008; 2004). When students have the ability to share with administrators, teachers, and counselors about what is working and not working within a school, they have chances to collaborate and improve the systems that serve them (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2004).

Engaging students in the process of making decisions that influence their achievement as well as college and career preparation, creates a sense of purpose and meaning that students connect with and internalize (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Mitra, 2004). When school faculty and staff collaborate with students, there is an acknowledgment by adults that “students possess unique knowledge and perspectives” that can benefit their learning and the learning environment (Mitra, 2004, p. 652). When students are included in the discourse, abstract ideas and concepts become meaningfully attached to working knowledge (Hall, 1997), and when teachers and counselors provide opportunities for students to engage in the decision of which educational pathway to choose, they allow students to take ownership of their learning as well as how to communicate in an effective manner. Students having the ability to engage in meaningful dialogue about the choices they have within the educational system are important and necessary (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Mitra, 2004). Students must have meaningful communication in and out of the classroom, especially regarding discussions about college and career goals, if they are to successfully construct knowledge and prepare for life after high school (Stone III, 2014).

In 2009, President Obama’s inaugural address included outlooks on education and the failure of America’s schools, which led to an emphasis on the power of the youth movement that he acknowledges helped support and propel him into office (Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). The discourse around student voice and youth engagement relies upon the belief that what students
have to say is important and necessary towards building relationships with adults (DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). Young people have the capabilities and creativity that is required to promote and initiate change within education. Historically, student movements during the 1960s and 1970s such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano Movement, and the Anti-War Movement were all major movements initiated by students wanting more from their educational and government institutions. Although most educational reforms concentrate on increasing equity and engagement in the learning environment, students are seldom involved in the reform discussion (Mitra, 2005, 2004). Fielding (2001) points out many times adults are quick to respond on the behalf of students whose perspectives they may know very little about or completely disregard. The student voice often sought after relates more to accountability than committing to democratic engagement (Fielding, 2001). There is a great value in the inclusion of student perspectives on school reform and the educational process, and yet many discussions completely ignore or dismiss the voices of students.

Similarly, research by Comfort, Giorgi, and Moody (1997) analyze the debate around high school reform in reports of “blue ribbon panels,” the book publication of *A Nation at Risk,* and general commentary by professionals, and insist that high school student voices are missing from the reform debate. With the addition of four conferences with students about their perceptions of school reform, Comfort et al. (1997) report a need for change in curriculum and instruction as well as the school culture, and that school should be a place for learning and living. Over three-hundred students from rural, suburban, and urban high schools chose to participate in discussion groups of twelve participants, and one student from each group served as a representative for a panel discussion at the general session (Comfort et al., 1997). Three themes
emerged from the students’ perceptions on school reform; the need for a connected and focused curriculum, a more flexible instructional system, and a developing sense of community (Comfort et al., 1997). Motivation and engagement increase for students when these themes are applied to realistic issues and situations in the students’ lives (Comfort et al., 1997). The quality of learning heightens with the incorporation of student voices in movements for curriculum and instructional reform and the influence of a unified community.

The importance of dialogue in education. According to Paulo Freire, “Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (1970, p. 92-93). Education requires students, teachers, and school counselors to engage in dialogue about subject matter, controversial topics, general ideals and concepts related to college and career readiness, and any other material in question or a concern. Students need their voices to be recognized and included in the dialogue about their learning, which will result in higher levels of motivation and engagement (DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Mitra, 2008, 2004; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). The most significant voice heard should be the students’ voices. Not only are conversations a critical factor towards acquiring knowledge, but also the ability to listen and hear what other people are saying is just as essential to the process of learning (Mitra, 2004).

The ability for students to have meaningful dialogue in educational settings is significant to their development and identities as learners and active participants in decisions that influence their lives (Mitra, 2004). In a qualitative study on student voice, Mitra (2004) examines the effect student voice activities have on youth development within a California high school. During a two-year period, she conducted 50 observations of student forums and school events, as well as over 70 interviews with students, advisors, administrators, and teachers. The results of Mitra’s (2004) study reveal that when student voices are heard and respected, they have greater sense of
agency within their own learning and making decisions. Students who are encouraged to take part in their learning and express their viewpoints are more likely to develop identities as change makers within their schools (Mitra, 2004). Leadership skills, a sense of belonging, and competency were all evident in the development of youths’ identities when they had opportunities to engage with student voice activities (Mitra, 2004). Students report that through participating in these activities they believe they are able to “transform themselves and the institutions that affect them…acquire the skills [necessary] to work towards these changes…and establish meaningful relationships with adults and peers” (Mitra, 2004, p. 681).

Students, teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents must navigate the discourse of education in order to create true reform that is meaningful and progressive (Mitra, 2008). Different perspectives concerning student voice create a debate among researchers and scholars regarding how the call for student voices, primarily with minority students, can be problematic and dangerous in how they “exist within a system of power and privilege” (Burbules & Rice, 1991, p. 396). Jones (1999) contends that in education, a dialogic pedagogy acknowledges and attempts to work across differences and break down the “culture of silence” of the marginalized that the dominant groups in traditional settings normally reproduce. Jones (1999) points out that it is not just about having minority students tell their stories, and that in educational dialogue the most important part “is not the speaking voice, but the voice heard” (p. 307). Similar to Jones’s argument, Burbules and Rice (1991) acknowledge the problems and challenges with calling for more student voice, and discuss how an active role within education and dialogue develops “communicative virtues” such as tolerance, patience, and a willingness to listen (p. 411). These virtues are beneficial to students who are preparing to be college and career ready, but must not come at the cost of oppressing minority students to feel as though they must “take on the burden
of trying to understand, and make themselves understood by, those who harm them or benefit from their deprivation” (Burbules & Rice, 1991, p. 403-404). Students must have opportunities to acquire the skills and strategies that are necessary for having open and meaningful discourse in order to listen and form an understanding of differences between people and in making informed decisions.

Having the ability to communicate effectively with others is important to the construction and stability of the education system (Burbules & Rice, 1991). The educational goal of Burbules and Rice’s (1991) research is to learn from failures of dialogue, try to avoid them in future efforts, and move beyond them. Learning and developing as a person involves painful lessons, failures, and frustrations, without feeling helpless (Burbules & Rice, 1991), and the educational system should guide students towards overcoming these problems and failures without creating self-pity or lowering their self-worth. Students must learn to make changes and adapt to situations as needed to be successful in the classroom and for survival in the world.

Dialogue and student voice provide a key context for the current study. Student voices are necessary for increasing engagement and motivation in learning, as well as for structuring realistic educational reforms. When students have opportunities to communicate actively through the skills of listening and responding to dialogue regarding their learning, they begin to make connections between instruction, and its application to their own lives. The current study stresses the importance of students’ perceptions regarding their learning experiences within the BPS model, and contributes to the literature of students’ voices about alternative education as demonstrated through this model of learning. Much of the dialogue around BPS is from the adult perspective, and yet, general literature on dialogue and student voice promotes the need for students to have a part in making decisions about their learning. The role of students’ voices not
only being shared, but actually heard is an essential part of the learning experience and structure. The skills of effective communication are necessary for those students who strive to be life-long learners and active citizens within their communities. I designed the investigation of student voice at GVBPS by focusing on students’ perceptions of their experiences, and allowing them a chance to share individually and as a group, and then to critique their transcriptions for accuracy.

**Tracking, Detracking, and Preparation for Colleges and/or Careers**

Another body of literature relevant to the study concerns tracking and curriculum, which are two highly debated topics within the discourse of education. Many schools implement methods of tracking students into particular pathways of learning, which historically, has served to maintain the status quo and provide a disservice to marginalized students. In this section, I present two subsections on tracking and detracking, one on ability grouping, and another on academic and vocational tracking, and two subsections on college and career readiness and a the concept of a comprehensive curriculum.

**Ability grouping.** Tracking is a prevalent method for schools to organize students, yet there is a debate on the complexities of tracking and detracking (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). Detracking is an equity-minded reform movement that attempts to equalize opportunities for learning among students of different socio-economic, racial, and linguistic groups (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). While tracking is often criticized for maintaining the segregation of minority and low achieving students (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013), detracking also creates controversy as teachers and parents who oppose it claim that it destroys the rigor and standards of upper level academic courses (Archibald & Keleher, 2008). Although tracking, framed as ability grouping, varies across school districts, according to Archibald and Keleher (2008), “about 80-85% of high schools in the United States group students by ability” (p. 26). Frequently, students reproduce the
norms and values of the larger community that implements tracking practices (Benavot, 1983); however, tracking, particularly low track pathways, do not provide all students with the support and education needed to be college and career ready (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012).

In a study of students’ perspectives on tracking and detracking, the students that Yonezawa and Jones (2006) studied found placement and tracking practices to be unfair, and students acknowledge that the tracking system does not adequately serve all students. For one year (1999-2000), Yonezawa and Jones facilitated “student inquiry groups at four high schools across two large, urban school districts,” and then over the next two years expanded the data collection to include more high schools by adding a third school district, which results in a total of 12 high schools (2006, p. 16). The researchers’ data come from 75 student group meetings with over 500 student participants from grades 9-12 (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). During the student group meetings, students explain their understanding of the track structures, and their views on how the schools could structurally and culturally improve to serve all students (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). Yonezawa and Jones (2006) focus on the students’ perspectives of tracking and detracking, and not necessarily, whether their views accurately represent what occurs in their schools.

The students in their study report unfair placement and tracking practices, unfair use of test scores for guiding placements, struggling students receiving less rigorous work and engagement with teachers, practices that make it easier to move to a lower track than a higher one, and tracking being justified as a way of maintaining meritocracy among students (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). In terms of detracking, students share that it requires teachers to
support all students and differentiate instruction, while also offering more courses that are rigorous for all students (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006).

**Academic and vocational tracking.** Many schools have tracking systems that organize students into particular pathways for learning (Finley, 1984). Historically, schools have directed children into one or another of two main tracks of preparation for life after high school graduation, namely, college or the workforce (Schwartz, 2014). Tracking, a common mechanism used by schools to sort, select, and socialize children, has been known for assigning students into academic or vocational pathways ostensibly based on students’ interests and abilities, but often based on school counselor and teacher biases and stereotypes (Chambers, 2009; Finley, 1984; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). Quite often, this method of sorting students in the academic environment segregates lower achieving and minority students, perpetuates stereotypes of what they are capable of learning, and perpetuates the assumption that vocational education is a “loser” and less intellectually demanding form of learning.

Akos, Lambie, Milsom, and Gilbert (2007) through an exploratory investigation argue that the systemic variables of students’ socioeconomic status, level of family engagement with education, ethnicity, race, familial aspirations, and parent(s) level of education all contribute to students’ academic and career aspirations. Akos et al. (2007) “explore the relationship between high school curriculum choices and demographic and school related variables” (p. 58) by creating an initial sample set of 812 eighth grade students from four middle schools in the state of North Carolina. The sample set is a balanced representation of females and males, and includes a representative percentage of minority students (Akos et al., 2007). The middle schools provided the researchers with 522 students’ curriculum choices, which left 290 students who did
not complete curriculum choices or the school did not record their choices (Akos et al., 2007).

Through an analysis of variance and chi-square analyses, the researchers identify statistical significance between choices in curriculum and different school and demographic variables (Akos et al., 2007). The results show that “career aspirations have a significant positive relationship with students’ achievement, in that higher expectations lead to higher educational and occupational attainment” (Akos et al., 2007, p. 59). In terms of statistics, about 60% of students in the study appear to be making choices regarding their preparation for college, while another 34% are preparing themselves for some kind of business or trade school (Akos et al., 2007). The requirement of schools and staff building relationships with and supporting students and their choices are evident and necessary for student achievement and preparation for college or a career after high school (Akos et al., 2007).

Research shows that students who are high achieving in school are more likely to be encouraged to pursue an academic as opposed to a vocational pathway, which discourages some students’ academic and career aspirations (Akos, et al., 2007; Kim, 2010; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). Traditionally, vocational pathways have been designed to serve problematic or lower achieving students and work as a method to maintain social classes (Benavot, 1983; Hyslop-Margison, 2005; Schwartz, 2014). Alternative learning environments such as career academies are the best-known model of providing strong academics and career preparation through a comprehensive curriculum to all students (Schwartz, 2014, p. 26); however, the BPS model also provides a similar model that addresses the academic, social, and career needs of students.

**College and career readiness.** With the industrial economy rapidly changing into a knowledge-based economy, schools have to begin to consider how to best prepare students for college and the workforce (Fenwick, 2006; Saavedra & Opfer, 2012; Schwartz, 2014; Symonds,
The Common Core State Standards, a national initiative to ensure that students in every state will be held to the same rigorous level of expectations (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012; Kendall, 2011), has become a major focus in many schools and the media. The phrase college and career readiness permeates discussions about how to best prepare students for life after high school. The goal of being college and career ready is for students to be able to engage in a job or post-secondary education without requiring remediation. It is important to note that the Common Core Standards have challenged the traditional assumption that vocational preparation is a second-class form of education, by asserting that schools should be preparing all students for college and careers and that the same standards are applicable to both.

Thomas Rogers (2013) reports that New York State graduation rates in June of 2011 were at 74%, yet only 34% of these students were deemed college and career ready. According to an Engage NY report by Dr. John B. King, Jr. in 2013, there are three domains of college and career readiness: Core academic knowledge and skills, career-specific knowledge and skills, and key behaviors and attitudes. These three domains identify that students need knowledge and skills in core academics, career-specific opportunities, and non-cognitive, socio-emotional knowledge and skills in order to be successful in the transition to college or careers from high school (King, 2013). A student who is college and career ready qualifies for and is successful in entry-level, credit-bearing postsecondary coursework or job training without requiring remediation (Achieve, 2016; Mettelman, 2013). For the purposes of the current study, the phrase “college and career readiness” will follow this definition.

In a study on the impacts of CTE (Career and Technical Education) on high school labor market success, Bishop and Mane (2004) analyze international cross-sectional data from multiple
studies and various samplings of upper level high school and postsecondary students over a twelve-year period. They establish that offering students the option of starting preparation for their chosen occupation during upper-secondary school tends to increase the school attendance and retention of 15-19 year old students in high school. When students have choices regarding their own education, they typically generate positive achievement and results (Bishop & Mane, 2004).

Similar research by Vilhjalmsdottir (2010) on students in Icelandic schools, finds evidence through the comparison of groups that graduated and dropped out, which shows gains in organized occupational thinking at age 15-16 and predicted graduation. In an eight-year longitudinal study, researchers explore 377 students’ responses to pre- and post- test questionnaires about career education programs and whether or not poor occupational thinking contributes to students dropping out of school (Vilhjalmsdottir, 2010). The analysis of data includes the implementation of “Kelly’s method of measuring vocational constructs, the repertory grid technique,” which measures the “gains in the organization of occupational thinking” (Vilhjalmsdottir, 2010, p. 677). Data outcomes from previous research also offer insight on students’ educational progress and status. Since the findings of the study reveal that students who are motivated and supported by school counselors tend to make higher gains in school and are less likely to drop out, it is important for school counselors to continue providing information and opportunities for students to engage in occupational thinking and preparation (Vilhjalmsdottir, 2010). Enhancing occupational thinking at an early age is worth the effect in implementing a comprehensive career education and counseling program for all students (Vilhjalmsdottir, 2010).
Another study assessing students’ perspectives and knowledge about career education by Yan, Goubeaud, and Fry (2005) reveals students’ knowledge of career skills and participation in career-related activities varies by activity type and grade level. The study uses data from a survey administered to 784 11th grade students in a School-To-Work program, and then follow-up data includes 851 12th grade students, all from eight different schools within one school district (Yan et al., 2005). The researchers quantitatively utilize means and standard deviations to describe the degree that students learn and use career-related skills, while t-tests and chi-square analysis determine if students’ implementation practices differ significantly between 11th and 12th grade (Yan et al., 2005).

Students’ awareness of career-related resources appears high, but underutilized within this specific study (Yan et al., 2005). In comparison to Vilhjalmsdottir’s study on poor organization of occupational thinking, it seems the presentation of available resources and preparation for an occupation at the high school level is lacking. Students are not using valuable resources that are readily available for improving their transition from high school student into a productive member of their community. Despite the positive praise that School-To-Work programs receive in combining academics with technical training, the students report only being moderately engaged with the career-related activities and learning (Yan et al., 2005). School counselors and teachers are a vital part of facilitating college and career readiness for all students. Symonds et al. (2011) argues that the U.S. education system must make an effort to construct a more comprehensive system of pathways for students that is better equipped to meet the widely diverse needs, interests, and abilities of all students.

The educational policies that call for change by business leaders, educational organizations, and researchers regarding students’ development of 21st century skills (NRC,
2012), shows a commitment in the movement of change and reform for current forms of schooling to prepare students to be college and career ready. The non-profit organization, Partnership for 21st Century skills comprised of business, education, community and governmental groups argues that “student success in college and careers requires four essential skills: critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity and innovations” (NRC, 2012, p. 16). “College and career readiness” and “21st century skills” are labels associated with students’ abilities to demonstrate their cognitive and non-cognitive skills in academics as well as in a work environment, and as a responsible, well-informed citizen (NRC, 2012, p. 17). The collaboration of businesses, the community, and schools is a step in the right direction towards addressing the educational needs of students. Feedback from the community and businesses on how to best prepare students with the skills they need to be successful in life after high school is important and valuable to students’ future success in college and careers (Schwartz, 2014).

The collaboration among selected members of the councils of the National Academies of Science and Engineering, along with the Institute of Medicine, organized a committee that defines and categorizes deeper learning and 21st century skills into three domains of competence: cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal (NRC, 2012). These three domains of competence represent constructivist learning and cognitive engagement (Eggen & Kauchak, 2012), which incorporate students taking control of their learning and applying the skills they obtain to various contexts and situations. The skills students acquire in school, the authors argue, should be applicable and transferrable to any future situations and thought of as “21st century competencies” (2012, p. 23). Achievement within these domains is important to students’ success in academics, the workplace, and with civic engagement (Kanter, 2012; NRC, 2012).
Students must learn how to work collaboratively with peers and adults in an academic setting as well as in the workplace. Socially speaking, the role of education should be to promote democratic thinking, social justice, and social cohesion for all students (Weiner, 2007), while from the economic perspective, a highly educated workforce is necessary and increasing due to “the need for different kinds of worker competencies with shifts in the distribution of occupations” (NRC, 2012, p. 54). Students who are able to navigate the expectations and skills developed through the three domains in school, should be able to transfer their knowledge and skills to other situations outside of school.

The demands of the economy are always changing, as history displays the shifts from an agricultural economy to an industrial and commerce economy to the future economy of knowledge. The changes in the U.S. economy continue to pressure how education is structured and delivered to children in an effort to prepare them as productive citizens within their communities (Benavot, 1983; Dewey, 2005; Hyslop-Margison, 2005). Learning cultures need to transform and adapt to the needs of our diverse student populations. Many of the social skills and work ethic needed in the workplace are just as applicable in the college setting. Students need to be on time and prepared for work, just as they would have to be on time and prepared to participate in class. Students need to see the connection between their program of study and tangible opportunities in the labor market (Symonds, 2011), in order to truly invest in their learning. The problem with the current educational system is that it is not evolving to serve the diverse population of students in this radically changing world (Schwartz, 2014). Single-routes of education do not allow flexibility for students to choose avenues of learning that will best serve their needs and aspirations (Schwartz, 2014; Stone III, 2014).
The literature on college and career readiness underscores the importance of how schools are working to prepare students for life after high school. College readiness allows students to begin course work without having to take remedial courses, and career readiness involves students who are proficient in core academics and technical work. The current system creates a platform of winners and losers through a market-based approach to learning that is not working well for all students. A change in providing comprehensive pathways for students may lead to higher attendance and retention rates, while building students’ skills of critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creative thinking. The BPS model creates opportunities for students to engage in comprehensive pathways of learning that prepare them as life-long learners who are college and career ready after high school.

A comprehensive curriculum for all students. A comprehensive curriculum encompasses constructivist learning and cognitive engagement through a combination of academics and technical training, which may also reduce tracking students by ability. The standards within a comprehensive curriculum do not necessarily mean doing away with separate tracks, but transform the idea and shed a different light on the concept of alternative education. Traditionally, the road of academics has been the preferred choice among high achieving students (Kim, 2010), while career and technical education has been reserved for troubled and low socioeconomic students preparing for working entry-level jobs (Fenwick, 2006; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012; MacLeod, 1995; Muller, 2009). Career and technical training is a critical factor in the preparation of 21st century learners for life after high school (Symonds, et al., 2011); therefore, the education system must change with the demands of the times. A curriculum that offers learning through an incorporation of both academic and career preparation appears to be the more logical solution.
A blended comprehensive curriculum of academics and career education prepares students with the necessary skills for competing in the job market and/or continuing with post-secondary education (Schwartz, 2014). Diane Ravitch (2010), a research professor of education at New York University and author of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, explains how schools can improve through refining the curriculum, instruction, and learning environment to increase student engagement and achievement. Curriculums need to be current with the times and integrate multiple perspectives and opportunities for the application of knowledge with hands-on experiences that apply to economic and social demands (Ravitch, 2010; Stone III, 2014). There needs to be more of a collaborative effort among teachers, school counselors, students, parents, and the community. A comprehensive liberal arts education is required for preparing all students to be college and career ready as well as responsible, democratic citizens (Ravitch, 2010). A comprehensive education has the potential to instruct and prepare students to be college and career ready for the future. Students require opportunities to pursue career or college preparation pathways that interest them, while still receiving a balanced curriculum of traditional academics and workshop experience (Schwartz, 2014). A successful learning environment fosters participation with problem solving, critical and analytical thinking processes, and construction of positive and productive networks among students, local businesses, and community members (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).

These authors maintain that schooling should provide opportunities for students to explore their interests within a comprehensive curriculum that prepares them to be college and career ready after high school. However, many schools function under the transmission model of education in which a teacher presents information to students that they “bank” into memory (Dewey, 2005; Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). The transmission model provides little or no room for
application of new knowledge with problem-solving, critical thinking, or effective communication with other people. These are essential skills for students’ success and participation as members within their communities, which many students lack as they graduate high school and enter into higher education and the workforce (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011).

The method of banking information creates passive learners to recall facts and truths without true understanding or application in a relevant context of life, and this is not a complete education (Dewey, 2005). This one-sided method of instruction does not adequately prepare all students for college or careers, nor does it improve the chances of students becoming well-informed, civically engaged citizens. What is the validity of learning facts with no action or purpose towards the betterment of the individual or their communities? The majority of high schools provide a traditional academic curriculum covering general subjects that prepare students for post-secondary education (Ravitch, 2010). However, not all students are motivated by a narrow focus on academic achievement, let alone engaged by traditional teaching methods, or have a desire to attend college directly after high school graduation (Washor & Mojkowski, 2013). Schools need to recognize that some students learn better in different environments, and that may be completely unlike the traditional classroom setting and procedures.

Various observers argue that the implementation of a comprehensive curriculum that makes education personal, is about learning, and acknowledges the implications on the school culture when the focus is on the learners and learning (Washor & Mojkowski, 2013) is necessary to improving the status of our struggling education system. However, there is a lack of empirical research on comprehensive schools and curriculums at the secondary level. Some studies address comprehensive curriculums at different medical schools at the postsecondary level, but there a
very few studies on schools that implement a comprehensive curriculum. The current study examines an alternative school site that effectively utilizes a comprehensive curriculum within a secondary setting. A comprehensive curriculum provides continuous opportunities to explore democratically the issues that arise in the course of daily lives, to imagine responses to problems, and to act upon those responses (Apple & Beane, 2007). Students must be exposed to the practice of effectively dealing with challenges through problem-solving strategies, have time to reflect upon those decisions and actions, and then discuss the experience with others in a learning environment that fosters and encourages academic and career work through engaging opportunities (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Washor and Mojkowski (2013) argue that if schools and educational stakeholders do not provide these educational opportunities and experiences to students, the levels of disengagement will continue to escalate, which may lead to higher dropout rates.

Social mobility becomes available to those people who are able to obtain an education; the more education, the more mobility a person has in climbing up the social ladder of status and success (MacLeod, 1995). Society has established the concept that privilege is associated with academic knowledge, while labeling vocational or technical knowledge as low-status and inferior (Crawford, 2009; MacLeod, 1995). Lewis (1998) contends that “the practice of dividing the curriculum into academic and vocational aspects, and treating the latter as a default for those deemed to be ill-suited to the former, has been an enduring staple of educational systems and schools across the globe” (284). Advocates of a comprehensive curriculum argue that all students should have the right to choose educational avenues that best articulate their interests and build upon their abilities. Additionally, academic learning and career education should be available for all students regardless of race, gender, socio-economic status, or ability; however, the conviction
that career preparation classes are for tracking students who are low performing, disabled, and/or have low socio-economic status is still evident in many schools (Fenwick, 2006; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013). Career programs offer all students the opportunity to prepare socially and academically for life as productive and participating citizens. These programs provide an active learning environment that focuses on soft skills, training for specific careers or jobs, and networking with community businesses for job placement after high school or for preparation to attend college (Crawford, 2009).

The curriculum within the BPS model is student-centered and built around students’ interests with an emphasis on five learning goals: communication, social reasoning, empirical reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and personal qualities (Levine, 2002; Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Students design learning plans that outline a project and demonstration of what they will complete within a specific amount of time (a quarter or semester) and how it will address state-mandated learning requirements for graduation. Unlike the curriculum of other more traditional schools, the BPS curriculum centers on the students’ interests as well as their social and academic needs (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). There is no tracking of students into specific pathways; instead, students are free to explore various pathways towards college and career readiness through academic work, internships, and college classes (Levine, 2002). The founders of BPS argue that meaningful system of education would take students’ interests and needs into account, and allow them to navigate their own educational paths. Children are better able to live well if they are rationally able to compare different ways of life and make choices for themselves (Brighouse, 2000). Students must have the chance to explore and decide what is best for them in order to make informed decisions that will affect their lives. Students require opportunities in the classroom or learning environment that promote growth by sharing their learning with others in a
meaningful and productive way that is applicable to life outside of school (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). There is a need for studies of systems founded on these principles, and the current study contributes to that need by analyzing how students respond when educators put them in practice.

This section on tracking and curriculum reveals how tracking and following strictly academic curriculums could be problematic for serving all students. The practice of tracking marginalizes students and stifles adequate preparation for all students to be college and career ready after high school. Although the method of detracking offers a more equitable approach towards learning, there are criticisms that learning is not as rigorous. The transmission model of learning, where students simply bank information without application, is another method that some schools implement and it influences disengagement among students. These problematic methods do not provide all students with the skills and opportunities to be successful in or outside of the classroom. The refinement of curriculum, instruction, and the learning environment in schools is vital to increasing student engagement, motivation, and achievement, as well as preparing students to be life-long learners and productive citizens within their communities.

**The Roles of Teachers and School Counselors Empowering Student Choice**

Students should have the power to make decisions about their future, but they need information about all options that may be available to them. Teachers and school counselors must provide students with the information and opportunities to make decisions that best fit their interests and needs for becoming knowledgeable and productive citizens within their communities (Akos et al., 2007; Finley, 1984; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). The third strand of literature on the roles of school counselors and teachers offers insight into the critical part they have in assisting students throughout the
learning process and in preparation to be not only college and career ready, but also lifelong learners and active citizens within their communities. Teachers and school counselors empower students to make choices about their education and career goals by providing them with the information and opportunities to do so. It is a collaborative effort between teachers and school counselors in preparing students to be college and career ready after high school graduation. In this section, I include two subsections on the roles of teachers and the role of school counselors. The basic role of any educational stakeholder is to support and encourage student learning, and then depending on the specific title of teacher, counselor, administrator, or parent, certain expectations and/ or requirements come into play. Two major stakeholders in schools are school counselors and teachers, and their ability to work with other educational stakeholders and students is vital to a quality and equitable education. In the current study, advisors (teachers) are major stakeholders in the learning process at GVBPS, as they provide one-on-one attention and instruction to students as needed. Unfortunately, the presence of a school counselor is limited at the site, but the advisors work together to provide the support and guidance students need in order to make informed decisions about their learning.

The role of teachers. Teachers play an important role in the education of students serving as not only as facilitators of students’ learning (Robinson & Aronica, 2015), but also as learners themselves. In an instructional capacity, teachers are expected to support deeper and complex learning for all students by having a strong understanding of their subject matter, knowledge of students’ ideas and misconceptions about the subject matter, awareness of student differences, and a collection of flexible and adaptable strategies to engage learners (NRC, 2012). Teachers as learners involves professional communities where administrators and colleagues work together to support one another in reflecting on effective practices, current research, and
student work towards cultivating and improving teacher performance in the classroom (NRC, 2012). Similar to students, teachers require opportunities to engage in different approaches to teaching and assessment that will refresh their own creativity and best serve all students in their classrooms (NRC, 2012, Robinson & Aronica, 2015).

Many teachers are expected to do more than just teach subject matter to students and deliver learning standards; they are expected to help students to learn (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Teachers who help students learn do so by inspiring, building confidence, and encouraging creativity within each of their students (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). These expectations are similar to BPS’s principles about teachers not just instructing students, but also becoming learners in the classroom. BPS teachers are leaders who model and foster stable relationships with students and colleagues with the goal of creating a strong community of learners. The atmosphere of a school is dependent upon the teachers and their excitement for learning (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). However, this excitement and passion for learning is sometimes challenged by demands from educational reforms that do not take into account other factors that may hinder student success.

In the past, educational reform efforts to improve students’ academic achievement and preparation for college or a career after high school graduation expose a primary focus on teacher quality, while ignoring multiple barriers that constrain student success (ASCA, 2013). These barriers are due to social, emotional, physical, and economic strains on students that can alter the learning environment and ability for some students to succeed (ASCA, 2013). In deconstructing the stereotypes that cast blame on teachers for students’ low achievement, Kumashiro (2012) states “by shining an oversized spotlight on a minor problem, and scapegoating people who are in fact an essential part of the solution, accountability is
sidestepped and responsibility shunned” (p. 11). Teachers are a key part of the solution towards helping students be successful in the classroom, but their role must be acknowledged and respected in a professional capacity. According to Kumashiro (2012), “current reforms are reducing what teachers need to learn about students, learning, curriculum, assessment, and educational contexts, thereby reducing their ability to understand, create, tailor and problem-solve…assuming the role of teachers as technicians who implement a scripted curriculum” (p. 49). In order for students to engage and achieve within the learning environment, teachers must have a strong rapport with their students and a decent understanding of their interests and goals (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).

The role of school counselors. According to the ASCA (2013), the role of a school counselor consists of assisting all students with academic achievement, personal/social and career development, while making sure they become productive, well-adjusted adults within their communities. Additionally, school counselors must support and help students nurture positive relationships among educational stakeholders, especially teachers in addressing the expectations and requirements related to college and career readiness (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009). School counselors serve as collaborators among teachers, parents, students, and the community to ensure that all students develop academic and career plans that are reflective of their interests and abilities (ASCA, 2013). As part of the preparation of students to be college and career ready, school counselors play a role in the guidance and counseling services offered to assist students with this task (Bell et al., 2009; Hart Research Associates, 2011; Perna et al., 2008). The intention of college and career planning is to prepare students for any type of post-secondary experience without needing remediation and for them to possess the skills and knowledge necessary for success in their career field (ASCA, 2013).
The Hart Research Associates (2011) assess 1,507 high school graduates of 2010, using a comprehensive survey about their high school experience and its role in preparing them for life in regards to work or post-secondary education. In order to increase responses, the researchers employ three methods for completing the survey by telephone, cellphone, or online (Hart Research Associates, 2011). The findings reveal a sense of ownership from the students that some claim they could have done more to improve their preparation for life after high school; however, only “49% said high school prepared them well for both college and work” (Hart Research Associates, 2011, p. 9). Additionally, most of the participants identify as satisfied with their high school experience, although almost all of them gave suggestions for changes such as they would have taken different or higher level courses (Hart Research Associates, 2011). School counselors play a major role in providing college and career information to all students, in addition to working with students to confirm their understanding and application of the learning process in preparing to be college and career ready (Bell et al., 2009; Stipanovic, 2010; Symonds et al., 2011).

The improvement of college and career readiness for students also involves school counselors incorporating social and emotional learning into their learning (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013). Social and emotional learning is a process where students and adults obtain and “effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, exhibit empathy for others, establish and maintain relationships, and make responsible decisions” (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013, p. 2). The five social and emotional learning core competencies: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making are similar to BPS’s principles.
The quality of teachers’ instruction and school counselors’ guidance and support are important towards preparing all students with access to educational opportunities that allow them to acquire skills and experiences necessary for life after high school. Research offers strategies and procedures for what might work best in schools, but is it up to teachers and school counselors as to how they present and apply that information towards guiding students (Akos, Lambie, Milsom, & Gilbert, 2007; Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Kim, 2010). The work between school counselors and teachers is essential to all students’ preparation and success. Not only is collegiality among teachers important, but the cooperation among students, teachers, administrators, the community, and school counselors is essential to improving academic achievement (Light, 2005; Thompson & Moffett, 2008) along with preparing students to be college and career ready (NOSCA, 2013). The BPS’s motto, “Education is everyone’s business” (Littky & Grabelle, 2004), is an appropriate reminder of the importance of a quality education for all students involves the work of many and not just one. Students are the main factor in education, so it only seems logical that student-centered learning is effective in motivating and engaging students to learn.

**Conclusion**

Due to the growing popularity of the BPS model and positive results with student learning and achievement, the present study examines the students and school stakeholders’ perspectives of the BPS model of learning. The previously discussed literature on the BPS model divulges limited studies that focus mostly on the teachers and administrators’ perspectives. Furthermore, the four strands of literature on dialogue and student voice, tracking, college and career readiness, and the role of teachers and school counselors provides additional context for the rationale of the current study. Each strand of literature presents support towards improving
and increasing student engagement, motivation, and achievement in the learning environment. A comprehensive curriculum that allows all students to actively participate and communicate creates a productive learning environment, as well as a sense of community. This study will contribute to the narrow literature regarding student voice and perspectives on learning as it relates to motivation and engagement within the BPS model of learning. The conceptual framework of the SDT in relation to autonomy, relatedness, and competence guides the study in answering the following two questions: How do students experience the Big Picture School model of learning? Moreover, how do the Big Picture School model and faculty structure that experience?
Chapter Three: Methods

In this chapter, I explain the methodology and procedures of the qualitative study on students’ perceptions of their experiences at the Green Valley Big Picture School (GVBPS), as well as school stakeholders’ perceptions of how the student experience is structured. The outline of the chapter begins with a statement of purpose and the research questions that guide the current study. An explanation of the research design follows the research question section, and provides a rationale for implementing a qualitative design through the approach of a case study. I define the case study method and describe why it is appropriate for this type of study. After the research design section, I include a researcher as instrument section in order to establish my positionality within the research and to introduce a second coder, who assisted with the coding and analysis of the data.

The section on site selection and sampling comes after the researcher as instrument section, and clarifies the justification for studying this particular site and procedures for sampling participants. I include a description of the participants and demographic information for potential generalization of the findings and/ or for making comparisons across future replications of this study.

The data collection section follows the site selection and sampling section, and contains subsections of the methods I used to collect information from participants. The four subsections are participant observations, interviews, focus group sessions, and document analysis. The subsections of the data collection outline the reasoning for implementation and provide a description of the instrumentation for each. Following this section is the data analysis section, and I present the procedures for coding and analyzing the data through constant comparison and comparative pattern analysis.
The last two sections of this chapter are trustworthiness and ethical considerations. I provide a depiction of how I maximize trustworthiness of the data through strategies of triangulating data sources and member checking, address and acknowledge the possibility of researcher bias, and the importance of maintaining confidentiality and ethical concerns throughout the study. The chapter ends with a brief conclusion of the main points regarding the methodological approach.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to formulate an understanding of the student experience at the alternative learning site, GVBPS. I contended that listening to students and utilizing their interests to write meaningful, relevant curriculums, while incorporating internships and college course work with high school required academics, and collaborating with community business members all contribute to higher levels of student engagement and motivation in the learning environment. Therefore, I proposed the following two questions to direct my study, *how do students experience the Big Picture School model of learning*, and *how do the Big Picture School model and faculty structure that experience?*

**Research Design**

Qualitative research allows for rich, descriptive data to illustrate theory and concepts that may create an understanding or explanation of social life beyond the particular group of people being studied (Biklen & Casella, 2007; Stake, 2000; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). In the case of education, understanding stakeholders’ perspectives on how they are equipping students for life after high school graduation is important to the success of local communities. Additionally, students’ perspectives are equally important to this dialogue regarding college and career preparation. The BPS is one form of alternative schooling for at-risk youth that offers student-
centered learning with a focus on teaching students how to become life-long learners through curriculum designed for each individual student’s interests (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). A qualitative approach was appropriate for the current study of students’ and school stakeholders’ perspectives on how students experience learning at the BPS, because it allowed for dialogue with and among participants concerning their understanding of observed and reported events and activities within the learning environment (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This approach also provided opportunities for informing educational practices within the context of the learning environment, while also creating connections between research and practice (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Qualitative studies begin with minimal commitment to prior assumptions and theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and look to understand the complexities of human behavior (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Researchers who implement qualitative studies investigate and examine the processes by which people construct meaning and identify those meanings through empirical observations, interviews, focus groups, and the analysis of documents (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Biklen & Casella, 2007; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). In the context of dissertation work, Biklen and Casella (2007) point out, “the goal is to produce a document that teaches readers a different way of considering an area that they may or may not understand well” (29). Since students are rarely included in the designing of educational curriculum, this study may present evidence of how student-centered learning based upon curriculum created with students’ interests in mind influences their learning experiences at GVBPS.

**Case study approach.** In the most basic terms, a case study is a detailed investigation of one setting or subject (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Stake, 2000; Yin, 1981a; Yin & Davis, 2007). The methodological strength of the case study, but also considered a
challenge, is its ability to examine a phenomenon and its context, as well as scrutinizing the blurring that occurs between the two (Tripathy, 2009; Yin, 1981a, 1981b, 1994; Yin & Davis, 2007). The purpose of this approach is to draw attention to what specifically can be learned from a single case (Stake, 2000), or cases. Despite the case study originating in the early 20th century, the popularity of case studies as research tools has developed only within the last thirty years (Stake, 2000; Tripathy, 2009). The case study method, referred to as a three-featured profile, emphasizes that the method relies on the ability to triangulate from multiple sources of evidence, and assumes a richness of data while investigating a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 1997).

The difficulties that may appear when implementing the case study method include, but are not limited to, the labor-intensive nature of this research, the consideration that this type of research lacks academic clout and rigor, conclusions might be statistically limited for generalization purposes, and the daunting task of gaining trust and participation from host organizations (Tripathy, 2009). The challenges that emerge from conducting a case study result usually from a lack of structure during data collection (Hays & Singh, 2012). In order to address these challenges, researchers must consider how their perspectives may influence a particular study’s design and process, as well as utilize the triangulation of data to establish trustworthiness (Hays & Singh, 2012; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2006).

Collecting information from a variety of sources is an essential component towards validating and reducing the chance of misinterpretation of a study’s results, with the main goal of being able to triangulate the data in an effort to solidify the findings (Hays & Singh, 2012; Stakes, 2000; Yin, 2006). Triangulation is a process of using multiple perceptions to illuminate meaning as well as verify observations or interpretation (Stake, 2000). Within the current study, I
triangulated data from multiple sources to examine the student experience at GVBPS through participant observations at the school site, individual interviews with students and school stakeholders, focus group sessions with students, and an analysis of school documents.

The case study was the most appropriate qualitative method for answering the two research questions that guided this study, because this was an investigation of students and school stakeholders in one specific alternative learning site. Through participant observations, interviews, focus group sessions, and the analysis of school-related documents, I triangulated the data and constructed a deeper understanding of the student experience within the context of the school.

**Researcher as Instrument**

As the primary researcher, I identified as a Caucasian female. I am a certified Literacy Coach and English teacher with eight years of experience teaching at the middle and high school levels. Additionally, I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Teaching and Leadership, with an interest in school counseling, student-designed curriculums, and preparing students for the world of work or college after graduation. My position as the primary researcher was from the viewpoint of an educator with experience working with teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and students at the middle and high school level, as well as a researcher interested in learning about student engagement and motivation within alternative models of schooling.

Prior to this study, I had no affiliation with the school or school district. Through my own research online and discussions in my graduate classes, I learned about the BPS model and became interested in how it served students who were at risk and disengaged in learning at their traditional schools. As a high school English teacher, I have experience working with at-risk and low achieving students. I am aware of students labeled as struggling or problematic in the
classroom disengaging in their learning. The BPS model with its student-centered focus and student-led curriculum intrigued my curiosity of how to re-engage students turned off from the traditional learning environment.

In the spring before I proposed this study, I attended an appreciation ceremony that the students at GVBPS hosted for their parents and mentors. Each of the students stood in the front of the audience of parents, teachers, friends, and mentors, and personally thanked them for assisting and supporting them throughout the year in their internships and classes. After the appreciation portion of the ceremony, the students invited everyone to walk through a gallery of pictures, artifacts, and tri-folds that displayed their work and major projects they had completed during the school year. The students were available to discuss their projects and internships, and all of them were energetic and excited to share their knowledge and experiences with everyone who took part in the gallery walk. The projects and demonstrations were extremely detailed, and varied greatly by topic, which I found captivating. The energy and excitement the students shared about their projects, and their gratitude to the mentors, parents, and teachers who supported them throughout the year, made me want to know more about this type of alternative learning environment, and if it was as positive as it appeared during these presentations. This event influenced my decision to study the student experience at GVBPS in order to formulate a better understanding of how this structure of learning served students, and if it was applicable to other educational environments.

There were constraints within the study regarding my positionality as a Caucasian, female researcher collecting data from students and parents who identified as Native American. Representatives of the local reservation asked me not to include any identifying information about the students who participated or anything that had to do with the particular reservation.
Although my study focused on the GVBPS and the students’ experiences of learning, there were issues of trust with participation between the Native American students and parents within the study. I assured the representatives of the reservation that my study examined the students’ experiences of learning within the GVBPS structure. I maintained strict confidentiality of all documents and data by using pseudonyms for all participants from the beginning of the data collection, throughout the coding and analysis, and during the final writing of the report. Due to the assurances I made to the students and their parents, my ability to delve more deeply into issues of race and ethnicity within this learning environment was certainly constrained.

I included a second coder to assist with coding and to discuss the findings during the analysis of data, which “strengthens the [qualitative] design and builds others’ confidence in [the] findings” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 209). The second coder identified as a Caucasian female, and was a retired licensed clinical social worker and psychologist. Prior to her retirement, she privately owned and operated a mental health practice for eighteen years. Her caseloads consisted of 80% adults and 20% children. Before owning her own practice, she worked for a local county’s mental health board and Head Start program. Her work focused on, but was not limited to, counseling in the areas of marriage, family, eating disorders, anxiety and depression, and military.

**Site Selection and Sampling**

The current case study implemented a qualitative approach during three months of the fall semester, between September and November of 2014, at GVBPS, a rural school on the eastern coast of the United States. Data collection transpired through participant observations, one-on-one interviews, focus group sessions, and document analysis as the main forms of evidence for triangulation. Due to the small population of students and faculty at this site,
purposeful sampling created hypotheses for investigation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Hays & Wood, 2011). I established a professional rapport with the principal and staff at the school through school visits and several on-going emails, along with discussions about the purpose and goals of the study with the school district’s superintendent, students, and parents at school-related events outside of the site.

**School demographics.** In the fall of 2014, there were 61 students enrolled at GVBPS. The 101 group (9th grade) had 12 students. The 201 group (10th grade) had 14 students. The 301 group (11th grade) had 20 students, and the 401 group (12th grade) had 15 students. For the category of gender, 36 students identified as male and 25 students identified as female. The ethnic identity of students represented 35 as Caucasian, 19 as Native American, and 7 as African American. Twenty-one students were students with disabilities. Thirty-two students received free and reduced lunch. Fifteen students were out-of-district students and required to pay tuition to attend GVBPS. All of the staff and faculty at GVBPS identified as Caucasian, except one advisor identified as Asian. Figure 1: GVBPS Demographics outlines the school’s general demographics.

**Figure 1: GVBPS Demographics**

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<th>Total Enrollment</th>
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<td>Grade Enrollment</td>
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<td>9th (101) – 12</td>
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<td>11th (301) – 20</td>
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<td>12th (401) – 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with disabilities</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free &amp; Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-district students</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants. I recruited student participants by observing them in their classes, and through informal conversations as a way to build rapport and trust. After four sessions of observations and conversations with students, I employed purposeful sampling to select students who created a variance across variables of race, ethnicity, gender, achievement, parenthood, socio-economic status, disability, and project-interest. Twenty-four students received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved parental consent and student assent forms requesting voluntary consent to participate in the study.

Out of 24 students invited to engage in the study, 16 students returned consent and assent forms to participate in the interviews and focus group sessions. The 101 group consisted of two males and two females. The two females identified as Caucasian, one male identified as African American, and the other male identified as Native American. The Native American male shared that he had ADHD and a learning disability. The 201 group included four students, two males, two females, and all of them identify as Caucasian. One of the males shared that he had ADHD, poor vision, and dyslexia. The 301 group consisted of three males and one female, and all four of them identified as Caucasian. One of the males was Autistic, and the female student suffered from anxiety. In the 401 group, there were three males and one female, two of the males and female identified as Caucasian, and one male identified as Native American. The participants were representative of the student population in terms of gender and disability, but not in representing the perspectives of other ethnicities. Only three students of color agreed to participate in the study, which may have been due to issues of trust, fear of misrepresentation, or tension to maintain confidentiality of the local reservation. Figure 2: GVBPS Student Participants lists each of the student participant’s self-identified ethnicity and grade level.
I invited the parents of each student to participate as well; however, out of 24, only two parents agreed to the individual interview. The two parents who agreed to the interview identified as Caucasian and female. The parent participants were not representative of gender or ethnicity within the parent population, and the lack of willingness to participate may have been due to issues of trust, fear of misrepresentation, or tension to maintain confidentiality of the local reservation. Nine school employees, the school principal, four advisors, two teaching assistants, one secretary/assistant, and the internship coordinator, were asked to participate and consented. The school principal, three advisors, two teaching assistants, the secretary/assistant, and internship coordinator all identified as Caucasian, and one advisor identified as Asian. Almost all of the faculty and staff participated except one teacher’s aide, one volunteer, and the special education teacher, who floated between the high school and GVBPS. Figure 3: GVBPS School
Stakeholders presents each of the school stakeholder’s self-identified ethnicity and role at the school.

**Figure 3: GVBPS School Stakeholders**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Role</th>
<th>School Stakeholders</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Assistant</td>
<td>Riley</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Assistant</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship Coordinator</td>
<td>Marvel</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary &amp; Assistant</td>
<td>Willow</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>Spencer</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>Howard</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor &amp; Parent</td>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Noah’s Parent</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Rachel’s Parent</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The student group of participants assisted in answering the first question of how students experience the BPS model of learning, along with what motivated their engagement in the learning process, and how they experienced college and career readiness at GVBPS. The secondary group of school stakeholders including the two parents contributed to answering the second question of this study, which was how they perceived students’ experiences regarding the structure of the BPS model of learning at GVBPS.

**Data Collection**

**Participant observation.** In order to build a relationship of acceptance with potential participants of a study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), I engaged in 50 hours of participant observations over the course of 13 weeks at the school’s site. Observations in the field included varying degrees of involvement from sole observance of a scene to full participation between the researcher and participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I conducted participant observations 2-3
times a week on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays for 2-6 hours depending on what was going on at the school and my own availability. On the Monday and Wednesday visits, I observed advisories, workshops, and exploratory classes, along with general observations of student and staff interactions.

I observed workshop classes for History, English, Biology, Algebra, and Art over the 13-week period. In the History workshops, students created timelines in relation to the Civil War and the case of Marbury versus Madison. Students worked on their laptops to complete review quizzes regarding the court case and in preparation for an essay that served as practice for the Regents exam. Some of the students struggled to stay on task with the review quizzes, but their advisor was able to redirect them and other students also offered help to each other.

In the English workshops, students read the short story, *The Most Dangerous Game*, and watched the 1930s version to analyze author’s right and producer changes in the movie. Students debated whether the movie was better than the story in print and why. In other English sessions, students finished reading, *Monster*, and created a movie trailer for the book. The class went to the local courthouse to film their trailer, which they were excited about being able to do.

The Biology workshops covered the topics of fungus, protist, and the dissecting of owl pellets. During the fungus and protist workshops, students went outside to gather different kinds of fungus and protist into Styrofoam cups, and then came back in to the classroom to research the characteristics of what they found. In another workshop, two students presented information they found on viruses and bacteria related to SARS and why there is no vaccine for the common cold. The owl pellet workshop involved students dissecting the pellets and then gluing the bones they found onto index cards or pieces of paper in order to recreate the skeletal design of animals the
owls had digested. The students appeared engaged and enjoyed the ability to incorporate going outside and working with partners as part of their lessons.

The Algebra workshop established the goal of identifying how graphs of parent functions are manipulated. Students learned about linear functions and quadratic functions by graphing various equations on graphing calculators and their laptops to solve the equations. The students worked together to figure out the equations and were not afraid to ask for help.

In the Art workshop, students were working on different ways to hold a pencil and shade. They were encouraged to draw pictures and images using various shading techniques. The History teacher teaches the Art workshops, and the students had a variety of artwork displayed around the school.

The advisory classes completed projects as a collective group, and each grade level had different projects going on during my time at the school. The 101 group created *Who am I* projects that focused on their interests, goals, and family background, which they presented at their first round of exhibitions. The 201 group worked on a music project designing homemade guitars. The 301 group project, *How to Feed the World* with the subtitle *How to Feed 9 Billion People by 2050*, included students researching how to address this daunting dilemma and having conversations about the information that they found. The 401 group had a similar project with their *Empty Bowls* event. The 401 students threw, glazed, and decorated clay bowls as part of their event to raise awareness and fundraise to stop hunger in America.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I observed student exhibitions, exploratory work, and had informal conversations with students and staff. I occasionally helped students with their writing and reading comprehension if they asked me to, and had numerous discussions with students about places they have or wanted to travel, where they wanted to live or work after high school,
hunting trips, camping trips, and several conversations about animals and what kind of pets I had at home. The student exhibitions were one of my favorite things to observe, because of the people who attended to watch, listen, and support the students while they presented their projects. Family members and their peers listened intently and provided supportive and constructive feedback at the end of each exhibition.

Each time I visited the school, I rotated to different classes, spending 20-60 minutes observing each workshop, advisory, or exploratory class. I did not shadow specific students, but attempted to talk with all students when provided an opportunity. I assisted students outside with clipping garlic for a fundraiser they do each year as a way to cover prom expenses. Each year the students and faculty work together to plant garlic, harvest it, clip it, and sell it. The bigger bulbs are sold in bunches and the smaller cloves of garlic are used to make garlic oil. Occasionally, I sat in the front hallway with students and talked with them about their projects, particularly the senior thesis projects. One student mentioned how he was extremely interested in glass blowing, and I invited my husband to the school to perform a glass blowing presentation that the student and staff greatly appreciated.

The recording of observational data occurred through fieldnotes, commonly associated with the research approach of participant observation allowing the researcher to produce a “written record of these observations and experiences” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 1). I crafted over 150 pages of observational fieldnotes and memos. Although participant observation is an effective method for immersing oneself into a study, too much participation may result in the loss of the “original intent” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, 92). In order to avoid losing sight of the study’s intent, I maintained organization and balance between participation and observation by allocating specific times to observe students working within the learning environment along with
specific times to talk and interact with students and school stakeholders during the daily activities.

After the first four weeks of observations, I started to consider students and staff as potential participants. I was transparent and open with potential participants regarding the purpose and procedures of the study, and established my role as a graduate student and primary researcher. I began the process of recruiting potential participants through a 15-minute introductory presentation about the study to students and school stakeholders at the school. Then I provided students and school stakeholders with handouts explaining the study and voluntary consent and assent forms for participation. I established availability through email or telephone for participants to ask questions or make comments about the study. I clearly stated their participation was voluntary and that they could leave the study at any time without penalty. How the researcher identifies him or herself in a setting (Biklen & Casella, 2007) is significant towards creating a rapport with participants, and I explained my role as a graduate student conducting research as a requirement towards the completion of my doctoral degree.

Interviews. Interviews are everywhere, people cannot escape the questioning, and conversations associated with interviews in some capacity from political polls to medical questionnaires to college applications and more (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The interview in terms of qualitative research is a data collection method that tends to have more focus and detail than a normal conversation, but still implores the feeling of a regular every day conversation with people taking turns speaking and exhibiting cues for understanding or confusion (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Most commonly, the one-on-one interview involves a face-to-face verbal exchange between two people, and may follow a structured, semi-structured, or unstructured format (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Accounts documented throughout the interview serve as “mental
maps that people carry around inside their heads” (Luker, 2010, 167), and assist in building theory around a particular phenomenon. A social relationship between the interviewer and interviewee becomes apparent and may more or less have an effect on the results obtained from the interview (Bourdieu, 1996; Fontana & Frey, 2005), which creates an emphasis on the researcher’s positionality and reflexivity in the study (Bourdieu, 1996; Fine et al., 2000; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007).

In regards to the structured and semi-structured format, the researcher should generate an outline of topics for discussion with questions related to the selected topics (Luker, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 1995), in which for the current study, I created two semi-structured outlines of questions for students and school stakeholders. The semi-structured student interviews followed a protocol comprised of 15 questions to ensure consistency and reliability with collecting the data. The protocol inquired about students’ academic background, what motivated and engaged them in learning, and their understanding of the concept of career and college readiness as it related to the goals and structure of the BPS model. The individual interview focused on the student’s general information, academic background, and perspective on this alternative learning model. There were 16 student interviews, ranging from 9:18 – 39:21 minutes in duration, and resulted in 146 pages of transcription for coding. All student interviews were audiotaped per participant consent and transcribed verbatim.

In order to confirm consistency and reliability throughout the school stakeholders’ semi-structured interviews, I followed a protocol comprised of 11 questions. The protocol investigated educational stakeholders’ perspectives on the students’ academic background and achievement, what motivated and engaged students in learning, and their understanding of the concept of career and college readiness as it related to the goals and structure of the BPS model. All
individual interview sessions were audiotaped per participant consent, and I transcribed all of the interview recordings verbatim. There were 11 interviews, ranging from 11:11 – 32:51 minutes in duration, which resulted in 132 pages of transcriptions.

Limiting the number of main topics for the interview improved the maintainability of smooth transitions and conversational flow (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), and I used the outlines as guides to keep the interviews on topic. By establishing a set of parameters, the closed- or open-ended questions produced a frame of the conversation responses for analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Snow, Zurcher, & Sjoberg, 1982). Furthermore, follow-up questions allowed for an in-depth pursuit of themes, elaboration of responses in context, and the exploration of implications for what was discussed, additionally assuring interest in what the interviewee shared (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Several of the students and school stakeholders provided responses that prompted me to ask follow-up questions, and I encouraged all participants to share anything that they felt was important to the topic of the student experience and how it was structured at their school.

A key period during an interview was after the interview, when the audio-recorder was off (Warren, Barnes-Brus, Burgess, Weibold-Lippisch, Hackney, Harkness, Kennedy, Dingwall, Rosenblatt, Ryen, & Shuy, 2003), and a few of the students and school stakeholders appeared more at ease. Majority of the participants seemed very comfortable and open about discussing their experiences at GVBPS and the affects its structure had on students’ experiences and learning. This last “strip of time” was a chance for the interviewee to directly or indirectly express strong interest or dislike for a particular topic discussed in the interview (Warren et al., 2003), and some participants took advantage of this “off the record” time to reiterate their perspectives on this type of learning environment and school structure. Once the interviews were complete, I began a more detailed analysis of the data collected from the participants during the
final stage of “listening to hear the meaning of what is said” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, 226), and immediately following each interview, I listened and transcribed the conversations verbatim. I reviewed the data for patterns or repetitive responses to specific questions in order to construct or support an emerging theory or concept (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). After the individual interviews were complete, I provided each participant with a copy of the individual interview for their review. Four of the 11 school stakeholders included additional information and corrections to their explanations after proofreading their transcripts. All participants verified their approval of the information on their individual transcripts either in person or via email.

Focus groups. Focus groups, also known as group interviews and considered a valuable qualitative research technique (Madriz, 2000), were structured so that talk was encouraged among the participants about topics related specifically to the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The advantages of focus groups were that they allowed for direct interaction between the researcher and participants, they provided a more relaxed atmosphere than individual interviews, they expedited self-exploration concerning the impact of the phenomenon understudy, and permitted opportunities for greater data collection in a smaller amount of time (Hays & Singh, 2012). This method of data collection was beneficial for the research purposes of stimulating multiple perspectives to engage about a topic or to promote a discussion about a topic that might be more challenging to answer in an individual interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Madriz, 2000).

I implemented the focus group method as another form of data collection to follow-up with information that students’ gave in the individual interviews. The students’ individual interviews revealed patterns and areas that needed further explanation, which proved to be easier
for students to explain with their peers in a group setting. I organized the focus group sessions by grade level, and 15 students who completed the individual interviews participated. One student left the study by the time I conducted the focus group sessions due to emotional distress at the school and relocated to another facility. The focus group sessions followed a protocol of 11 questions and provided students with the opportunity to share with one another their perspectives, and provided additional insight into how students were experiencing learning at GVBPS. There were five focus group sessions, ranging from 8:09 – 37:08 minutes in duration, and resulted in 66 pages of transcription for coding. The fifth focus group session was actually an individual interview with a 101 student that followed the focus group protocol, because she was unwilling to participate in the 101 focus group due to tension with another student. The focus group sessions were audiotaped per participant consent and transcribed verbatim.

Confidentiality was a challenge within the focus groups, since there was no guarantee that information shared among the participants of the study would stay within the group (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Morgan 1997); however, the student participants were respectful and supportive of each other during and after the focus group sessions. Another challenge with focus groups was when participants talked too much or did not share information that was relevant to the topics of discussion (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), and were reduced with the role of the moderator. I had minor trouble with keeping the 201’s on task during their focus group session. The four students were very excited to talk about their school, and at times would try to talk over each other, or discussed topics that were not necessarily associated with the protocol. One student got off on a tangent about his strong dislike for traditional schooling, while another student went off about 3-D printers and the making of sports car. I served as the moderator for all of the focus group sessions, and was able to keep students on task for majority of the time. The researcher usually
serves as the moderator during the focus group sessions and decides the structure for the group; whether it is to learn new information or confirm emerging theories from previous group sessions, or individual interviews (Morgan, 1997). Occasionally, I had to remind students to stay on topic, and repeated or rephrased questions for clarity when needed. Similar to structured or semi-structure interviews, the effectiveness of a focus group depends upon the preparation and use of a guide or outline for the session containing a general question that creates an agenda of topics for discussion (Morgan, 1997).

Focus groups should be avoided if there is concern with participants being uncomfortable or hostile with each other in a group session (Madriz, 2000). This was an issue during the 101’s focus group time, because the 101 students were having an internal conflict with each other. One of the participants was not willing to talk in front of the other participants, and she completed her focus group session as an individual interview. When researchers distinguish which topics are most important for the focus group to cover, it reduces the remoteness readers sometimes feel when reading the findings or results of qualitative research (Morgan, 1997). All questions and topics covered in the focus group sessions related to the students’ experience at their school and patterns I found in the individual interviews associated with the structure of those experiences. I chose not to implement the focus group method with the school stakeholders, because I wanted to maintain the focus on the students’ perspectives of their experiences at GVBPS.

**Document analysis.** The gathering and analyzing of documents was the fourth form of data collection I implemented, and is commonly used in qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Yin, 1981a). An advantage to the collecting of documents for analysis is that it was a less invasive method (Hays & Singh, 2012). In the current study, document analysis included 12 TGIF newsletters, a learning plan template, an application form
for students and parents to enroll at the school, an audit report (Cohen, 2014), and a student survey report (YouthTruth, 2014). The newsletters provided a detailed description of the work students and faculty were doing at GVBPS, the learning plan template displayed the outlining of how students created their own curriculums, and the application form revealed how the school encouraged students and parents to think about why they wanted to attend this type of alternative learning environment. The reports demonstrated prior assessment of the school’s structure and services, as well as the students’ perspectives on their experiences with learning at GVBPS.

In October of 2014, GVBPS students participated in the YouthTruth survey online. The Center for Effective Philanthropy, in collaboration with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, developed the YouthTruth survey to collect honest student feedback from a diverse range of traditional, charter, STEM, comprehensive, alternative, and early college schools (YouthTruth, 2014). Of the 59 GVBPS students surveyed, 57 responded, resulting in a 97% survey response rate. The researchers who prepared this survey note only 287 schools were included in the YouthTruth’s comparative dataset; therefore, it should not be considered a comprehensive benchmarking study. However, the results from this survey aligned with and supported my own findings.

During the 2013-2014 school year at GVBPS, the school district and local community raised questions regarding the manner in which the school met the rules and regulations of New York State (Cohen, 2014). Therefore, Castallo and Silky Education Consultants conducted an audit of the GVBPS by interviewing district administration, all current staff at GVBPS, and twelve students representing all four-grade levels. Two individual focus group sessions were held with three parents and the other with four members of the school district’s teacher association. The focus of the interviews and focus group sessions was to gain insight on the
program descriptions, course offerings, and individual perceptions of the program’s strengths and weaknesses (Cohen, 2014). Additionally, a review of school documents and observations of the students at GVBPS over three days were forms of data collection for the audit. Overall, the findings revealed the GVBPS programs as academically in compliance with NYS rules and regulations. Recommendations to address weaker areas such as the fact that students do not have adequate access to counseling services from a certified school counselor or that the GVBPS does not currently use any of the alternative approaches available to gain credit and waivers for variances with programs per NYS regulations were included in the report (Cohen, 2014).

It was significant to the results of the study as to how I constructed meaning from the documents (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), and I triangulated the information from these documents with the data collected from the participant observations, interviews, and focus group sessions. The second coder and I read and coded 88 pages from the TGIF newsletters, five pages of the learning plan template, and eight pages of school application using the codes created for the individual interview and focus group transcriptions for the purposes of triangulating themes within the data. I coded the reports, 25 pages from the audit and 56 pages from the survey, using the same codes developed with the other documents, and compared the results from the audit and survey reports with my own findings, since similar outcomes from the reports appeared within the data collected from the other data sources.

Data Analysis

**Question one.** In order to answer the first research question, *how do students experience the Big Picture School model of learning*, I individually spoke with students utilizing a semi-structured one-on-one interview guide, and then followed up through five focus group sessions with students in each grade level. I reviewed the collection of relevant documents such as the
audit and survey reports, learning plan template, and weekly TGIF newsletters to increase credibility, dependability, and authenticity with identifying patterns in the data and drawing conclusions. The data gathered from the observational fieldnotes, interviews, focus group sessions, and documents frame from the students’ perspectives, how they are experiencing learning through this alternative model of teaching.

The collection of data transpired through participant observations, semi-structured interviews, focus group sessions, and relevant school-related documents. After the transcripts from the interviews and focus group sessions were complete, students received copies of the transcriptions to check for accuracy. Once all students agreed on the correctness of their transcriptions, the second coder and I open coded and axial coded the transcripts, which go hand in hand (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Open coding involves a wide review of the data and looking for major themes, while axial coding refines the open codes and allows for more in-depth analysis of relationships within the data (Hays & Singh, 2012).

To decrease researcher bias and maximize trustworthiness during the reducing and coding of data, a certified clinical social worker, not directly affiliated with the study, served as a second coder. The inclusion of a second coder enhanced the strength of the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). I prepared the second coder for coding and analysis by reviewing the information from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) online training modules on social/behavioral research that I was mandated to complete. Due to the second coder’s extensive work as a clinical social worker, she was familiar with the rules and ethics that researchers must follow to ensure the safety and confidentiality of participants and collected data within a study.

Throughout the stages of coding and analysis of data, I directed the steps we followed. As the primary researcher, I created 15 general codes that aligned with the 15 questions from the
student interview protocol. We coded each transcription and newsletter separately using the initial 15 codes, while creating new codes to address responses that did not necessarily align with the initial 15 codes, which resulted in 49 general open codes. While reading the transcriptions and newsletters individually, we coded students’ responses and information in the newsletters line by line that aligned with the initial 15 codes. If a response or piece of information did not fit within those codes, we each created a new code for that piece of information. After the general codes were established, we had three different discussions about themes and patterns that were evident in the data.

During the open coding and axial coding, I kept one codebook of all codes and used analytic memoing to organize emerging themes identified within the data. I wrote reflections based on the codes and themes emerging from the data, which were “think pieces about the progress of the research” (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007; p. 122). We discussed patterns and discrepancies during four different meetings until reaching consensus to reduce the 49 general codes to 12 axial codes, and separately axial coded all of the documents. Through the process of axial coding, we were able to understand in more depth what the data revealed in terms of building theory (Hays & Singh, 2012). After we completed the axial coding, we had two different discussions about the themes that were emerging from the data. The method of breaking apart and blocking data into categories for analysis allowed us to hypothesize themes and concepts from patterns within the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Once the open and axial coding was complete, the second coder and I discussed to consensus the final six selective codes. Selective coding is the refining of axial codes, which is the most complex process with coding and allows for the building of theory regarding the phenomenon understudy to occur (Hays & Singh, 2012). We agreed upon the following six
selective codes: Structure of GVBPS, Student Interest and Motivation, Family, Supportive Learning Environment, Student Identity, and College and Career Readiness. The final six selective codes each included subthemes to explain adequately the student experience at GVBPS, its structure as it relates to the BPS model, and the faculty and parents’ perceptions of this experience.

The analysis of this qualitative data involved a process of inductive reasoning, thinking, and theorizing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), which allowed students to voice their perspectives on how they were experiencing learning and preparation at GVBPS for the world of work or college after graduation. I utilized the constant comparison method of analysis, since throughout the data collection process the second coder and I went back and forth with the building of themes within the data sources (Hays & Singh, 2012). The second coder and I referred to earlier codes in the codebook for coding new data sources, added new codes, and allowed the codebook to evolve until saturation of the data collection was complete (Hays & Singh, 2012).

**Question two.** In order to address question two, *how do the Big Picture School model and faculty structure that experience?* I interviewed nine school stakeholders and two parents using semi-structured protocols. Participant observations provided opportunities to record how advisors, school staff, and parents interacted with students in the classroom. I also reviewed the BPS model from literature written by the co-founders and researchers associated with the original BPS in Rhode Island, and compared how GVBPS modeled the expectations of BPL, as well as addressed the social, academic, and career needs of their students.

After the transcripts from the school stakeholder interviews were complete, each school stakeholder received a copy of the transcription to ensure accuracy. Once the school stakeholders
approved the accuracy of their transcripts, the second coder and I open and axial coded the transcripts using the same codebook used with the individual student interviews, focus group sessions, and school-related documents. Then we blocked data into categories for analysis in order to hypothesize themes and concepts from patterns within the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The responses of the secondary group of participants supplemented the students’ responses on how they were experiencing learning at the GVBPS. Data analysis occurred through the method of constant comparison, as the second coder and I continuously compared “previous data collection and analysis to subsequent data collection and analysis” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 345).

**Trustworthiness**

When conducting qualitative research, a strict adherence to methodological rules and standards produces outcomes of authentic, plausible findings for a particular phenomenon, which supports evidence of validity within the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). A study’s authenticity is the truthfulness of the findings and conclusions based upon the maximum opportunity to hear participant voices in a specific context (Hays & Singh, 2012). The researcher in the way he or she creates a rapport with the participants establishes ethical validation as well as coherence and dependability with the maintaining and reporting of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). According to Hill (2012), the term trustworthiness refers to “the researchers’ claim to have used appropriate, adequate, and replicable methods and to have correctly reported the findings” (p. 175). In order to limit and manage possible complications with the case study method, I kept organized fieldnotes and memos, collected multiple sources of evidence, and maintained transparency as much as possible with participants about the study’s procedures and protocols, all of which were important actions in sustaining validity and credibility of a study.
(Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Furthermore, the inclusion of a second coder for coding and analysis of the data, the approaches of triangulation, member checking, theory development, and simultaneous data collection and analysis contributed to building credibility, transferability, and dependability of trustworthiness within the study (Hays & Singh, 2012).

The common strategy of triangulation contributes to, but does not guarantee, trustworthiness with the use of multiple forms of evidence to support and build themes and theories from the data (Hays & Singh, 2012), and I triangulated data sources, data methods, and theoretical perspectives during the study. The triangulation of data sources involves multiple participant voices during the qualitative inquiry (Hays & Singh, 2012), which was applicable to the participants (students, parents, advisors, administrators) who participated in the study. The triangulation of data methods included participant observations, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, which were multiple methods to demonstrate themes within the data (Hays & Singh, 2012). The triangulation of theoretical perspectives provided opportunities for the integration of “theories at any stage in the research process, such as constructing the conceptual framework and analyzing data” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p.211). This strategy of triangulation established theoretical and methodological rigor for the study and research design.

The strategy of member checking, known as a key strategy for establishing trustworthiness, involved an ongoing discussion with participants about developing findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). In order to address member checking methods, I shared interview transcripts with each individual participant to check for accuracy of responses and representation of their interview sessions, conducted follow-up data collections to expand participant voices, and facilitated focus group sessions to review total findings from the study with participants. The involvement of participants in the research process added to the richness of the data and the
overall accuracy of portraying their intended meanings and ideas related to the student experience at GVBPS.

**Researcher bias.** Researchers are human, and there is a distinct likelihood of the professional and personal selves intertwining in the development of the research relationship (Hays & Singh, 2012). Since no research is free from bias (Hays & Singh, 2012), it was essential for my role as the researcher to be acknowledged and understood by all of the participants. All researchers bring different knowledge and opinions into the research field, and must be able to identify and control how those differences may affect the research relationship and the outcomes of a study (Hays & Singh, 2012). The research relationship influences not only the researcher’s effects on the participants, but also by the effects of the participants on the researcher (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In an attempt to avoid bias or influence, I was mindful of how I positioned myself in the learning environment during participant observations. I was open to students, parents, and faculty about my intentions with the study, and made myself available by email, cell phone, or in-person to respond to any questions or concerns that they had before, during, or after the study. The faculty members utilized my email to confirm the accuracy of their transcriptions and to ask questions during the study about observation dates. In an educational research setting, it is appropriate for the researcher to be aware of his or her presence in the classroom, and how students and faculty perceive and experience this new presence in the learning environment (Hays & Singh, 2012). Therefore, I did not lead students to answer in a certain manner during individual interviews or focus group sessions, but instead continuously encouraged students to discuss what they felt was important for me to know about the student experience and structure of the learning environment at GVBPS. I am confident that I was not simply hearing what I
wanted to hear, or that participants were telling me what I wanted to hear, because all of the participants shared positive and negative aspects of the learning environment.

Although there are many positive and important activities and projects going on at the school, participants shared honestly aspects that they felt needed more work or that were not so great. Tatyana, a 101 student, explains how she has not felt the sense of family yet at GVBPS, and that she will not work hard on projects that are not interesting or something she has done before. Andrew, a 401 student, describes how when he is stressed he becomes relaxed and just does not care about getting the work done. Claire and Charlotte, 201 students, express similar responses to the idea that if they are not interested in the topic or assignment they do not always do their work or do their best. Charlotte shares how some days she is “just not feeling this today…like I am not in the mood to do anything.” Another 401 student, George shares how he has failed a couple of grades while being at GVBPS, because some of his projects were “not up to par with previous work.” In a conversation with two 301 students, Gerald and Owen discuss how the advisors try to make all the work relate to interests of all students and it is not always possible to do so. Owen describes how annoyed he gets when he has to rely on pictures for his exhibitions, because it is impossible to bring in big pieces of farm equipment or a lawnmower for his presentations. Noah and Calvin, 201 students, reveal how cellphones can be a deterrent for engaging and getting work done in class. Noah mentions that some students are on their cellphones all day and get nothing done, which Calvin adds that Snapchat is another reason why students are on their phones all the time. He explains how they are always waiting for a reply to their posts and it becomes a distraction. These responses portray students who are openly reflecting on their engagement in the GVBPS learning environment, and how sometimes they do not always work up to their full potential or things to do not always work out.
Ethical Considerations

In minimizing issues of coercion or undue influence, informed consent was explained and all potential participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation. Furthermore, I reminded participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, which one student did leave the school during the middle of the study. Lastly, I intentionally included information in the consent form that explicitly stated that no one would know whether they agreed to participate or not, as this information would not be shared. I ensured confidentiality through the assignment of pseudonyms to all participants’ transcriptions and the write-up of the findings, although confidentiality was not a guarantee with participation in the focus group sessions. To minimalize the concerns of confidentiality, I reminded all participants to keep all discussions during the focus group session among those involved and not to share information, especially identifying information, with people outside of the study. Due to the concerns presented by representatives of the local reservation and the lack of parental participation, I assured parents and students through open communication that the study’s focus was on students’ experiences within the GVBPS as it related to their learning. I provided students, parents, and faculty with contact information for myself, my advisor, and the IRB at Syracuse University, if anyone had questions or concerns about the study. By assuring parents that the study would only focus on students’ experiences within the learning environment at GVBPS, my ability to pursue certain lines of inquiry was limited.

Ethical practices within research demonstrate ethical validation that “provides insights to practical and meaningful real-world problems” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 202). I acknowledged that despite awareness and planning for researcher bias and the maintaining of trustworthiness throughout the study, “no research is free of the biases, assumptions, and personality of the
researcher” (Sword, 1999, p. 277). The rules and procedures that guide qualitative work serve to uphold the “scientific integrity of theoretical descriptions. However, it is the researcher’s familiarity with previous works and sensitivity to participants that deepens understanding and enhances the creation of meaning” (Sword, 1999, p. 277).

**Conclusion**

The qualitative research design and methodological approach of the case study allowed for themes and patterns to emerge from the data, which lead to a construction of theories and conceptual ideas regarding the student experience at GVBPS. Through the implementation of multiple data sources, I was able to formulate a deeper understanding of how students experience learning within the BPS alternative model, and how other school stakeholders and parents perceive those experiences. In the next three data chapters, I present findings that illustrate the students’ experiences at GVBPS, and how the structure of the BPS model influences those experiences.
Chapter 4: Who is Green Valley Big Picture School?

This chapter is the first of three that report the student experience at Green Valley Big Picture School (GVBPS). This chapter focuses on how faculty and staff structure that experience adhering to the Big Picture model of learning. In order to explain who GVBPS is as a school, the chapter has two main sections, the structure of GVBPS and the ways student interest and motivation are taken into account in structuring these experiences. The structure of GVBPS presents a system that provides students with support and opportunities to engage in the learning process. The second section on student interest and motivation includes findings that support the importance of incorporating student interest into students’ learning in order to promote work effort and motivation. The structure of the school along with student interest and motivation creates a framing for understanding who GVBPS is from the students’ and school stakeholders’ perspectives. By defining who GVBPS is, I establish a context for conveying a stronger understanding of the student experience within this alternative learning environment. The diagram below displays a general outline and the interconnectedness of the themes that evolved from the data.

Figure 4: Outline of Themes from Who is Green Valley Big Picture School

Structure of GVBPS
- Small space
- Engagement in learning
- GVBPS feels different from a traditional school setting

Student Interest & Motivation
- Incorporating student interest
- Work effort
- The importance of motivation

Who is Green Valley Big Picture School?

The Student Experience at Green Valley Big Picture School
Overall, the dissertation argues that listening to students and utilizing their interests to write meaningful, relevant curriculums, incorporating internships and college course work with high school required academics, and collaborating with community businesses all contribute to higher levels of student engagement and motivation in the learning environment. Students and school stakeholders report that these higher levels of student engagement and motivation at the GVBPS have led to higher graduation and college enrollment rates along with building strong college and career readiness skills for students who enter the program considered “at-risk” or “do not fit” in the traditional high school setting.

In addressing the question of who is Green Valley Big Picture School, data collection through participant observations, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis results in two main themes that create a descriptive picture of how the student experience is structured and the role of student interest and motivation at this specific learning site. The first theme, structure of the GVBPS, includes subthemes of small space, engagement in learning, and GVBPS feels different from a traditional school setting. Each of these subthemes contributes to forming an understanding of the student experience and the influence of the physical structure within this alternative learning environment.

The second theme, student interest and motivation, evolves from the subthemes of the incorporation of student interest, work effort, and the importance of motivation. The data within these subthemes provide evidence of how the structure of the GVBPS affects the student experience concerning learning and engagement. The following sections describe a detailed account of who Green Valley Big Picture School is, and what that means with regard to the student experience and learning. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the main points from the findings.
Structure of GVBPS

The purpose of this section is to convey how the student experience is structured from the school stakeholders’ perspectives. School stakeholders consisting of four advisors, an administrator, two teaching assistants, an internship coordinator, a secretary/assistant, and two parents from GVBPS participated in individual interviews explaining their perceptions regarding the structure of the student experience. The school stakeholders’ responses create context for how adults view the learning environment and students’ experiences at GVBPS. The varying responses from the school stakeholders all focus on the students and their learning through learning plans based on student interest, working in internships, and the necessity of motivation to engage in the work.

The school stakeholders’ interviews all began with the same inquiry: *Please describe your perception of the student experience and how it is structured here at the Big Picture School.* Each school stakeholder provides a detailed description of how he or she views the structure of the student experience with common discussion threads. Seven of the nine stakeholders focus on student interest as the main component to the student experience. Six stakeholders (three advisors, two teaching assistants, and the administrator) share how the student learning plans or curriculum are designed around the students’ interests and drive the projects, internships, and instruction. Four stakeholders (two advisors, one teaching assistant, and one parent) convey the importance of the internships in the structure of the student experience and preparing students for the real world. Three of the advisors and the internship coordinator report that student learning incorporates the requirements of the New York State Regents standards for graduation, and that all student curriculums address specific learning goals (quantitative reasoning, empirical reasoning, social reasoning, communication, personal qualities, and aesthetic expression). One
parent and one teaching assistant mention how students need to be self-motivated in order to be successful at GVBPS. The internship coordinator and one parent discuss how different the student experience is at GVBPS in comparison to a traditional school setting.

Among all of the initial responses from the school stakeholders, two advisors, the administrator, one teaching assistant, the internship coordinator, and one parent provide explanations that appeared to encompass several critical elements of the student experience and how it is structured. The critical elements of incorporating students’ interests into the learning plans, internships, projects, and instruction, while adhering to NYS graduation requirements reveal a dedication to motivating and engaging students in the learning process. Howard’s description reveals various components of the school’s structure that influence the student experience through internships and learning plans, work with community members outside of school that teaches students employability skills for later in life, and the fact that student learning integrates the most important tenets of their school’s philosophy, family, school, and community.

Howard: It’s structured out in a few different ways, because there are different components to our school. I think the most important one is the internship, and how that is structured out. Working with the community members of outside of the school to learn employee ability skills that will really benefit them later on. So, I think that is structured out well, because it starts off with a shadow day, in which they are able to kind of get their feet wet and see if it’s a good fit. And then, they attend for a couple of more weeks, and it turns into an LTI project or a formal learning plan, in which they get most of their credits here for school for their project work for school. So, a large part of it is structured, around this internship. In addition to that, we have our Regents’ workshops, and those are structured at passing the Regents’ exams and giving the students the skills they need to
meet that New York State requirement and that is on Monday, Wednesday, and Fridays. And so they have the formal classroom environment in addition to their community experience, so it’s the more traditional route. Then there are things like service learning, which we really value in getting kids out of the building and help out the community in a different sense, not just for their internships, but to help them out like at the Rescue Mission. So that is probably another aspect of how we are structured out, because the structure, you know, is family, school, community, and that’s the most important tenets of our philosophy.

Spencer’s response focuses on the student experience in the sense that everything revolves around the student’s interests and desire to attend GVBPS. While student involvement is paramount to their success at GVBPS, parent involvement is also a major part of the structure at the school. Parents must also write an essay, as a part of the application process, on why they want their child to attend GVBPS. In doing what is best for the student, Spencer states that they are “enrolling a family” when they register a student, since parent involvement is an essential factor in student success.

Spencer: At onset, the students are self-selected to attend our school. It is our hope that no student is forced to come to our school although for some students it does seem like it is their last option. So we like to start off with students that want to be here and our application process also involves the parents filling out an intention of why they want their son or daughter to come here. So, we think that is the right foot to begin on, and then when a student begins here one of the first things that we do is try to identify what the student’s interest is, or what their passion is. If they are able to identify a passion and sometimes high school kids don’t really use that word that they are passionate about
things. So, framing it that way, hopefully sends a strong message that it’s student centered. That we are enrolling a family, not just a student and that the intention is for us to all do what’s best for the student. From that point forward, I mean I won’t go into all the details, but a learning plan is designed that is meant to be at an appropriate level for the student. To have elements that challenge the student, but not be way out of balance for their ability to move them forward in that sense, and really be based around areas that they are interested in pursuing.

Brenda provides two definitions of how the student experience is structured in terms of “loose and tight.” She points out that within the loose structure students are encouraged to use their voice about what they want to learn and how they want to accomplish their learning goals. The tight structure is evident through the GVBPS faculty and staff’s high expectations of students, and the reflections that students are asked to complete after each project, shadow-day, or internship experience. Additionally, Brenda makes an interesting statement about the valuable experience of failing and its importance as part of the students’ learning. She clarifies that they do not set the students up for failure, but maintains that failure is an inevitable part of learning.

Brenda: Well I think it’s structured, um, I like to look at it in terms of loose and tight. So, in terms of the loose structure, students are given a lot of choice and opportunity to really put their own voice in their learning and what they want to learn about. Um, and they are given lots of room to take opportunities but also lots of room to fail. And I really think there is a lot of valuable experience in failing, not that we set them up to fail, but I think that is a pretty important part of what we do here. And then, in terms of tight, we have so pretty high expectations of what we want our kids to do. Um, in terms of self-exploration
as well as digging deep into some curriculum that they of course get to choose. Then tight in terms of the reflection we ask our kids to do.

Willow’s description of the student experience emphases how different it is from a traditional high school. She explains how student learning incorporates their interests and passions around academics, and that internships and volunteering outside of the building create more real life experience, which are a key parts of the school’s structure. The students create products and projects based on their own interests and through this approach; she believes the students learn more, and more rigorously, because the students already want to learn about that topic.

Willow: The student experience here at Big Picture structures around their passion area and their interests, so in other words any student that comes in would, whatever they are interested in, we try to put all the academics around that. So if they are interested in veterinary school or just animals in general, their Math, Science, even Social Studies to some degree can be tied it with that. And that is what I think is key to the structure of the school and what is different with a regular high school. I think they learn a lot more because it’s what they are interested in to begin with and they don’t realize, like wow, you can tie math into animals somehow, and I can actually write a paper around what I like instead of being told what to do. So, their academic rigor I think goes deeper and farther because they already like what they are talking about. One of the unique aspects of learning here is, I think, the hands on approach so they are creating a lot more products and projects for their work, which is not done so, if any, in the traditional high school. They also have to get out of the building and volunteer and well as do internships and job
shadowing. I think their learning gets more of a real life experience than in a different setting.

Marvel’s perception of how the student experience is structured focuses around the relationships students create with staff as well as with one another in the school. He explains that students have a say in their education, which makes it very personal. The personal connections teachers make with students forms a sense of family, which is supportive of the students. Marvel explains how the sense of family is important to the Native American culture, and therefore provides a connectedness among the students, particularly for the Native American students.

Marvel: Well, I think obviously the student experience here is very different from a traditional setting. That is due to students having a say in their education and feeling like they are part of their education. So, instead of them just being bodies in the institution, they are part of the institution and because they are such a part of it and they have a lot of say, it does become very personal. That is part of our philosophy, so of course, which is tied to the three R’s, which is Relationship, Relevance, and Rigor. Relationship starts first and that is the relationship that staff creates with students then also what students create with one another. So I think that relationship piece is really, what sets our school over their experience apart from the traditional setting. The teachers aren’t just people standing in front of the classroom, giving them homework and just teaching them what is out of the textbook or what is required of them to, you know, fulfill sort of state requirements, but there is a deeper connection, a personal connection. Um, we are almost – it kind of does feel like a family in a sense where each advisor is kind of like head of that household so to speak and then each advisor – they are like cousins. But I think that also speaks to, which is great, keeping up with the Native American culture, since we
have a large number of Native Americans students here. It seems that everyone is your cousin. You know, everyone is related in some sense, so I think that’s something we do that is very relatable for Native American students because it is so close like that. Almost like, you know, I have had a lot of students say it is like the cook house where everyone can come in and cook. You know, they can contribute and give their own, and so, I really think that is a big part of their experience, which separates their experience here from other schools, and of course part of that experience is getting up and going out into the real world. And learning from people in the real world and actually see that put into practice since they were just reading about it.

Noah’s parent shares her perception of the student experience and its structure as a model of project-based learning centered around the interest of the student. The students’ interests and passions drive everything they do at school. She attributes student interest and the ability to see different projects going on in the learning environment towards helping students find self-motivation.

Noah’s parent: Well, there’s a lot of things to talk about, but my basic understanding is that the model of the learning is project based learning centered around the student’s particular interests or as the school says, to have the students identify their passion. Everything follows from that, the great thing about it, I think, is that not only do the kids find the self-motivation because they are doing something they really are interested in, but also their friends around them and their advisory are doing different things and everybody thinks that’s cool and looks at what everybody else is doing.

These initial responses from the school stakeholders begins to tell the story of a school that puts students at the very center of their learning, and are committed to honoring “one student
at time.” Students’ learning is highly personalized and students have opportunities to make connections within their communities and in other areas of interest in the world outside of the classroom. The goal of GVBPS is to inspire students to become life-long learners and empower them to take charge of their learning, which is evident in all of the responses. The design of GVBPS supports independent thinking, and through appropriate guidance and information from school stakeholders, allows students to make meaningful decisions about their learning.

Small space. The physical structure of GVBPS is small, but the school itself is massive in energy and enthusiasm for learning and collaborating among the faculty, staff, students, parents, and community members. A primary goal of Big Picture Schools is for teachers to know the entire student body very well, and small school settings are valuable towards accomplishing this objective (Levine, 2002). The GVBPS school building is 1800 square feet, and is located in a residential area on a cul-de-sac. In addition to the school building, the students maintain an active chicken coop on the property.

During my first visit to GVBPS, I walked through the glass door entrance and entered into a sea of students congregating in a tight hallway. I greeted each of the students as I worked my way into the warm hallway; everyone was so friendly. Immediately to my right was a small kitchen that included an oven, microwave, refrigerator, and sink. The kitchen is for everyone at the school to use, and a couple of students were preparing hot drinks before the official morning meeting. Next to the kitchen, there is a small room with a couple of tables, chairs (chairs are moved constantly throughout the school by students and staff), a computer, and musical instruments. This room has multiple functions as a place for meetings, group work, individual work, musical lessons, as well as a location for students to chat and relax. At the end of the hallway, on the left side next to the multi-functional room, is the principal’s office, which is
about the size of an average cubical. All along the walls of this hallway are announcements, student work, and student-made items that are for sale in support of various upcoming GVBPS activities.

Across from the multi-use room is a doorway into a great room. The great room has two sets of sliding wall dividers that pull together during advisories, workshops, and exploratories creating three smaller classrooms for the 101s (freshmen), 201s (sophomores), and 301s (juniors). In addition to the entrance near the main entryway of the building, walking down the hallway towards the principal’s office, there is a connecting hallway on the left. This hallway has a floor to ceiling bookshelf full of different kinds of books along the left side, and on the right side are the boy’s and girl’s bathrooms, and a supply closet that is sometimes opened and used by students as an individual cubical area for working.

At the end of the center hallway, there is another short hallway. To the right there is a small supply closet on the back wall of the building that is also used for meetings, and was where the majority of my interviews took place. Next to the supply closet is another room that has one sliding wall divider, and is the 401s classroom and the internship coordinator’s office. Each classroom is complete with books, binders, pictures of students and staff members, and student work. Everything looks tightly packed in this small building, but the attitude of the students and staff reveals a love for this small space.

In this small space, students are able to build and foster meaningful relationships with adults and peers. Rachel, a 101, excitedly explains her perspective of the student experience, “Well, first of all I like how it’s small, everyone knows everybody, because I love people and I love talking to people, and if I went somewhere else I wouldn’t know everybody.” Being able to connect and know each other is an important aspect of the student experience, as George
illuminates, “it’s such a small space, we basically know each other’s names, you know what they like, you know what they don’t like, you’re basically like a family…more connected and you understand each other more.” Andrew, a 401 like George, discusses how different GVBPS is in comparison to the local high school and that in a small setting he is able to get to know other students, which is something he would not necessarily be able to do in a larger school setting.

Andrew: Way different. It’s smaller, so people see you more. You see the same people more often and you get to know those people. Like there are people that if I was at the high school, I would never even talk to. Would never connect with and now that I’m here and I am in a small spot, I talk to them more. A lot of them are my friends now, and it’s way different. Um, if someone says the high school is like a big family too; not even close compared to what this place is like.

Despite the close quarters, the students and staff use the space to their advantage in building supportive relationships that encourage students to engage in the learning process and foster success.

**Engagement in learning.** In this learning environment, engagement involves students participating in class lessons and assignments, which is similar to a traditional school setting. What makes this school setting different, in terms of engagement, is that students direct their learning and have the ability to leave school at least twice a week for their internships, shadow days, and volunteer work, which is then connected to the work they do in their classes the other three days of the week. The students’ active engagement in these activities appears to be preparing them for life after graduation by giving them opportunities to gain experience and build the skills necessary to succeed in college or a career. All students follow the same agenda for time in class on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, with many students having different
schedules on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Three days of the week, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, students arrive to school by 8:00 AM and have fifteen minutes before the start of the morning meeting, which begins promptly at 8:15 AM and usually lasts about fifteen minutes. Then from 8:30 – 10:10 AM, students go to their advisories to check in with their advisors and discuss current projects, learning plan deadlines, and upcoming assignments and events. Traditional workshops are from 10:10 – 11:10 AM, and involve lessons related to Science, Math, History, and English. Students have lunch from 11:10 – 11:40 AM, and directly after students and staff have silent reading time from 11:40 – 12:00 PM. The second sets of traditional workshops are from 12:00 – 1:00 PM, which allow students time to work on assignments related to a specific content area or preparation for Regents exams. Exploratories are from 1:00 – 2:10 PM, and provide time for students to explore their interests or to engage in an elective class like drawing or music. The final section of time, 2:10 – 2:30 PM is reserved for cleaning up the work areas and allowing students to get ready for dismissal. Tuesdays and Thursdays are designated days for students to attend their internships, shadow days, service learning, or college classes off campus. Students who have yet to establish an internship or enroll in a college course still come to school, and have open workshops from 8:30 – 11:10 AM, and 11:40 – 2:30 PM. During these open workshops students can obtain extra help with their English, Math, Science, or History classes, catch up on missing work, prepare for Regents exams, or begin researching new topics and ideas for future projects and internships. The structure of the week allows students to engage in academic, social, and career learning.

The findings from the school stakeholder interviews and TGIF newsletters demonstrate how advisors and staff at the GVBPS engage students in learning by encouraging students to use their voices in making decisions about their learning. From participant observations, it appears
that the more interactive a student is with the decision making process of writing their learning plans, outlining projects, and establishing internships, the more likely they are to fully invest in and take ownership of their learning. When I ask how the faculty encourages students to have a voice in making decisions about their learning, Rachel’s parent reports that it takes some kids longer than others to figure out what they are interested in or passionate about. Yet the faculty gently continues to guide the students by asking questions that related to their interests and what they want to learn.

Rachel’s Parent: Well, it really is based on what the kids want…and that’s why for some of the kids it takes so long, because they can’t…they don’t do it by telling the kids what to do they really want them to own it. So, sometimes it can take a little bit of time to figure out where their interest is, ah, and get started on something…They just kind of guide them and try to say ok, you are interested with this. What do you think you could do with that? It’s very gentle leading to do things that are totally based on what the kids want.

As advisors, Cindy and Spencer’s answers to how the faculty encourages students to have a voice in making decisions about their learning support Rachel’s parent’s response about the faculty asking for student input through questioning. Cindy explains how some people may look at this model and wonder how someone could actually be learning, but if a person is really “in it,” then it is more real and relevant to their lives.

Cindy: Oh, because we ask them repeatedly, what do you want to learn about? What is your interest, and it’s very strange sometimes when you first come in. You are like, how can they learn when they are looking at tattoos or some weird, random, it took me a while. This doesn’t make sense to me, really? So it takes a while. You have to be in it to
really, clearly understand that you can find learning, it makes it more real and relevant to
the students. If they do it properly…then they want to do the work, because they are
really interested in it. So, that’s the crux of it, I guess. We really push them to try to find
what they are interested in, so they will actually do the work.

Spencer explains that the faculty encourages student voice not only by asking questions, but also
by exposing students to different places and ideas in an effort to spark an interest worth pursuing
indicating how the advisors structure the learning for students. Students at GVBPS are constantly
on attending field trips to local and out of state colleges, businesses, and volunteer centers, which
allows them to practice their social and academic skills, and engage with different types of
people in diverse learning environments.

Spencer: Well, I guess the simplest thing is that we constantly ask questions to the
students and we ask them in groups. You know, and we ask them in our one-on-one
meetings. You know, what are you interested in? What are you doing? We also work
very hard to expose them to different things because many times a student just doesn’t
know what they don’t know. They just don’t have that perspective. So, our LTI
coordinator, he coordinates a lot of things through STEP. He has taken students to
Providence, visited colleges with them, visited Penguin Books last year…taking kids to
museums and different locations, and you never know when that is going to spark
interest. So, we ask them a lot, but then we also realize part of our obligation is to expose
them to different things that they might find that they are interested in, and then pursue
that with them.

The staff also provides weekly newsletters (TGIFs), available on the school’s website or
in print at the school, for parents and the community to stay informed of what students are doing
at the school. The TGIF is a six to ten page newsletter written by the faculty and staff at GVBPS every week, and includes highlights from the school and students regarding academic work, internships, field trips, extracurricular and sporting events, and multiple pictures of students’ learning in action. The advisors present an outline of what students are working on, individually and as a group, for that particular week. One of the best parts of the newsletter is all the pictures that are included of students’ learning and engaging in various projects and events. The newsletter emphasizes the students’ work and successes, while creating a sense of transparency with the parents and community members as to what is going on at GVBPS.

According to the YouthTruth survey (2014), GVBPS students have more positive perceptions of their school experience and report higher levels of engagement with their school than most students do in other participating schools. In terms of perceptions of the school experience, students favorably rate engagement with school, school culture, relationships with teachers, academic rigor, and college and career readiness. Every participating school’s average rating is ranked on a percentile scale: 0th (lowest-rated), 50th (median, or typical), and 100th (highest-rated). GVBPS ranks in the 69th percentile for student engagement, which means GVBPS student engagement rates above 69% of the participating schools (YouthTruth, 2014).

Similar results are evident from the students’ individual interviews and focus group sessions regarding student engagement as it relates to how the structure of the student experience influences engagement in the learning environment. In the focus group sessions, I ask students, what makes something engaging or makes you want to do your work? What factors contribute to your engagement in the learning environment? In the 101 focus group, Keydo shares, “Well, because they’re fun, and well, you know that you aren’t going to have to take a test on it, and like memorize the whole thing, and all that just to take one test on it.” The fact that testing is not
a priority in the learning environment creates less stress in the learning process. Even though testing is not the primary focus at GVBPS, student assessments happen through exhibitions, completion of classwork, Regents exams, and other state-mandated tests. In the YouthTruth survey (2014), students highly rank the statement, *Most of my teachers want us to use our thinking skills, not just memorize*, in the 83rd percentile. At GVBPS, their attention is on the students’ learning, not the students’ test scores.

The 201 focus group responses to what makes something engaging are, “if it applies to you,” “it’s interesting,” and “if it’s a competition.” The first two responses are not surprising; however, the competition comment instigates a conversation among the 201s about how competition gets people motivated but does not always work for everyone. They also credit their advisor, Tom as a major contributing factor to their engagement, because of his ability to get them working, helping them find things to do, and wanting them to succeed.

When I ask the 301 focus group questions about student engagement, Jack immediately gives an example of something that is not engaging. He states, “Ah, an example of something not engaging is like if a teacher gives us papers and just tells us to get it done by the end of class or something. I like when we all do a group thing.” Being told to get something done by the end of class generates lower levels of engagement for Jack, and the other three students agree with him. Gerald states, “They try to make all of our work related to what we are interested in,” and Owen responds, “It don’t normally happen. Like well not all the time, but sometimes it doesn’t happen, like how sometimes it’s hard to make it into what you are interested in.” Owen continues to explain the difficulties of always trying to tie student interest and internship activities into the academics. At his internship, he works on various farm and garden equipment, which makes it a challenge to share his internship work with hands-on examples at school. Gerald gave an
example of how he ties his interests into other academic classes, “Sometimes they [advisors] stress other parts [academics], other parts they have less stress on, they will try to relate it to our interests as much as they can. Like in art class, I will do something music related and draw that.”

The 401 focus group discusses the incorporation of student interest and the person teaching the material makes a difference in student engagement. Andrew shares, “It could also be the person that’s teaching. If they can make it exciting in some ways to make students interested, ah, then that helps a lot too.” Mark states, “Spencer [301 advisor] is really good at that.” Andrew and George discuss how “other students being annoying” would contribute to lower levels of engagement. George explains that distractors in the school’s small space sometimes negatively affect his work.

George: Because since like this school is very small, it’s very close quarters. So like, it’s really easy to get on some people’s nerves when you don’t mean to. But like I said, how someone’s day, they can be like angry or really mad at you or just really sad, it just makes it hard to learn, because well, I focus on like how can I make this student better, and like that deteriorates from the work that I am trying to do.

The students’ responses from the individual interviews, focus group sessions, YouthTruth survey, and TGIF newsletters, reveal that engagement in the learning environment depends on several factors. These factors include the incorporation of student interest with a project or assignment, the attitude of teacher, encouraging student voice, exposing students to a variety of opportunities and information, and the focus on learning over testing. Majority of these factors that contribute to higher levels of engagement are what make GVBPS distinct in comparison to traditional school settings.
**GVBPS feels different from a traditional school setting.** There are no bells to dictate the time to change classes; students transition from workshops, advisories, and exploratories by advisor directives. Learning can occur anywhere at any time; the classroom, the hallway, outside in the parking lot or on the lawn, or internships. There is no stress about tests; students concentrate more on their exhibitions and performances in the classroom and internships. Within this small learning community, students acquire academic and social skills in a variety of ways that are necessary for life in college or work after high school.

During the individual interviews with school stakeholders and students, I do not directly question the differences between their school and other traditional school settings. However, seven of the 16 students and three of the 11 school stakeholders share examples or reference how GVBPS is different from other more traditional schools. According to the three school stakeholders, the main difference is in the relationship building that occurs between students, and how they learn to accept one another and know what each other is doing. Willow discusses how this type of school is not for everyone, but that students have the chance to learn how to handle themselves in social situations with different kinds of people, which is something they usually do not encounter until college.

Willow: I think it’s important to realize that this school is not for everyone…we have such a diverse group. I absolutely love it, and because it’s small, they have to learn to get along with each other. Whereas at the traditional school’s setting, they kind of get lost in it and they can form more cliques…but here they realize I need to and I am going to learn how to deal with certain types of people before I get to college, which is where you usually get forced into that.
Noah’s parent discusses one particular observation that sticks out to her from a previous field trip to the Met, the original Big Picture School, in Providence, Rhode Island. She reflects on the students’ reactions to the large Met campus in comparison to their own school.

Noah’s parent: One comment, almost all of them made afterward, was yeah, it’s a great campus and it’s really impressive, but I like our school better, because we are all together. And everybody knows what everybody else is doing and the advisories aren’t all separated out all the time. I really like that environment.

Marvel states, “Everything they are doing here is very different, well fairly different from what any other surrounding school is doing.” He explains “we have students that are here now that have come to our school because they were bullied so much at their previous school and ah, it was terrible for them and they weren’t going to school.” It seems GVBPS creates a completely different type of learning environment for students in comparison to other schools, and with the small space, students learn to navigate the challenges of working and communicating with other people.

The student interviews disclose various viewpoints on how students see GVBPS in comparison to other schools, and some of the responses support the school stakeholders’ comments about being more like a family, designing learning around students’ interests, and having more opportunities to grow socially and academically than students would have at in a traditional school setting. Claire explains that due to the small number of students, it is easier to make connections with teachers and peers throughout the school. Since establishing meaningful and trusting relationships is a priority, bullying and fighting are not issues at GVBPS.

Claire: There are not as many kids and you can make better connections with your teachers and the other students in your grade and in the whole school. So that makes your
relationship with everyone better, there’s not bullying or anyone picking on anybody.

There’s no fights.

Tatyana gave a similar response in her interview when she discusses her preference for GVBPS over her regular school. Her reason for liking GVBPS better stems from “having more time to finish projects,” and “the students are nicer.” She does admit, “Sometimes there are still problems, but that the students are nicer.” She insists that everyone at GVBPS is kind to one another and offers support or assistance whenever someone needs or asks for it.

Freedom and flexibility within the learning environment are two distinct differences Jack, Amelia, and Emily discuss in their interviews. Jack’s statement shows everything about how the school functions creates a sense of freedom and responsibility that the students positively respond to, “Everything. Um, like how the school operates pretty much…I don’t know how to explain it…it’s more like free willing and lots more responsibility.” Amelia states, “It’s a lot of like freedom here and you just get to do things on your own and it’s kind of like more real world than at a traditional high school, because you get to go out and try things.” Since students are able to go out into the community on internships, shadow days, and to local colleges for classes and field trips, they are getting “more real world” experience than they would in a traditional high school. Emily enjoys the flexibility and freedom the school offers. At her old school, when Emily would have an anxiety attack, the teachers would immediately send her to the nurse’s office. She never found that method helpful, and it sometimes made things worse. The faculty and staff at GVBPS is responsive to Emily’s social emotional and mental health needs, and provides her with the freedom to take the time she needs to collect herself when she is feeling overwhelmed. They do not assume Emily is sick because she is having an anxiety attack.
Emily: I think that the thing is uh, if you’re having a really off day, like I have anxiety attacks sometimes, at normal school they are not going to just let you leave class because you need a moment. Here you can like maybe leave the class and get permission to like go to the kitchen and get some tea or something. That’s a big deal to me, because I used to have a lot of issues with that at my old school. They would send me to the nurse’s office, and that wasn’t where I needed to be.

The GVBPS faculty and staff create a strong sense of trust with their students. Through ongoing one-on-one meetings between faculty and students, students direct how they will meet their goals and deadlines with every project and assignment. According to Noah, “…that’s the thing that separates Big Picture from a public school. Not that you can get away with stuff, but that you’re trusted to not get away with stuff, I guess you could say.” Students are responsible for their own learning, and this structure, for some students, has made them better people. Mark explains that although he does not know what to do with his life, he feels that GVBPS has helped him become more mature. He believes the conventional high school structure would have made him insane.

Mark: I don’t know what to do with life. I know this school is meant to prepare you for the future and it has. I know more about myself because of this school than I would have if I went to the high school. I feel like I’ve matured better here than I would have at the high school, because the structure would have made me insane.

Since seven of the participants bring up differences between GVBPS and traditional high school, I include the question of differences in the focus group sessions. Students emphasize the difference between the teachers at GVBPS in comparison to teachers at other high schools. Claire explains, “The teachers. Teachers here really care, you can tell that they care, and they
want you to succeed.” Moreover, Gerald responds, “Well, I am going to start with teachers. I’ve just never had teachers like this that are so caring and cool. I just feel that this school is just so much more inspiring in comparison to other schools.” Peter explains how the teachers actually listen to him, “They help me make decisions by talking to me, and actually listening when I talk. They give me a chance to talk, instead of just me listening to hear what they have to say.” These students point out the teachers at GVBPS are caring, want the students to succeed, and actually listen to what students have to say about their learning, which is something that may be lacking in other schools motivated by standardized testing and student scores.

The structure of the student experience at GVBPS reveals a dedication to helping students find their passions. The small space creates opportunities for students to build relationships and social skills with their peers and adults in a safe environment. Engagement in the learning environment emphasizes the importance of incorporating student voice and student interest into the writing of their learning plans. The students’ individual learning plans serve as the curriculum guide for the student’s project and goals for each semester. Students and school stakeholders’ comments about differences between GVBPS and traditional high schools indicate that supportive relationships with teachers and the freedom to choose projects and internships based on student interest are distinct differences between the two types of schools.

**Student Interest and Motivation**

Student interest and motivation are essential components to students’ achievement and success at GVBPS. Deci and Ryan (2008) point out that “an important aspect of motivation concerns the energization of people’s psychological processes and behaviors” (p. 184). Energized people act more autonomous and persevere more with activities, because they are intrinsically motivated and invested (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Learning at GVBPS not only focuses
on students’ interests, but also emphasizes relevancy with what they are learning and how it connects to the world outside of school. Students understanding the relevancy of what they are learning and how it connects to the real world increases motivation (Pink, 2009).

The second theme develops from the subthemes of incorporating student interest, work effort, and the importance of motivation. These subthemes present evidence from school stakeholders and students portraying a strong grounding for student learning based on student interest, and how that assists in engaging students in their learning. The more autonomy students have in choosing a particular topic, the more engaged they are, which affects the amount of effort the students put forth in their work. Designing learning around student interest is a major part of the student experience, and motivation is crucial for success at GVBPS.

**Incorporating student interest.** The purpose of incorporating student interest into student learning plans and internships is to create a sense of student ownership with their learning. At GVBPS, students are encouraged to find their passions, advocate for their ideas, and produce meaningful, relevant projects and exhibitions that demonstrate their understanding and reflection on the learning process and how they met their set goals. During the school stakeholder interviews, Sally states, “you can do whatever project or whatever interest you want to do.” Being able to learning about one’s interests is exciting, but this type of learning is not for everyone, as some students have trouble adjusting to an open learning structure that holds them accountable for completing work. Cindy discusses the experience is different for every student, and students who take advantage of these opportunities have positive benefits.

Cindy: Well, it is different for every student. It is supposed to be structured around what their interests are and some students do that very well and take advantage of the school and really benefit in a positive way…then some take advantage of it in a negative way,
Tom explains how advisors at GVBPS encourage students to create one of two types of projects, “An interest based project, or ideally a learning-through-interest project, or learning-through-internship project, and those projects are centered around the student’s interests and their internships.” Cindy and Tom’s responses establish a consistency in the structure of learning that focuses around students’ interests, and gets them out into the world to apply and experience that knowledge and interest in some type of job or skill area.

Student interest alone is not enough to be successful at GVBPS, since students need to be engaged in their learning. The previous subtheme, engagement in learning, reveals how students engage in learning in regards to the structure of GVBPS. In this section, I present engagement in learning through the lens of student interest motivating students to engage. According to the students, student interest influences their level of engagement. Keydo shares, “You do what you are interested in. A lot of the projects are based on what you want to do them on.” Rachel gives a similar response, “Oh, you choose your own learning plan, and what you want to do, and what you want to go into for a career.” Mark’s reply shows having an interest makes engagement easier, and insinuates a teacher lecturing for thirty minutes is not engaging.

Mark: When it’s one of your interests, like you already had, like just having an interest in something makes it much more easier to be engaged than if you are in a class having the teacher trying to engage everyone and not just lecturing for thirty minutes, helps a lot.

The students understand that the learning is student directed around their interests. If students are interested or have prior knowledge on a topic, they are more likely to want to engage in a lesson or complete their work. Tatyana explains if she is interested, she will want to do the work.
Tatyana: If I’m interested in a subject, so if we are doing something in class that I may already know a little bit of back knowledge on or something I have been wanting to learn about, that would make me want to do a project on it and learn more about it.

Similarly, George expresses the same view as Tatyana, if he is interested in something, he will use all his effort, but if it is something he does not care for, he does it to get it done. His response reveals how student interest drives him to finish his senior thesis and accomplish his personal career goals.

George: If I’m like really interested in something, I put all my effort into it. If it’s not, I am just like eh, get it over with. So that’s kind of how I see the science, the math, the history, the English stuff, all that doesn’t really interest me. So I’m just like get it over with, so I can focus on my big things like trying to become a professional photographer and trying to get like Big Picture Schools connected with each other. That’s what I really want to do, but so, I can focus more on my senior thesis project and try to become a professional photographer.

**Work effort.** Student interest is an important factor in the learning environment, so how does the concept of effort and students exerting energy come into play in terms of motivation and output? The question of students’ work effort derives from the YouthTruth survey results of three specific statements students rated. The first statement, *I try to do my best in school*, ranked in the 18th percentile, while the second statement, *In order to receive a good grade, I have to work hard in my classes*, ranked in the 28th percentile. These two low rankings are surprising, since learning is student interest based. The third statement, *How many of your teachers believe you can get a good grade if you try*, ranked in the 81st percentile. Students report they do not always try their best in school; they do not have to work hard to get good grades, and yet, rank
teachers in the 81st percentile for believing they can do the work if they try. These findings from the YouthTruth survey spark a conversation among students about how much effort they apply to their work, and the issue of grades. Since students are not specifically working towards getting good grades, but working for understanding and relevancy with their work and their interests, students share that the rankings do not accurately represent their abilities or the effort they employ with their work.

During the focus group sessions, 13 of 15 students describe how much effort they put into their work, and eight of them explain the amount of effort they put into their work is dependent upon how they are feeling on that day and/or what the project is. Charlotte shares, “I guess it depends on the day I guess, so some days like I am really motivated to just do my work, and then there are those days where you just don’t want to.” Interestingly, Rachel states, “Well, if I actually want to do it, I’ll put a lot of effort into it. But it’s either a lot of effort, or I just don’t do it.” If an assignment or project is not something Rachel actually wants to do, she does not do it. She feels confident focusing her energy and time on things that are important to her. Emily explains people put more effort into their passions as opposed to their classwork.

Emily: I think it depends on what we are doing in the academics, but I would say a lot of people put more effort into their passions, than like you know work we are doing on paper, so or things we are doing in a class.

Two students from the 201s give exact percentages for their amount of effort, Noah’s response, “one hundred and ten percent,” and Calvin states, “I put in one hundred.” Both students are serious about their answers regarding how much effort they put into their work. Three of the seniors have trouble responding to this question, as Andrew and Amelia clearly
state, “I don’t really know.” Mark explains as students, they do not know what their maximum effort is; therefore, they do not know if they are really putting all their effort into their work.

Mark: I don’t think we know like what our maximum effort is…like we are at that age where like we just don’t know what’s, like sometimes I think I am putting my all into it, and then come back and I’m like I could have done way better.

The follow-up question to the seniors as to whether they could always put more effort into their work, Mark indicates, “that’s not even a question,” while George states, “definitely,” and Andrew claims, “I’m pretty sure that a lot of people could do that.” The students’ responses are honest and reveal their skills as being reflective about their work and actions in the learning environment. George makes an excellent point that, “you’ve got to find the motivation to do it.”

**The importance of motivation.** Motivation is a “huge” contributing factor to student engagement and learning at GVBPS. According to parents and other school stakeholders, the incorporation of student interest builds students’ motivation to engage in learning, and teaches self-motivation, since students need to have some form of self-motivation to succeed at GVBPS. Noah’s parent states, “It’s everything, and it has to come from within the student. You can’t, you know they say, ‘let’s motivate the child.’ No, you can help them to motivate themselves, and that’s what they do.” Her response is not about just motivating students, but about teaching students how to motivate themselves, which is a necessary skill for college or work after graduation. Similarly, Rachel’s parent emphasizes that student interest positively affects kids.

Rachel’s Parent: Well, it is huge, because they are able to find out what the kids interests are. When a kid is interested in something that amount that they can learn is amazing, and we have all seen that. Especially, once you are out of school and maybe you develop an
interest in something and you need to research something for a particular reason, then how much more meaningful that is.

The advisors, teaching assistants, and administrator agree that student interest and self-motivation are influential factors in the learning environment. Brenda and Spencer also share that student and staff relationships motivate students to do their work. Brenda explains, “I think it’s huge…I don’t know if it’s motivation or if it’s the relationship, kids who have definitely been labeled and unmotivated in other settings have come to us and done really, really well and appear to have found motivation.” She is not sure, but the healthy relationships students are forming could be influencing their motivation. Spencer also agrees with the importance of relationships and student motivation.

Spencer: So, they have to know that what they are doing counts. That somebody actually cares and somebody is relying on them to do that, and I think if that is sustained long enough, then the students begin to see the value in themselves and eventually they do it for themselves, which is the ultimate goal.

Self-motivation and internal motivation are a common thread among seven of the 11 school stakeholder responses regarding how motivation is a factor in the learning environment. Cindy states, “…this has to be a school of self-motivation. The students who are not motivated to do their work on a continual basis struggle all the way through.” Howard jokes, “If I had an answer on how to motivate teenagers, I would be very rich right now. So, it’s different for every student. It’s a problem we all struggle with, sometimes on a daily basis.” Cindy and Howard acknowledge that motivation is different for everyone and sometimes students struggle to complete their work. Howard explains, “Some kids have it, and they are just willing, whatever it takes, to reach their goals. Other students have been in some ways defeated in life already at this
age. They don’t see a bright future. They don’t see opportunities.” In order to help those students who might feel defeated, Howard tries to “latch on to what they are most passionate about at that time.” Tom describes how helping students become self-motivated can be a challenge.

Tom: Well, motivation, it’s a tricky animal, because I think the kids have been, when we get them, the kids have been trained very heavily to be motivated by grades and be motivated by you know carrot and stick mentality. Bad things happen if you do badly. Where it’s my goal throughout their whole four years with me is to build up in them intrinsic motivation. I want them to want to do the work and their projects. I think when you give kids ownership of their projects, even like this workshop that is happening right now, I think all of these kids are working on something they want to do. I am not going to bark at them to get on task. And that’s a joy, to see somebody intrinsically motivated and curious.

Tom’s goal is to help students build up their intrinsic motivation and take ownership of their learning. The hope is that students be motivated to learn because they want to learn, and not just for a grade or score. For some students, motivation comes from being the first in their family to graduate high school or to enroll in college. According to Willow, “motivation is huge,” and “we have a lot of students that don’t have parents that have graduated from high school, so there is not a lot of motivation necessarily that they are getting from their parents.” She also shares, “with the native population up until…10 years ago graduating from high school was not an important thing. They don’t need that if they stay on the reservation and do kind of traditionally what their parents have done.” These parental factors can influence student motivation positively or negatively, as some students may want to change their situation and others may not see a
reason. Willow explains, “Try to just give them all the options, how big the world is that they could do absolutely anything if they put their mind to it, just to try to give them that little spark.”

The student interviews confirm that motivation is important and student interest motivates students to complete their work. Four students, two 201s, one 301, and one 401, identify advisors as motivators for them to get their work done. When discussing the role of motivation in the student experience, Jack states, “It’s just like a big part. I mean without motivation, like if this school didn’t have motivation or if any of the teachers didn’t try to motivate anybody, nothing would get done.” Similarly, Andrew views the advisors as contributing motivators to his learning.

Andrew: Well, I see the teachers are like big motivators. I like to find things that I am interested in. Otherwise, I don’t really care. So, which is why this school is great, because of what you are doing. You are finding things you want to learn, then you learn them, which is a big motivator for me. Find something I like, learn it, get good at it, things like that.

Charlotte discusses trying to do her schoolwork without focusing necessarily on a reward or consequence, but instead, on reflecting about what she thinks of herself and her goals. She gives an example of how she was less motivated to get her work done when her interest in a project declined.

Charlotte: We try to be like internally motivated. So instead of getting like a reward or consequence if we don’t complete something, we think of our self, our goals and what we would like to meet. And so like that is the whole reason we create our own timelines. So, like you have to find something that you are interested in and like last year my internship I was kind of like interested in it, because I used to go to that school [local private
school, but like towards the end, it just started fading off, so my projects became less rigorous. So, I wasn’t as motivated to get work done.

Noah explains one motivation for him is that all of his projects relate to his personal interests. He states that he has a thing about being successful as well as happy with success, and the things he finds happiness with may not be like everyone else’s.

Noah: I mean all my projects have to do with personal interests, and they all will help me later in life, so that is one motivation. And I have a really big thing about being successful as well as being happy with your success, so if I do stuff to help me succeed that is also fun like building a computer is fun to me. Maybe not to other people, because soldering for four hours might not be your ideal way to spend an evening, but I like to do it.

One 301 student, Gerald emphasizes, “if you are not motivated or inspired to do something you procrastinate or you won’t even do it,” and that GVBPS is different from other schools because “they inspire you and get you ready for what you have to overcome.” Some students need others to help get them motivated.

Emily and George candidly share that they both have issues with motivation. Emily finds Spencer’s ability to guide her by having conversations with her and knowing when to encourage her to keep going with her work, helps in getting her motivated and able to complete projects.

Emily: Ah, well, I do have issues with motivation and completing projects, but I think my advisor really pushes me to finish things. Spencer is always like he knows what my weaknesses are and he knows it’s pushing myself to finish things. Like I will start something and be really into and then towards the end I am like, ahhh. But Spencer really tries to push me to finish my things, and almost always succeeds.
George also struggles with motivation, especially if he is not interested in doing the work or does not see relevancy to his life. He laughs, as he shares, “I don’t know, I’m not really that motivated like I am motivated to do something I’m really passionate about.” He has to be “really interested in” something to learn about it, and if it will not help him in the future, he does not want to learn it. Mark’s statement, “Motivation is like different for everyone; everyone’s motivation is different in this school,” also appears true for the other students and school stakeholders.

The inclusion of student interest in learning plans increases motivation and work effort for most students. According to students, work effort depends on who is teaching and the purpose of the assignment or project. Motivation is a vital part of the student experience at GVBPS, and many of the students look to and rely on their advisors for motivation. Hence, who is Green Valley Big Picture School? The faculty and staff at GVBPS create a structure, unlike most traditional schools, that fosters student learning through interest-based projects and internships. Students are encouraged to take control of their learning and direct it in a manner that suites their interests and abilities. There are challenges at GVBPS, just like at any school, such as lacking resources, unmotivated students, and the issue of space, but these do not hinder the learning and success students and school stakeholders are finding at this school.

**Summary**

Green Valley Big Picture School is an alternative learning environment that truly puts students at the center of their learning. Throughout this chapter, I explain the structure of the school and student experience from the students’ and school stakeholders’ perspectives, and its alignment with the Big Picture School model. From a conceptual standpoint, I present connections to the findings with Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory. The main two themes regarding the structure of GVBPS and student interest and motivation demonstrate a
fluidness of the data related to motivation and engagement in learning. The student experience at GVBPS is complex and multi-faceted, yet appears to be productive and positive for the student participants. This chapter provides a context of setting and instructional design for understanding how students experience learning within this type of alternative school.
Chapter 5: *Who are we at Green Valley Big Picture School?*

The previous chapter establishes that GVBPS structures the learning environment to be student–centered. This chapter raises the next question, *who are we at Green Valley Big Picture School?* Two main themes emerge from the data, the first one is family, and the second is supportive learning environment, which is evident in Figure 5. The main theme of family is organized into two subthemes, which are family–like atmosphere and family involvement. The family–like atmosphere subtheme explains through student responses why this type of atmosphere is important and how it affects their learning. The family involvement subtheme explores how students and school stakeholders view the support provided by students’ own families to students and the school. The second theme, supportive learning environment presents data that provides evidence of faculty and staff being supportive and caring of students’ learning and achievements. This theme is comprised of two subthemes, student relationships with faculty and staff, and student relationships with peers. The relationships that students build among their peers and with the faculty and staff are major contributors to the second theme of a supportive learning environment. The chapter concludes with a summary of the two main themes demonstrating an answer to the question of, *who are we at Green Valley Big Picture School?*

**Figure 5: Outline of Themes from Who are We at Green Valley Big Picture School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Supportive Learning Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family-like atmosphere</td>
<td>Student relationships with faculty and staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family involvement</td>
<td>Student relationships with peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Family

The concept of being like a family at GVBPS is another fluid theme that appears within other sections of data. Students and school stakeholders emphasize the importance of how they feel like a family due to the intimate learning environment and support they receive from each other. During my time at GVBPS, I witnessed a range of interactions between students and faculty, students and their peers, and faculty with one another. The communication I observed among all of these interactions demonstrated respect and the ability to listen. However, there were times when students would appear frustrated or not interested in doing their work, which is typical of any learning environment. The difference at GVBPS was that faculty did not get visibly upset or scream at the students; instead, they would give students the opportunity to do something else or take a break before coming back to the task. Many of the students who attend GVBPS were at risk of dropping out or had problems at their traditional high schools; however, students report that because GVBPS feels more like a family, they enjoy and are proud of their school.

Family-like atmosphere. At the end of each interview, I ask students and school stakeholders, is there anything I should definitely know about GVBPS? Although the participants give a variety of responses, one common thread relates directly and indirectly to the concept of being a family. At GVBPS, we are family. Marvel clearly states, “Everyone has to remember that the students do feel like we are part of their family.” The structure of the student experience creates an atmosphere that students report to be family like in nature. Mark, a 401, agrees, “Big Picture student experience, it’s different for anyone no matter what…it’s just like we’re all family.” The student experience is different for everyone, but the school creates an environment where students feel like family. Another 401, George shares, “the students definitely feel like
family…that’s something you can’t get at traditional high school.” Calvin, a 201, makes a
similar comment to George’s statement, “We’re always family no matter what we do, and it’s
something I wouldn’t get in a normal school setting.” George and Calvin see the students at the
school like family, which is something they do not believe they can get in a traditional school
setting. Additionally, Emily also sees the school’s culture as completely different from her
experiences in a traditional setting.

Emily: School culture is a really big deal. I think that is one of the most important factors
at this school. I think it’s really important because it helps the students so much that
we’re in an environment where we are comfortable. There is respect going both ways.
We are on a first-name basis. It’s just a comfortable environment and our school culture
makes it feel more like a family than a school. We come here and we can like if we have
a problem, we can go to one of the staff members and talk about it. We don’t need to
come in a bad mood and stay in bad mood. We can be comfortable, we don’t have to, I
don’t know, regular school is just like boom boom boom. You don’t have that structure
that like makes people stress out. It’s just a really comfortable environment, and it’s so
caring. You always feel like someone cares about you here. I’ve never felt like nobody
cared about me, because there’s always at least a staff member that really cares.

Emily reports a comparable response to the boys’ responses about this setting being different
from any other type of traditional setting. Emily attributes this comfortable and caring
environment to the teachers and the sense of respect that goes both ways. She acknowledges that
that the school does not stress her out and that there is at least one member of the staff who cares
about what each student is doing.
Similar to the first four students’ responses, four more students made statements about teachers being very caring and more like friends than teachers. Gerald states, “I would probably just say that the teachers are more of your friends than your teacher at school, and they will do anything to help make you inspired or get good grades.” Claire shares, “Know that you will never be left out or feel stupid, and don’t ever feel like your teacher doesn’t care about you or how you are doing, because every teacher here cares about what you’re doing and how you’re doing it.” Rachel expresses how much she likes coming to GVBPS, “I like to come here, everyone is really nice…they’ll help you with what you want to learn.” Andrew felt that internships and teachers were two things everyone should know about GVPBS.

Cindy, the 401 advisor, and Rachel’s parent explain from the parent view that GVBPS is the perfect model for their children. Cindy shares a brief story about how her son hated school until he came to GVBPS, and then everything changed. She acknowledges that GVBPS is different for every student and that the experience is dependent on the child, but that it was the best thing for her son.

Cindy: It all depends on the student. My son was just a nightmare to get to school from kindergarten right up through. Did not like it; was always getting in trouble. Luckily, figured out he had a learning disability fairly early on, because he is the youngest of the crowd, almost the youngest. The teachers at the elementary school have known him since he was little, so he got diagnosed pretty early with a learning disability, but it was still very difficult. All that changed when he came here. He started coming to STEP the summer before ninth grade. And it’s summertime, and he’d be like, come on mom I need to go to school, and I was like, who took my child? Where is my child? And he’s loved it here for four years. I have never had an argument with him about going to school.
This particular model of alternative learning that is student–centered and focuses learning around students’ interests creates an environment unlike many other traditional school settings. Spencer expresses, “That our school is a school designed for students, because I feel like a lot of other schools are designed around the teachers’ needs or systemic needs or the structure of the building or what the parents’ expectations are.” He emphasizes that GVBPS is a student–centered school, and continues that at the heart of the matter, “if it’s not about them, then they are not going to be truly invested in it.” Students who take ownership of their learning are investing in themselves and preparing for college or a career after graduation. Just as parents would focus their full attention around their children’s best interest, teachers at GVBPS also want to support what is in the best interest of the students, and do so by creating a family-like and supportive learning environment.

The subtheme of family-like atmosphere developed from students sharing comparisons between the school and being like a family in their interviews. The YouthTruth survey reveals students rating the question, *I really feel like part of my school’s community*, in the 83rd percentile. With such a high ranking, I ask students in the focus group sessions, *why is the family-like atmosphere important?* Twelve out of fifteen students gave responses to this question, and their responses revolve around the idea of families being involved in everything a person does and that the availability of support is important.

Keydo, a 101, states, “your family is involved with everything that you do here.” Parents are expected to be actively involved in their students’ learning at GVBPS. Another 101, Rachel recalls the trip to the Met in Rhode Island, and shares, “we went to the Met, and there were like eight hundred kids there, and it was just like a regular school. We came back here and everybody was like, I like how we are keeping it family here.” Contrastingly, Tatyana did not agree with the
other 101s, “I don’t feel so much as a family-like community, yet. I don’t know, this is my first year, so maybe I don’t know, I haven’t really had that feeling yet.” During the 101’s focus group session, there were issues and tension among the 101 students stemming from a disagreement that occurred that same week. This may have contributed to Tatyana’s response about not feeling like the school is a community, and she was the only student to share this type of response.

In the 201’s focus group session, Noah expresses, “you don’t think of your peers as like your friends or like people that you don’t know, you think of them as family, and so like you can go to family with anything.” Claire and Calvin both agree with Noah’s statement, and Claire includes, “It makes you feel comfortable.” This type of learning environment makes her feel comfortable and want to engage in learning.

The 301’s responses to the question focuses on how they like the support from the faculty and do not feel like the faculty is just trying to move them along without any concern or interest for their well-being.

Emily: You don’t feel like people are just, you don’t feel like the staff is just trying to get rid of you. You really feel like they care about you graduating, and that creates the family atmosphere, but it’s really important. Some people, a lot of people actually that come to schools like this don’t really have a good sense of what family is. At least that is what I’ve noticed from talking to people from other schools like this. I’ve noticed that’s like a pattern, and I feel like it’s important to get that feeling of community.

Gerald built off Emily’s response with, “I agree. It’s just kind of a nice feeling knowing that you have that extra support if you need it.” Owen and Jack agree with both, Gerald and Emily’s statements. The idea of having access to support when it is needed is a major benefit within this learning environment.
The support that comes from the family–like atmosphere at the school was also evident with the 401’s focus group session. Andrew, Mark, and George feel they receive more support from GVBPS faculty than they would at any other school. Andrews starts with, “Well, much more support,” and Mark states, “Yeah, much more support and it doesn’t just affect our learning, it like really helps us through life situations and stuff like that.” Mark views the support as something that is not just academic, but also social and applicable to life after graduation. George shares an explanation on how much he really likes GVBPS in comparison to a traditional school.

George: I just really like it because normally at like a traditional school, there would be like two or three people that I could really turn to, to help me if something happened to me. But here, I have a class or more to help me out with it. To support me through all this stuff, and everyone will basically try to help each other as much as they can, whether it’s just a tiny little task or helping guide them along the way, it really is very nice to have that love and support from students, because I am not sure that anywhere else you can get something like this.

When I ask students how this type of an environment affects their learning, they are slow to respond. The 101s are the only group with two of the students sharing a response, which Rachel states it affects her learning, “positively.” Tatyana claims, “Yeah, I think it might affect my learning a little bit.” Calvin, a 201, says, “It’s important.” Majority of the students chose not to answer or do not have an answer for how it affects their learning. However, their overall responses within the interviews and informal conversations, the school’s graduation rate of 89% (Cohen, 2014) and college enrollment rates of 70% (School Brochure, 2013), demonstrate that students are positively affected. The learning environment that is being fostered in a family–like
way appears to benefit the students and assist in their engagement and productivity with learning and work success.

**Family involvement.** The involvement of family in the learning environment is vital and expected at GVBPS. When students complete the application process, there is a section for parents to write a short essay about why they think GVBPS is the best option for their child. According to Brenda, “one of our tag lines is we enroll families. So, we are trying to provide as much for our families as our students and have our families support what we are doing.” It is all about the building of supportive and trusting relationships among school faculty, students, and parents. Willow discusses the importance of relationships, “Relationship building is huge for us here; that’s part of one of our big “Rs” that we work around. So, parent involvement is key. We try to have a good rapport with them as much as possible.”

When I ask school faculty and staff how families support learning at GVBPS, all nine participants mention the importance of communication between the school and the parents. Families need to know what is going on at school in order to best support their child at home. In the sense of teamwork and communication, Tom states, “Well, a lot of families stay in really good communication with me, and meet with me not as an adversary, but as a team member.” Spencer shares a similar comment to not being an adversary to parents, “…we get families involved as much as we can so that there is no, we try to take out any adversarial element that there might be between a family and a school, and just really working hard on communication.” Like Tom and Spencer, Howard states, “…because community, family, and school were all interrelated for us. It’s very important to have a parent on board with what we do. And, you know, like all things, there are students that have supportive parents and non-supportive parents.” Communication with parents occurs through phone calls, text messages, emails, face-to-face
meetings, the TGIF newsletter, the school website, and paper announcements. Furthermore, a parent group supports the school and students by responding to requests for supplies or donations needed by the students for their projects or the school in general.

From the parents’ perspectives, the school completely engages their children in the learning process. Both Rachel and Noah’s parents express relief with knowing their children have highly supportive teachers at GVBPS. Rachel’s parent shares how she was Rachel’s homeschool teacher before she came to GVBPS, and now Rachel has taken ownership of her learning.

Rachel’s Parent: I was her teacher for so many years, and I was the one that supplied her with what she needed and helped her find the things. And now she is doing it mostly on her own, and with Howard, and we are here and we are saying do you need any help and she is saying, no. So, she is doing it herself which is kind of a good thing. It’s kind of awesome, amazing and yeah, I mean we are willing, but we haven’t found that we needed to do a lot and part of that is the fact that they do so much at the school and the other part is that Rachel is Rachel.

The relationship between Rachel and school is a positive one that is possible through Rachel’s abilities and interests in the learning environment, and the school’s ability to support her needs and cultivate her interests. Noah’s Parent talks about how she and her husband have finally been able to relax and “have gotten off his back.” She explains that since second or third grade, Noah was practically a lost cause, because he was unable to sit still in his desk, as he is a very active kid. She claims the school has taken “a load off our shoulders.”

Noah’s Parent: He is expected to be responsible for what he is doing. We still say, “What are you doing? Have you gotten that done?” And he'll say, “I don’t need to, my advisor
said I can have it in by whenever.” Fine, but I can talk to his advisor anytime. I can talk
to any of the other advisors at any time. But he, in his own words, last year he said, when
I hit the Big Picture last year I took off like a rocket. You know, it just suits his learning
style. And uh, we just are very grateful and relieved.

Students’ responses about how their learning is supported by their families focus on the
aspect of communication between students and their parents. Students report the most common
way parents support their learning is by asking questions about what’s going on at school and if
they have homework to complete. Rachel shares how her mom is used to knowing everything
about her day, “…so she asks every single day after school. She asks exactly what we did, what
we are working on, she likes to see everything I am doing. My dad too…but mostly my mom is
like the one.” Although Jack mentions that his family situation is complicated right now, they
still support him, “I mean they support me, but I mean like they ask how I do, and they’re
making sure I’m not slacking or anything.” Charlotte says her family wants her to work on things
that she is interested in, and every day when she gets home they ask, “Do you have any work that
you need to finish, and then I will have to sit down and work on my projects.”

When students explain how their parents support their learning, fourteen of the sixteen
students refer to their parents and families as “they,” while only two students specifically
mention only their mothers supporting their learning. Claire explains why her mother sent her
and her brother to GVBPS.

Claire: My mom really encourages me because she always wants us to best, and she isn’t
mad if we don’t get everything done. Like she’s leant because she wasn’t good in school,
so she just wants us to do better, and get a good education for ourselves. So that’s why
she sent us here.
George has a similar story about his mother wanting him to stay at the Big Picture School, because of all the opportunities that are provided to students at the school. When he says, “they,” he is referring to his mother and grandmother.

George: They literally say, my mom, like if you want to transfer schools you can’t do it unless it’s another Big Picture, like that’s how much they support like they would not send me to like a traditional school, because I would not get the same opportunities at traditional school as I would at Big Picture.

All of the students identify their mothers as supportive; however, two students share that their dads were not originally on board with the concept of a Big Picture School. Both students also share that eventually their dads approved of the school once they saw how their students were progressing. Emily states, “Ah, my dad’s not quite as supportive as my mom. Mom really loves this school. And she is always happy when I come home and I am like, I am doing this and I like it.” Mark expresses his frustration with his dad when he tries to explain to him what he is learning; “…he’s very structural, and so this change for him was like wait are you doing any work? What’s going on? I don’t like see the learning here, and it’s hard for me, because I have trouble expressing what I’ve learned.” Amelia’s mother is supportive of her learning and was the reason she enrolled in GVBPS, “Well, my mom was the one who told me to try this school. So, she’s always there to help, and she supports this school, so basically, like anything I am doing she’s like there to help me and support me.”

Other responses from students about how their families support their learning show families trying to do what they can to help. Peter shares, “They get me to school every day.” It may seem minor, but sometimes getting kids to school can be half the battle. Keydo states, “They tell me to work.” Calvin and Gerald explain how their parents push them to do their best,
although Calvin claims, “Sometimes it gets a little stressful, but they are always there to back me up when I need it and help me out with anything.” Tatyana’s family is supportive as she explains, “They support my learning a lot. They really want me to go to college and get a good job and make money for myself.” Tatyana’s family appears to want her to be independent, and she feels supported in doing so. Both Andrew and Noah share how their families are supportive and happy that they both found learning environments that teaches them how to take ownership for their learning. Noah explains, “Ah, well, my parents are happy because for once I am doing what I need to do and not getting into trouble so they are really supportive of everything.”

Owen’s response brings it all back to the school being like his family, as he states, “like pretty much my family is almost the same as the school. Like how they’re like you need help, let me know, and I’ll be there. Just I’ve got a very supportive family I guess you could say.” Majority of the students report that they have support from their families, and with a supportive faculty and staff, students have the support they need to be successful within the learning environment.

**Supportive Learning Environment**

The theme of supportive learning environment developed from participant observations, interviews, and the YouthTruth survey. The faculty and staff constantly are doing their best to attend to all students and their needs. Some students require more support than others do, but if anyone needs anything, the faculty and staff at GVBPS are always available. Students can meet and communicate with advisors in one-on-one meetings, phone calls, text messages, email, *Google Docs*, and *Slack*. The school is always open, advisors and staff members are consistently checking in with each student, and making sure that they are working and following their learning plans.
On the YouthTruth survey (2014), students rank the quality of teacher support and personal attention in the 94th percentile. In the student interviews, the faculty and staff appear to be supportive by being accommodating, available, specialized, encouraging, caring, modeling, asking questions, and offering extra help. Students rank their teachers willingness to give extra help on schoolwork if needed in the 90th percentile (YouthTruth, 2014). Peter states, “Yeah, they help me with a lot, because I have ADHD, and all the stuff I have to go through, they give me a lot of support.” Peter requires extra time and support with staying on task, and he definitely feels supported by the faculty.

Students who believe that they are actually learning in their classes almost every day rank in the 78th percentile (YouthTruth, 2014). Calvin explains how the advisors work with students, “They will basically give you a task, they will walk you through it about one or two times, and they will let you, they will be there to assist you, but they won’t do it for you.” He points out they will not do the work for the students, which promotes student learning and work ethic. Students at GVBPS know their teachers want them to be able to explain their answers, why they think what they think, since they rank that statement in the 73rd percentile (YouthTruth, 2014). Noah shares, “So they really encourage, like branching off and applying what you are learning to yourself.” Everything comes back to the student–centered learning approach, and that learning needs to be applicable to students if it is to be meaningful.

The 101s share a focus on the communication as a way that the faculty supports their learning. Keydo points out in addition to having conversations and being available, “they give us certain templates and guidelines to help us with our papers and PowerPoints and stuff like that.” Rachel shares that the advisor, “…makes sure that we are doing our work that we need to have done. Talks to us. Tells us what needs to be done.” Tatyana explains how the advisors are more
accommodating, “they let you ask a lot of questions. They will sit with you. They will let you go on your computer to find definitions, and they let you, they explain things, they take more time to explain things.”

Andrew, Mark, and Claire focus their responses on how the faculty supports their learning and their specialties. Each advisor is a certified teacher in a specific content area, but also offers lessons and advice related to other topics and elective courses. Claire’s response encompasses a description of several members of the GVBPS faculty and staff.

Claire: All of the teachers here specialize in their own thing, so if you need help with English writing or something, you go to Howard and he will help you. He will give you edits, he will go over how, he’ll show you how to create an outline. Tom is math, so if you’re in math class and need help with a problem, he will learn it the way you are capable of learning. Instead of learning it, a teacher would just teach it like in front of you and tell you to get it. And then, Cindy does history and global, so if you need help with that, she’ll help you…Willow is like good at everything. She helps a lot with a lot of kids. So just pretty much that anything you need, there is someone here for you.

She points out there is someone for each student, no matter what they need. Mark stresses, “There was so much opportunity here; there was so much like I think that it is so cool that each advisor is so different from each other.” Andrew concisely states, “Everyone is just very nice and very supportive.” It is not surprising that majority of the students find the faculty and staff supportive, since they rank the question, how many of your teachers are not just satisfied if you pass, they care if you’re really learning, in the 99th percentile (YouthTruth, 2014). Almost 100% of students believe the teachers care more about their learning than just passing. Learning is evidently a major and well-known concern at GVBPS.
Encouragement and showing they care are two reoccurring responses from students. Jack explains, “…they just show that they care, and if I don’t get something done, they will harass me about it, but that just shows that they care.” Although he says they will harass him about not getting something done, he perceives this attention as a sign of caring. Owen expresses, “they all want you to get your projects done, and I don’t think there is anyone here that doesn’t wanna help you get your stuff done…they’re right there with ya. If you need them to, they’re right there next to ya.” The faculty does what the students need to accomplish their goals and complete their work. Concerning encouragement, Gerald specifically states, “They encourage me every time I complete something like I complete a WorkKeys level, and so they support me like crazy. They are very supportive teachers.” Along with supporting Gerald academically, the faculty also supports him socially, as he shares, “They have showed up to gigs themselves. Yeah, it’s really cool seeing your high school teacher out in the middle of the show.” The teachers truly invest in the students and their interests, which produces a supportive learning environment for everyone.

When I ask school stakeholders about how the faculty supports student learning, every response details the multiple ways in which the faculty creates a learning environment that provides support with academic as well as social elements for each student to be successful. Howard starts by listing all the things he or other advisors do to support students.

Howard: Ah, oh gee, lots of ways. I mean it could be staying after school to work on a research paper like I have been doing with my kids. It could be getting them a book at Barnes and Nobles, which I do on a very regular basis. Ah, it could be calling home and facilitating a conflict that students are having that’s preventing them from being able to focus on school. I mean, it could be driving them to court. I mean, that has happened, you
know? So, I think that we go a little more above and beyond. Just because of the nature of our school.

Cindy expands Howard’s response to outside of the classroom as she states, “More ways than I can count. Um, you know, we guide them; we take them to different places for experiences. Show them things; it’s been great for me because I’ve about jobs that I didn’t even know existed.” She explains getting the students into different experiences has also been a learning experience for her as well. Cindy explains, “You as an advisor learn just as much as the students. So, we are open to just about anything that is safe and not, you know, detrimental to the school or them.” Students have the freedom to explore within reason, and it’s exciting as an advisor to also be a part of the learning experience. From the teaching assistant perspective, Riley discusses how he sees the advisors supporting the students’ learning.

Riley: So I think they just support it by just trying to continually assess what the kids have accomplished with an insurmountable amount of patience and giving personal information, emotional information, anything they can possible give as an individual themselves as a teacher to try to come up with something that is going to turn that kid’s brain on to whatever he is supposed to be working on.

Riley’s statement about advisors’ insurmountable amount of patience is comparable to my observations of student and advisor interactions during workshops and advisories. The faculty and staff exhibit more patience with students than I have even witnessed in my teaching experiences. Brenda explains, “It’s trying to find that balance,” with supporting students to get their work completed. She views her staff as “teachers of students,” which is something she finds significant to her school. Her advisors and staff do not only focus on their certified content areas, but also branch out to different hobbies and interests in order to help get students engaged in
learning. Tom finds the individualized attention from advisors as, “…the best thing as far as support that staff gives is individualized attention. And, also being flexible as to what expectations are for each individual student’s product goals or project goals even.” Knowing the students’ needs and goals are a necessary part of providing a supportive learning environment. Spencer shares that this is a difficult question to answer, since all students are different, but that, “The teachers are obviously diversifying their instruction for different student needs, and giving them choice on some rounds, but working a lot on curriculum.” There is a lot of individualized attention geared towards the students and getting them engaged in the learning process, and Spencer points out the value in pairing students with experts in the field, and “to get a kid linked up with a welder or say a glass blower for instance, they are going to learn so much more from that.” He believes students learn more from working with experts in a field of interest than just in the academic classroom.

The consensus from all participants is that the learning environment is highly supported by the faculty and students’ families. Willow explains, “Most of the students here just need help focusing and redirecting, because it is the different style within the building.” She continues that the learning environment is completely different from a traditional setting, since “there is no desk, no set boundaries necessarily so, they are there just to keep them focused. Keep them motivated and remind them of why they are doing this and allow for change if necessary.” The faculty and staff motivate and direct students towards their personal goals, while also accommodating for changes as needed. From the parent perspective, Rachel’s parent felt that everything the faculty does is supportive, and that she could never do as good a job as they do.

Rachel’s Parent: Oh, my gosh, yes. They do everything, which is why I was like, there is no way I could home school as well as what they do there. They do so much to help them
find the resources that they need, to find the right textbooks, to websites or experiences, real world experiences for what they are looking for. They really are just resource heavy. They have so many things that they can help the kids find resources on if the kids are willing to do the work.

The faculty and staff provide a resource heavy environment with multiple opportunities for learning in and outside of the classroom in comparison to other settings. The supportive environment is a result of the quality relationships faculty and staff establish with students.

**Student relationships with faculty and staff.** The relationships between students and the faculty and staff at GVBPS, as compared to students in other schools who participated in the YouthTruth survey, demonstrates that more of the teachers foster strong, supportive relationships with their students. In response to the question, *how many of your teachers make an effort to understand what your life is like outside of school*, students rank their teachers for making an effort in the 96th percentile (YouthTruth, 2014). Majority of the students feel the faculty and staff make an effort to understand what is happening in their lives outside of the school. As Emily explains, the staff is mindful of students’ actions and demeanor. If she is having a bad day, they are able to respond appropriately, and work with her accordingly to accomplish her work. The faculty and staff make it point to address students’ needs, particularly regarding social-emotional and mental health needs in order to assist them in being successful and productive within this learning environment.

Emily: Well, like I am a really emotional person, and the staff members, like Cindy especially, if they notice that I am having like some kind of issue, they’ll address that like before I have to go do a project, because going into a project with a negative attitude can
like really damage the project and your quality of the work, so I think that’s a huge part that can go into that would be the emotional support that I get from the staff.

These relationships between faculty and students depend heavily on the concept of respect. Students rank the statement; *most students in this school treat adults with respect*, in the 69th percentile, and the statement, *most adults in this school treat students with respect*, in the 98th percentile (YouthTruth, 2014). The rankings reveal that the students feel adults treat them with more respect than they do towards adults. Jack shares, “…it seems like everyone actually cares about you, and you actually have relationships with the teachers.” Again, the idea of caring comes up and it is part of the relationship this student has with his teachers. Gerald expresses, “I would like to say my teachers are more my friends than my teachers.” The teachers become so close to the students that the students view them more as friends than as authoritative adult figures. Mark shares the thought of how each student has one memory of being themselves with a teacher, and how it is one of the best parts of attending a Big Picture school.

Mark: And I think each student has that one memory that they have with a teacher that they can just be like, yeah like, I can be myself around this person, because they really know who I am…I think that’s one of the greatest things that Big Picture is doing is making kids become who they really are and because they are themselves, the teachers are themselves, which also brings out the us in us.

From the advisor perspective, Howard specifically discusses how the advisors use relationships with students as bargaining chips or motivators to get them working. Getting students emotionally stable is an ultimate goal, along with gaining their trust, which leads to engagement in the learning environment. It is necessary to have an understanding of the basic
psychological needs of students because it provides a context for how different environments affect motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Howard: We use relationships as kind of a bargaining chip. As a motivator. So, we are able to kind of assist in a whole bunch of different areas, but ultimately getting them stable emotionally and having them trust you, leads them to being much more academically engaged. So, we do a lot every day.

Advisors are working every day to motivate and engage students in the learning process, and building meaningful relationships among the faculty, staff members, and students is a step in the right direction towards accomplishing this goal.

**Student relationships with peers.** The student relationships with the faculty and staff are just as important as the relationships students have with their peers. In the YouthTruth survey (2014), students rank the statement: *Most of the students at this school are friendly to me*, in the 63rd percentile. Even though more than fifty percent of the students claim this statement as true, the students rank *the degree to which students have supportive, collaborative relationships with their classmates*, in the 31st percentile (YouthTruth, 2014). In comparison to the ranking of relationships with teachers at the 94th percentile, this seems like a very low percentage. When talking with student about this difference, many report that it is because everything is individualized to each student’s needs and interests at the school. Therefore, they do not rely as often on peers to complete their work.

During the 401 focus group session, Mark explains, “…the peer relationship depends on the grade level. Us, 401s, we’ve grown and like we’ve been here since day one.” He is alluding to the idea that relationships take time, and over four years, the 401s have learned to accept and
support each other. Gerald, a 301, expresses how majority of the students at the school are friends who act like a family, and in comparison to other schools, that is a pretty good thing.

Gerald: I think the majority of the school, I mean all of us, most of us are all friends. I think it’s pretty good in comparison to most schools, and on big events like picnics or campouts and stuff we kind of just act like a family.

Owen adds on to Gerald’s response with, “And to add on to that, really we can all be friends on it, because there is only ten to fifteen of us in a class. There’s not sixty or seventy or more.” The smaller class sizes make it possible for the students to be friends with each other. Calvin points out how the students behave like siblings at times, as he states, “I know like some of us pick on each other at times, like so sometimes we mean it and sometimes we don’t.”

The 101s have a slightly different response to the question about relationships with their peers. On the day of the focus group session, the unknown conflict among the 101s reveals candid responses about their relationships with each other. Keydo starts with “Oh god. Whoa, that’s all I am going to say.” Rachel also responds with a similar comment, “Yeah, oh my god. I don’t know. Ah, most of them are really good.” From observations, I have never noticed an issue among the students, and everyone did seem to get along well throughout the fall semester. Tatyana shares that “the relationships with my peers are, they’re good, some things can be set off, but I mean, like if we just talk, we can get over them.” She seems to understand that problems may come up, but through communication, they can work them out.

The overall relationships between peers seems somewhat beneficial to the students and their work, so I ask them, how often do you work on projects together? The student responses reveal that students rarely or do not at all work on projects with their peers. Rachel and Keydo share that sometimes they work with others, but Tatyana mentions that big projects like the
Science Fair project is something they do on their own. Gerald expresses how sometimes, “some have helped on projects like sometimes someone will ask for help, like in the first two years we are friends and my friends, we just all did things together and built stuff and messed around and presented.” Working with peers appears to be a choice, and Owen explains the difficulties of peers working together, “Like I’ve always found, if you want someone to help you, you gotta get someone who is interested in the same thing. Like me and another student done a lot of stuff together. How we are interested in similar things.” The individualized piece comes into play again, and Jack and Emily share that they agree with Owen. Jack states, “With me, it’s individualized. Usually, no one else wants to help.”

The students’ responses align with the YouthTruth survey results regarding how often students work with their peers on projects. Students rank the question, how often do you work with other students for your classes because your teachers ask or tell you to, in the 19th percentile, and the second question, how often do you work with other students for your classes, even when your teacher doesn’t ask or tell you to, in the 6th percentile (YouthTruth, 2014). Although these are very low rankings, it doesn’t appear to drastically affect the student experience at GVBPS. Claire states, “We may not work often with each other, but we are always around each other, so we are together working.” Working in partners or groups may not be a usual thing at school, but due to the close proximity of the students in the small space, they feel like they are working together in a different capacity. Noah agrees with Claire, and Charlotte explains, “We’ll look over each other’s projects and edit.”

Student responses in some instances appear to contradict the results of the YouthTruth survey regarding working with peers. During observations, I noticed that many of the students work on individualized projects and assignments. However, during advisories and workshops
students often work as a group or in partners to complete assignments. Advisory projects usually involve everyone to work together on one common project, even if they are creating individual products; everyone still works towards a common goal. A few students chose to do their work on their own majority of the time, and rarely work with their peers. The structure of the learning environment allows students to make the decision of whether to work individually or with their peers on assignments and projects. Overall, the relationships between students and their peers appears supportive regardless of who they work with.

Summary

At Green Valley Big Picture School, students, faculty, and staff are a family within a supportive learning environment. Through the building of meaningful and trusting relationships, a family-like atmosphere is created that is important to the students and school stakeholders. Relationships are a major part of the school’s structure and drive towards helping motivate and engage students in the learning process. School stakeholders are carefully modeling, monitoring, and promoting self-advocacy with students. Students are expected to take charge of their learning and direct it in a way that best suits their style and interests. At GVBPS, they are a family who continually supports each other and genuinely cares about the well-being of all students as well as their academic, social, and career successes.
Chapter Six: *Who am I at Green Valley Big Picture School?*

The first two data chapters present evidence of a supportive, student-centered learning environment that focuses on establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships among school stakeholders and students. This chapter emphasizes the students’ perceptions as the central element to Green Valley Big Picture School’s structure of the learning environment and experience. Students lead their learning by being able to explore, question, and create projects that are of interest and meaningful to their preparation during the secondary years. Nine of the 16 students throughout the individual interviews explain how they did not fit in at their traditional school and that GVBPS allowed them to be truly themselves. Students share how they feel more comfortable and less stressed out in this type of a learning environment, because of the relationships they have built with the faculty and staff, which makes them feel like they can accomplish the goals they aspire to. According to the students, the support and care they receive from the faculty and staff, and even their peers, as well as from their family and friends outside of school, appears to have a beneficial effect on their success at school.

With respect to learning and the incorporation of student interest, the student experience appears positive and focuses on students’ interests and abilities. Academic and internship work are planned around the students’ learning plans and their personal interests, so students are more engaged in the learning and are more invested in the process as they have control of meeting the deadlines and requirements for their work and presentations that are preparing them for life after graduation. The students share a variety of interests and projects that demonstrate who they are as individuals and how they see themselves as contributing members of society once they graduate from GVBPS. The first theme, student identity, explores who students believe they are becoming as individuals. The second theme, college and career readiness, demonstrates students’
perceptions of their readiness for college or entering the workforce after graduation. In answering the question, *who am I at Green Valley Big Picture School*, students provide their perspectives on what it has been like for them in terms of learning through internships and college classes, and their future plans after they graduate. Figure 6 provides an outline of the themes from this last data chapter.

**Figure 6: Outline of Themes from Who am I at Green Valley Big Picture School**

**Student Identity**
- Current interests and projects

**College & Career Readiness**
- Internships
- College courses
- Plans after graduation

**Student Identity**

At the start of each individual interview, students describe what their experience as a student is like at GVBPS. Students also explain what their experience is like with respect to learning and incorporating their interests. All sixteen students start their responses off with a positive comment about the school, and nine students specifically mention the incorporation of their interests in their work is a major factor in supporting their affirmative perspectives on the student experience. The 101s each express positive experiences as Keydo states, “it’s been actually really good. Like everything is about my interests, well just about everything we do is about my interest.” Tatyana likes the teachers and claims the work is “easier to do” because it is “more scheduled out.” She explains, “I think it’s a better way for me to learn because I get to
learn about what I am interested in. And that’s cool.” According to Rachel, “it’s awesome sauce!” Peter’s experience allows him to engage more in learning due to the differences in the learning environment in comparison to other schools.

Peter: Well, it’s been all right. Like my experiences here from other schools, it’s a lot different. Because you get more help from other people than from just one person inside a class with twenty kids. I feel like when I learn, I learn more, because I can pay attention more and there isn’t as much going on. There isn’t as much goofing off as in other schools.

The 201s express positive experiences as well, with Claire and Noah including descriptions of their internships into their responses. Claire explains how she gets a lot of work done, because she is able to learn in a way that is easiest for her. Time management and responsibility for academics is also a priority for Claire.

Claire: So I intern at [the local horse barn] on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but today I obviously stayed back so I could get some work done. And there’s obviously going to be times when you have to do that. But usually you can have really good time management through the regular days that you are here so you can get your work done, and then you just get to go out and have fun at your internship. You get to go wherever you want to go. Claire identifies her ability to manage her time between academics and work at her internship. She likes the fact that the school is able to provide her with opportunities to do and go wherever she wants in terms of learning. Similarly, Charlotte shares, “In this school, the projects I do are based on what I enjoy, so I do a lot of projects based on gymnastics. They let you explore different parts of what you are interested in.” Calvin also likes the school and doesn’t believe he would “learn as much in a normal school setting,” he thinks he would “probably be dozing off in
Noah’s first experience visiting the school is the reason he decided to attend GVBPS.

Noah: Well, I came to Big Picture halfway through the school year of ninth grade because I didn’t like public school. And like, the first questions I got asked by my advisor and other advisors were like, what do you like? What are your interests? What do you want to do here? And like, everyone was really friendly and they showed me around and like got me assimilated to the Big Picture daily life and all the teachers were really understanding.

The 301s report positive experiences within the school environment, because it is less stressful and the teachers are more caring than what they experienced in other schools. Jack explains how the school has really worked for him over the last three years.

Jack: It’s really different and it depends who you are, but for me it’s really beneficial and comfortable for me. One thing would probably be the freedom that you get and how you get to know everybody and it seems like everyone actually cares about you.

Gerald shares that it was different for him when he started at GVBPS, and he had trouble adjusting. Then halfway through his first year, he “started getting the hang of things.” Gerald states, “I started really liking this school; really liking my teachers and it’s kind of been the same ever since. I would like to say my teachers are more my friends than my teachers.” Owen explains how things are “less stressful for the student,” because “there’s not tests every week, there’s not homework every day. It’s just you come, get your work done and if you’re lucky you go on an internship.” Emily finds GVBPS a “huge help,” because at her “regular school” she “wasn’t doing well” and “failed everything.” The students express feeling like a community and teachers being more like friends as positive contributions to their experiences at GVBPS.
The 401s explain their positive experiences as different from their experiences at other schools. Their responses include more detail with how the experience is preparing them for life after graduation. Andrew believes the school teaches him “in a better way” for his learning, as he states, “I can go out in the real world and learn what I am going to be doing when I graduate.” Andrew’s experience at GVBPS provides him with time to explore what is meaningful to him, and has changed his mind set about possibly going to college in the future.

Andrew: It’s great because not only are you learning the required things but you are also learning very much needed skills once you get out of high school, and it helps you figure out much sooner whether or not you want to go to college or if you want to go into the work force. Which has definitely been helping me, because I did not want to go to college when I graduated high school and now I have actually been thinking about it, but back when I was in [the regular] high school I didn’t even want to think it.

Amelia, like Andrew, was not sure what she wanted to do after graduation, but now after attending GVBPS, she has explored many possibilities for herself.

Amelia: My experience has been great! It’s been different, and the teachers care a lot. It’s not really what I got at the high school. I guess the easy way to say it is like we set goals for ourselves and we have a certain amount of time to meet each goal. So it’s like we schedule our own time to work on our learning and it’s very like, independent. And if you don’t complete those goals in that certain amount of time, then they get pushed over to the next learning plan that you do. So they never like go away. You always have to complete them. When I was at a high school, I had no idea what I wanted to do like when I was older, so when I came to Big Picture, I just kind of explored everything.
George and Mark both agree that the student experience is different for each student. George likes that he can pursue his interest of music, as where at “the high school, they said you are only going to take one semester of it.” He found out that the one semester of music would only be available during his sophomore year, which was disappointing. George shares, “Then a few days later, my school came down here for a little trip, and I saw some students playing music, recording stuff, and I was like this is what I want to do. So, that’s why I came here.” He explains, “Learning here was different than from what I was used to, but I am open to new ideas cause I like being different.” George found a school that met his needs and passions within the learning environment, and Mark explains how the support from the teachers is realistic and that they are mindful of the students’ time and abilities.

Mark: The experience with learning is from a traditional sense, sometimes it’s more one-on-one, and other times it’s like all right here is what you need to do, go off and do it. And the teachers know if you are capable doing this by yourself and they will send you on your way. They’re not going to try and waste your time with something you already know. On one-on-one, they really sit down with you and like if you don’t get it, they’re going to try a different approach of teaching you that thing.

The students’ experiences appear to be relevant and meaningful to their preparation for life after graduation. The students are experiencing social, academic, and career related learning and skills that are necessary for students to acquire and master for success in the world. The incorporation of interests into the learning plans and curriculum are a vital part of structuring the student experience. In the following section, the students’ share their current interests and projects that reveal variety and relevance to student learning and engagement in and outside of the classroom.
The current interests and projects also contribute to their identities as students at GVBPS, and their perspectives of themselves in the learning environment.

**Current interests and projects.** The variety of interests and projects the students discuss expose how individualized the learning at GVBPS is for each student. During the interviews, the students appear at ease and willing to converse about their interests and projects they are working on. The students incorporate their projects into their learning plans, which they create with their advisor in order to establish the learning goals and objectives that meet the academic state requirements. All of the students check-in with their advisors at least once a week, if not daily, to make sure they are on track towards completing their work and presentation for their exhibition. Three of the 101s report working on projects directly associated with their interests. Keydo’s interest in “soda making, having a soda company, and acting,” are the focus of his current project, “a research paper on like how soda has evolved since the first soft drink.” Rachel’s interests in “art, Irish dancing, and having my own charity,” are all a part of her *Who am I* project. She reports, “it took me a really long time,” and “the biographical sketch was hard, three whole pages.” Tatyana’s interests are “cosmetology, working with horses, and working with kids.” Her current project is on cosmetology, “how you shouldn’t dye your hair on your own.” Culinary arts and mechanics are Peter’s current interests; however, his current project is on “the jail system and what it’s like to be there, how many people go to jail, and how many people get caught for what and things like that.”

All four of the 201s are exploring current projects that directly connect to their interests. Calvin is interested in “possibly doing academic teaching,” or “like physical education or being maybe like a TA or just a positive influence on elementary students before they make the wrong decisions in life.” His current project is for his internship-based project, and he is “trying to
figure out what is the learning speed of different ages in the elementary school setting. Grades, ages, gender. I am going to see if boys will pick it up faster than girls at the age of seven.”

Charlotte is building off her interest in gymnastics, and is now getting into “physical fitness and well-being.” Currently, she is working on two projects.

Charlotte: I am working on the advisory project, which is the power of music, but I am also working on my IBP [interest based project], which I am figuring out if the angle in which a gymnast releases the bar, if that has any effect on the difficulty of their dismount.

Claire’s love of horses and desire “to be a big animal vet when I get older,” are evident in her LTI (Learning though Internship) project, “for that I’m making signs, through routing, for the horses at the stables. I have to rout their names out. I’m also doing this thing on Cushing’s disease. My whole project is actually on the daily care of a horse.” Noah shares, “I like software development, doing a lot of stuff with computers.” He is working on two projects now, “disassembling a couple of Ipods, then putting them back together, but trying to make it better as well as being able to dual boot it, so you can boot one hard drive that would be normal and the other would be jail broken,” which he is working on with a friend. Noah is also “working on building a computer,” as his other project.

In the 301 group, three of the students, Emily, Gerald, and Jack express a passion or interest in music. Emily explains she is “really passionate about the arts,” and she identifies her interest in the arts as it relates to “performance art, music, drawing, painting, writing, and reading.” She likes the fact that “this school gives me the opportunity to do those things and get credit for them.” Emily’s current project involves her “taking piano and vocal lessons,” but she shares, “I’ve done a lot of writing pieces, but there not creative writing pieces, they have to go with things that I’ve been doing, I’ve been really trying to focus on getting my Regents done at
the moment.” Jack, who also likes music, states, “I am into self-defense stuff. I want to learn more about cars, because that’s definitely going to help in the future.” Recently, Jack presented two projects, and he explains, “One of them was for Global, a project about Islam. The other one I just presented the other day in advisory was about soup kitchens in NY, and I had to write about them and what they do.” Another lover of music, Gerald, also likes to “incorporate engineering” with his projects. His interest-based project is on jazz music, and he is incorporating the information he is learning from his internship to guide his project.

Gerald: My interest-based project is called jazz fusion and I’m basically exploring jazz, and right now actually through my internship, I am working with a jazz musician who is a teacher as well. He is a trumpet player, but converts pretty easy. But my whole project is for me to kind of define the roots of jazz and how it converts like a normal major scale converts to a jazz scales and what notes are more favored like the two and the fifth cords and stuff like that.

Owen is another 301 who uses his experience and knowledge from his internship to direct his school projects. Owen is very interested in “farm machinery and farming in general.” His current project includes work at his internship regarding “an engine on a Ferris lawnmower, which is kind of been put on hold, because the customer was saying he might just cut his losses.” Owen is waiting to hear back from the customer, and does other jobs around the shop to keep busy. He states, “I’m just doing pretty much something different every day. Today I was changing a hood on lawnmower that got messed up in shipping.”

The 401s are focusing on their senior thesis projects. Although Amelia expresses an interest in “cars and sports, and plays on the school district’s lacrosse and basketball teams,” her senior thesis project is on animals in overcrowded shelters.
Amelia: I wanted to help animals, because I still really like animals. I am going to get donations of like food, toys, blankets and all this stuff that dogs need, and I am going to donate them to shelters. And I was going to go to an elementary school and basically talk about like why you should get a dog from the shelter instead of someone breeding a dog, because that is kind of like the age that you would get a dog. So, maybe they could say something to their parents or kind of give them the idea. And that might help out the shelters. They are usually overcrowded.

Andrew, like Amelia, gives back to his community through his skills and interests in construction. He is also interested in “small engine repair and engine repair in general,” as he believes it is important to be able “to fix things on my own, not having to take it to a shop.” Andrew is working on his senior thesis project, which includes going to Kentucky to assist people through a Christian-based project that “helps build things for needy people,” as well as helping a local person’s house who “really needs it [the help/ work] for free.” Additionally, Andrew has an internship with a local construction company that he hopes will lead to a job after graduation.

George and Mark, similar to Amelia and Andrew, are working on projects that help the greater good. Instead of focusing on their own specific interests, George and Mark are looking to build more community support for GVBPS by informing the public about what students do at the school and why they believe this alternative learning environment works. George is very passionate about music and has an interest in graphic designs; however recently, his exploration into photography has ignited a new spark of interest. With all these interests in arts and design, George’s senior thesis project formulates from the actions he observed of the adults who keep Big Picture Schools running.
George: Our principal and Spencer were always going to like these little resorts like with other Big Picture staff, and they would always come back saying what kind of experience they had and how much they learned. I was always wondering why the students don’t do that too. Because Big Picture was made for the students, like for them to learn what they want, and I think that with the teachers, when they connect, they share ideas like how they can improve their school, what they should change, so why don’t the students do the same thing?

Mark explains that his interests have changed throughout his four years at GVBPS. He tried architecture during his first year, and hated his internship with a local architect, because his job consisted of sitting in a cubical all day. His sophomore year was the “I don’t know” phase, where he just did not know what he wanted to do. By his junior year, he expressed an interest in comedy and interned with a local comedy club. Mark expresses that he is “very comfortable on the stage,” which led him to his current project. For his senior thesis project, Mark is organizing an event at the local comedy club to promote GVBPS and get the word out to people in the community about what students and staff do at their school. Mark states, “I feel like we don’t have as big of a crowd supporting us as we should, and I want to draw in like a bigger crowd to support us.”

From the freshmen group of 101s to the senior 401s, students demonstrate maturity and honest thought to each of their responses and stories. The students are building and acquiring the necessary social, academic, and career related skills to navigate college or a career after graduation. GVBPS provides a structure to the student experience that allows students to create their own intellectual identities that focus around student interest and abilities. These experiences are assisting in students in being college and career ready once they graduate from GVBPS.
College and Career Readiness

The students at GVBPS are engaging in preparation strategies, skills, and activities that will make them college and career ready for life after graduation. In the YouthTruth survey (2014), students on average report, “more favorable perceptions of what their school is doing to prepare them for life after high school compared to students at other participating schools.” The college and career readiness summary measure exposes the degrees to which students feel equipped to pursue college and careers in the 86th percentile (YouthTruth, 2014). Both students and school stakeholders share their perceptions of the student experience with regard to college and career readiness. Students discuss how the GVBPS learning environment is similar to the college learning environment, since students are self-directed and choose courses and work based on their interests.

The freshmen 101 group explains college and career readiness from an informational point of view. Peter states, “I think they are getting me ready to start thinking about it; not getting me ready to start it, yet. Because a lot of stuff, I already know because of my brothers and sisters already went to college.” Peter is not the only student to have siblings who have already gone on to college, but as a freshman, he claims to know about the process. Rachel’s lack of response to the question about how she is experiencing college and career readiness could be due to this being her first semester attending GVBPS. Keydo and Tatyana express how they are receiving information about college and have the opportunities to explore their interests. Tatyana states, “They are preparing me by giving me the information I need, and like different classes help for your projects. So, cosmetology for science would be what chemicals to mix in, how are they mixed in, and how much to put.” The blending of students’ interests into the curriculum is a key reason why the students feel this type of learning works for them.
In the sophomore 201 group, the students focus on the shadow days, internships, and college classes as ways they are preparing to be college and career ready. Calvin mentions how he is working on “sending in college applications,” and “going out on internships, job shadows, and everything,” so he can put them on his resume that he will send out to colleges. Calvin also has two brothers who attend a private liberal arts college in the state. Charlotte’s description of the student experience with college and career readiness includes her shadow days and internships, and how the chance to go and try out her interests is helping her decide what career she would like to go into. She states, “I’ve also been thinking about like being a gymnastics coach, which involves teaching and gymnastics.” Charlotte comfortably shares, “If I find a place I would like to go to, we just have to call them up, and then I can go over and see what their job is.” Claire attributes the internships to what really gets her ready for when she is out of school, and that in the junior and senior years, students can take classes at a local state college. Noah states, “this is kind of is like college, because you get your own directive here instead of sit down, math, social studies, World History, go home, come back, and do it again.” He explains that in college, “you are kind of able to explore your career opportunities and you choose your classes, so here you choose the topics you learn but you have to follow some classes because of state laws.” The work with internships and college classes provide the students with experience that is necessary for success in college and the work place that many students do not have until after a few years in college or a job.

For the junior 301s, they each focus on the internships as the main factor in their college and career readiness. Owen explains, “It’s been like for probably the last two years now getting me ready for college, and just like how even my internship, it’s the internship that will feed right into college and college will feed right into a job.” Owen sees the work from his internship
leading him into college, which will eventually lead into a job. Like a couple of the freshmen and sophomores, Jack views the school the same as he would a college classroom. He shares, “I’ve talked to a few people who went to college, and they say this school is basically like college. They just tell you to get your work done, and it’s up to you to get it done.” Jack understands he is responsible for his work at GVBPS just like a college student would be, and he explains that before he attended GVBPS, “I didn’t even want to go to college, and now I still want to go to college, I just don’t know what I want to go to college for yet.” Jack mentions the importance of internships, which Gerald also discusses, “I feel like I am prepared for my career. I plan to be on the music education side. And that is what I get from the signature music, which is my internship, and I learn how they teach and take tips for myself.” Additionally, practice tests for the SATs and information about topics related to college in his advisory class are two ways he is preparing for college. Emily points out self-motivation is necessary, and that the internships provide experience in the “real world.” She discusses the importance of communication and being able to interact with people effectively. Emily realizes “a lot of people don’t experience internships until they get to college.” She and the other students acknowledge the head start they are receiving with college and career readiness in comparison to traditional school settings.

The senior 401s’ responses are not much different from the other students’ comments, and they focus on the internships as the most important component to their preparation and experience as a student at GVBPS. As George states, “Big Picture basically is a like a college high school. You’ve got to do everything on your own.” He continues to explain that not everything is on their own, but most of the projects and work is individual. Amelia and Andrew discuss their college courses they took last year and this year, which are helping to assimilate them into the college culture. Andrew also emphasizes how the internships help students see
where they need to go college depending on what they want to do. Mark points out that “career ready, I think is more what Big Picture is about” and through his internships he feels confident enough to get a job after graduation instead of going to college. Although he is still thinking about going to college, he believes the internships provide a strong sense of experience that could be enough for students not interested in going to college.

The school stakeholders’ perceptions of how students are experiencing college and career readiness are similar to the students’ perceptions regarding the importance of internships. Ten out of the eleven stakeholders mention internships in their responses to students’ college and career readiness. College preparation is evident through evaluative skill tests such as WorkKeys, SATs, and ACTs, as well as through college visits, enrolling in college courses during the 11th and 12th grade school years, and applying to college. Six of the eleven stakeholders also discuss the close relationship with the local state college where students are able to enroll and attend classes on campus for credit. Rachel’s parent explains “we fully expect our children to go to college and to get degrees and get careers,” but that she is not a fan of the whole college and career readiness concept. She states, “I made it all the way through high school being college and career ready and getting great grades,” and does not remember anything that she did. Rachel’s parent believes the internships are the best part of the school.

Rachel’s Parent: But I think that the internships more than anything else, and being able to put together a project, and then display your work, and get up and speak about it, and all those things come together. They are way more college and career ready than anything I have seen in a regular public school.

Noah’s parent comments on the connection GVBPS has with the local state college, and that her son “is already talking about trying to graduate with a whole first year’s worth of college credits.
I don’t know if he will accomplish that, but that’s his goal and that’s, wow, that’s great.” She likes the fact that the school promotes college for everybody, and then the internships are excellent for the career readiness because students have “the chance to explore their passions. Get out in the real world and see how it all works.”

From an administrative standpoint, Brenda thinks the school does ok with college readiness, but “it’s a weakness, because it hasn’t been any one person’s specific job in terms of college.” She explains the career readiness is accomplished well through the internships, but she wants to do more. Brenda points out “we also have a population or we have had a population so far that came to us thinking that college was not an option,” and “just under half of our students that graduate are enrolled in college, so I think we are making significant gains.” Unlike the career readiness overseen by the internship coordinator, there is no one specifically assigned to assist students with college readiness. However, the internship coordinator does help students with enrolling in classes at the local state college, and the GVBPS staff willingly takes students on college visits. There is progress with working with students who never thought college was an option, but Brenda stresses that the school and staff can do more to better prepare students with college readiness. It is important to note that students are not divided into college or career bound tracks at GVBPS, and that students are given choices as to how they want to spend their time either in college classes, at internships, or participating in both.

The four advisors each discuss the internship component in terms of career readiness, and the relationship with the local state college and prep work for the SATs, ACTs, and WorkKeys in preparation for college readiness. Cindy explains, “They have opportunities, they just need to take them,” and that “it goes back to if the students want to.” The students have to want to do the work and seek out information if they are going to be truly ready for life after graduation.
Howard illuminates this point of being responsible for their own learning, “I think in stressing independence so much, they are understanding that they have to communicate with teachers. They are responsible for doing their own work and that is actually a big advantage for them.” He states that “most people struggle with that going to college,” and GVBPS exposes students to opportunities that will elevate some of those challenges. Tom explains the concept of trial and error, and how students are not always going to like what they are doing, but the whole point is to try new things and reflect on what works and does not work.

Tom: I think that it’s important to note that the kids don’t always find the thing that they are going to do for life. It’s really important to remember that they are going to try some things out that they don’t like, and that is a good learning experience as well.

Spencer finds the career part “very easy,” although that does not apply to every single student. Shadow days, internships, and service learning are ways students are learning about requirements and expectations in the workplace. Spencer also agrees they could be doing a better job with the college piece; however, he feels, “the one piece that we do a good job of is encouraging them to be independent learners because that is the shift from college is not having mom and dad leaning over your shoulder and you have a deadline.”

The internship coordinator and teaching assistants also stress the importance of the student internships, but present more of a focus around the college preparation piece and what the school is beneficially doing for students. According to Sally, “considering they have a learning plan ever since they entered ninth grade, they are going to be more, they SHOULD be able to adapt to college life much easier, because they are used to having to motivate themselves.” College is something worth talking about, as Marvel points out they “make college something,” and “if you want to go on and learn you can go.” College is an option for all
students, and the school stakeholders make that a priority for students to understand. As Riley puts it, “These students have opportunities that kids in most schools are never going to have.”

**Internships.** The career readiness portion is heavily influenced by the internships students participate in during their four years at GVBPS. Once students establish their interests in a particular career field, they set up shadow days to test out the setting and job expectations. If the student likes the shadow day experience, they can request to intern for a semester or a full year. Some students go back to the same internship site each year, hoping to build a rapport and secure a job position after they graduate. Students intern at a variety of local places such as schools, construction companies, recording studios, farming and heavy equipment stores, college campuses, and animal boarding farms to name a few. According to the YouthTruth survey (2014), the statement, *my school has helped me figure out which careers match my interests and abilities*, ranks in the 91st percentile by students, and the statement, *my school has helped me understand the steps I need to take in order to have the career that I want*, in the 95th percentile. Students understand the work they are doing is helping to prepare them for life in college or a career.

Since internships are such a major part of student experience, students explain the purpose of internships and their usefulness from their perspective. In the 101 focus group session, regarding a particular type of job, Rachel states, “it’s awesome to see if you actually like it.” Keydo shares, “they help you show that if you go into this career, this is what you will be doing.” Tatyana agrees the internships allow students to get to know more about a job before it’s too late and a person is stuck with it. Keydo and Rachel respectively report that the internships are preparing them for “real life” and “having a job.”
Students in the 201 focus group session explain that the internships are getting them ready for the “real world.” Claire believes “our school’s more like a college. It’s not like a high school. We are ready for like anything, because we get out there and get to see what we are interested in.” The engagement in the internships allows students to try out their interests in a professional setting. Calvin explains how the internship has layers and that sometimes the outer layer is not representative of the inner layer.

Calvin: Yeah, in your head you’re like, oh it’s going to be great, and you only think of the easy stuff you see on the outer shell, but once you go into the internship, you see like the inner shell of the operation, and it’s a lot more complicated than you really think on the outside.

Noah explains that he bases his projects around his internships, so “we get a real world application for our projects.” He also shares a major success with his last internship, “I actually have a piece of encryption code that’s actually in a product that’s on the market now.” Charlotte finds the internships as an “easier way for us to like explore a job that we will or that we are interested in having. So, you get to kind of test it out before you commit yourself fully.” The students have the opportunity to try out different jobs and find the best fit.

Two of the students in the 301 focus group provide comments on the purpose and usefulness of the internships. Owen shares, “You get to learn about what you are interested in. It gets you ready for the real world.” He wisely mentions that, “I’m not speaking for everybody, but my own opinion, a lot of people in this school don’t realize after high school’s over, they are in for it.” Owen thinks many of the students do not realize what life will be like once they graduate. As a junior, Owen realizes the expectations and skills required to be successful are acquired through participation in the internships. Emily explains the role of social reasoning
within internships and that learning how to communicate and build relationships with superiors
and new people is important, which “is something that some people go into college with no
experience.” Emily acknowledges the opportunities and experiences GVBPS provides are not as
likely in other schools.

The seniors’ responses are similar to the other focus group session answers. Andrew
agrees, “They’re so much better than anything, because ninety-five percent of the stuff I am
learning here is going to come with me into my work life at my internships that’s where I am
learning.” Andrew is planning to get a job with his construction internship, and finds the
experience to be “extremely helpful” towards his goals in life. Mark simply believes the
internships are “great for a resume.” All of the seniors concur that the internships are preparing
them for “life.”

**College courses.** The relationship GVBPS has with the local state college provides
opportunities for students to enroll and attend classes on campus with other college students. By
getting a jump-start on college classes, Claire shares, “you’re not nervous about it.” Other 301
and 401 students agree with Claire that when they are able to attend classes during their
secondary years, they get a chance to see if they like that type of learning. Howard, the 101
advisor, shares an example of one student who took five courses and had his first college
semester completed by the time he graduated from GVBPS. Some students take advantage of the
college courses offered, and others do not. Amelia and Andrew both share stories about taking a
class together last year, and it did not go so well. Amelia states, “Last year I took human biology
class…It was my first class ever with other college kids, and I mean it was hard, but I finished
it.” Andrew also took the human biology class, because other students were taking it, but “it
wasn’t very interesting to me, so I just kind of failed it.” This year, Amelia is taking a coaching
class, which she is really enjoying. She claims, “I was scared to like go to college and like be with all the other kids, but now I feel like I fit in with them. And they don’t notice me as a high schooler.”

The ability to take courses and try them out is important towards preparing students to be college ready. Students need to experience what it is like in a college classroom and what the professor expects from them. According to the YouthTruth survey (2014), students rank the statement, *my school has helped me develop the skills and knowledge I will need for college level classes*, in the 70th percentile. Similarly, students rank the statement, *my school has helped me understand the steps I need to take in order to apply to college*, in the 76th percentile. These are relatively high rankings for college readiness from the students’ perspectives, and align with the individual and focus group session findings on how students are experiencing college and career readiness.

**Plans after graduation.** The 101, 201, and 301 students’ plans for after graduation may change during their time at GVBPS, however the 401 students’ plans appear to be more concrete. Fourteen students share their future plans, since Charlotte had no comment and Peter left the study at this point in the data collection. Rachel “really wants to be an art teacher,” and plans to “go to college and then get a job.” Keydo has to “go to college first” and then “get a job.” Tatyana’s goal is to “get a good job.” Even as 101 freshmen, these three students have a plan to either attend college and/or get a job after graduation.

As 201 sophomores, Noah plans on “making lots of money,” Claire wants “to be successful,” and Calvin states he will “visit Tom,” his advisor. Although these responses are more general and not specifically focused on either college or a career, these are important to the students once they graduate. Noah’s interest in computers and software development is a
growing field that has potential for a high income. Claire’s desire to be successful most likely aligns with her dream of being a large animal veterinarian. Calvin’s statement of coming to visit Tom after he graduates is not out of character given his love for talking and learning. With the strong relationships students build with the faculty and staff, it is not surprising that coming back to visit is a priority for some students.

All of the 301 students state that college is in their plans after graduation. However, Jack shares, “I’m probably going to take a year off, save up some money, and that will give me time for where I want to college or if I want to go to college.” Jack follows up his plan to take a year off to save money with, “I am going to work and save up money, and figure out what I want to do. As long as I get money, that’s all I care about.” Although he mentions college, making money is significant to his plans. Gerald plans to go “to college right after school.” He will complete his first two years at a community school, and “then transfer to his dream school.” Gerald states, “that I will be able to get into any college that I want after this school.” Owen plans to attend the local state college for a degree related to farming. Emily would like to “spend next year finding ways to build up scholarship money,” and then apply to a college in New York City that is styled like the Big Picture School.

As 401 seniors, Mark and Amelia are planning on going straight to college after graduation. However, during Mark’s interview and informal conversations, it seems he is struggling with going to college or working after he finishes at GVBPS. According to Mark, his parents are supportive, but really push him to attend college and have that experience. Andrew hopes to secure a position with his current construction internship, but if that falls through, he plans on working after graduation. Once George graduates, he plans to move to “Canada to be with his girl.” George also aspires to be a professional photographer or musician.
Summary

In answering the question, *who am I at Green Valley Big Picture School*, students are developing identities through the exploration of their personal interests and current projects that reveals engagement in the learning environment. Throughout their time at GVBPS, students are constantly refining their ideas about their plans for the future. Students are participating in internships and college courses that are preparing them socially and academically towards being college and career ready after graduation. Each student plans to graduate from GVBPS, and at least half plan on attending college, which for some students will make them the first in their families to do so. These student identities reveal how the structure of the school and the support from the faculty and staff scaffolds this development and that through listening to students and utilizing their interests to write meaningful, relevant curriculums, there is an increase in student engagement and motivation. The students participating in this study portray an invested interest in their education that is a result of the how the school’s structure influences the student experience at GVBPS.
Chapter 7: Discussion

The Green Valley Big Picture School began as an alternative learning environment for students who were disengaged and at risk for dropping out from a conventional high school. However, the school has become a place for any student who is motivated to learn through his or her own interests and self-direction. This dissertation argues that listening to students and utilizing their interests to write meaningful, relevant curriculums, while incorporating internships and college course work with high school required academics, and collaborating with community businesses all contribute to higher levels of student engagement and motivation in the learning environment. In this chapter, I review the findings that attempt to answer, how do students experience the Big Picture School model of learning, and how do the Big Picture School model and faculty structure that experience? Moreover, I connect research and theory to the findings in order to build an understanding of the Big Picture School student experience and the implications these results have on current teaching practices, educational reform initiatives, and the need for further research.

Data Chapters Four and Five, Who is GVBPS and Who are we at GVBPS, present evidence of the student experience and how the advisors and school staff structure that experience through the BPS model of learning. The actual structure of the learning environment at GVBPS mirrors the original design of BPS, and all participants in the current study provide evidence of the students’ success regarding engagement, motivation, graduation, and college enrollment. The theme of being a family appears throughout the data, and the family-like atmosphere, family involvement, and supportive learning environment all interconnect and contribute to the student experience. The third data chapter, Who am I at GVBPS, focuses on the students’ interests, current projects, internships, college courses, and plans for after graduation,
which all provide insight into how the students are perceiving and creating their own identities within the learning environment in preparation to be college and career ready after graduation.

The diagram, Figure 7, outlines the student experience by first establishing the three data chapters in the smaller ovals; the themes for each chapter are included in the boxes. The bulleted phrases are the subthemes for the main theme listed. The directional arrows portray the connectedness and fluidity of the themes and subthemes within each chapter that provide a detailed picture of the student experience at GVBPS.

**Understanding the Student Experience**

The student experience at GVBPS focuses on learning through students’ interests and passions with consistent support from parents, advisors, school staff, and community businesses. The current study provides insight into how this structured experience aligns with the goals and expectations of the BPS model of learning, which emphasizes focusing on one student at a time (Big Picture, 2008; Littky & Grabelle, 2004). GVBPS advisors and school staff clearly focus around the five learning domains established by the BPS model: communication, social reasoning, empirical reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and personal qualities (Big Picture, 2008; Levine, 2002), and all student work and learning plans are organized around these five domains. Students engage in academic courses and internship work with the goal of graduating as college and career ready with a high school diploma, and some graduate with specific skill certifications. The partnership with the local state college and the internship coordinator provide students with opportunities to enroll in internships as early as their freshman year, and in college courses beginning in their junior year. With support from local community businesses, students are able to visit and arrange internships with companies that could serve as potential employers after graduation. At school, the structure of the workweek, three days at GVBPS for academics, and
two days at their internship site or college class, teaches students how to manage their time and meet deadlines, which also aligns with the BPS model of learning (Washor & Mojkowski, 2013).

**Figure 7: The Student Experience at Green Valley Big Picture School**

**Structure of GVBPSS**
- Small space
- Engagement in learning
- GVBPSP feels different from a traditional school setting

**Student Interest & Motivation**
- Incorporating student interest
- Work effort
- The importance of motivation

**Family**
- Family-like atmosphere
- Family involvement

**Supportive Learning Environment**
- Student relationships with faculty and staff
- Student relationships with peers

**College & Career Readiness**
- Internships
- College courses
- Plans after graduation

**Student Identity**
- Current interests and projects

**Structure of GVBPSP.** There are no bells to disrupt the learning environment and remind students that they must change to the next class. The purpose of not having bells indicates that
learning is ongoing and should not be split up or confined to a specific period (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Advisors and school staff utilize every bit of their 1,800 square feet of space for learning, and students appear to thrive in this small space. The small space makes learning more personalized and meaningful to the students (Levine, 2002). The school structure offers freedom and flexibility that allow students more time to finish projects, and provides more real world experiences for them to engage in, which contributes to the literature on how the structure of the BPS model differs from traditional school settings.

Engagement in learning is evident through the students’ involvement in regular academic course work (English, Math, Social Studies, and Science), shadow days, internships, service learning, and volunteering in the community. During advisories, workshops, and exploratories, students are actively using their laptops, textbooks, and informational handouts or books to locate information about topics they are interested in or need to complete as a state requirement for graduation. Students have choices and opportunities to explore what is important to them, which is something that is lacking in most traditional school curriculums (Washor & Mojkowski, 2013). Students are constantly talking with their advisors, other school staff, their parents, and peers in order to clarify or practice using information to complete their assignments, as well as providing input that assists in making the school a better learning environment for everyone. By continuously encouraging students to be a part of the discourse regarding their education and preparation for life after graduation, adults and students have a better understanding of each other’s perspectives, which ultimately leads to results that are more productive (DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Fielding 2001; Mitra, 2004; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). These findings add to the literature on how the BPS model increases student engagement through encouraging students to have a voice in making decisions about their learning.
The communication is constant and more involved within this structure of learning; students lead discussions based on their own interests and passions. Many schools expect students to sit quietly for 45-80 minutes while listening to a teacher provide direct instruction; however, this type of “learning” does not allow students to be themselves or allow teachers to learn from their students (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). The student voice is essential for success at GVBPS, and students are consistently encouraged to share their opinions and ideas about their work and the work of others. Learning is more beneficial for students and teachers when the two groups are able to collaborate and acknowledge that each possesses unique knowledge and perspectives that are worth sharing with one another (DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Mitra, 2005). By including students’ voices in all types of discussions, either school related or not, students are learning how to participate in a democratic forum, which ultimately prepares them with the skills necessary for effective communication inside and outside of school (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). When students’ voices are not only heard, but also are included in a dialogue with adults, levels of motivation and engagement increase (DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Mitra, 2008; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). A quality education should provide all students with the information and opportunities to make decisions that best fit their interests and needs for becoming civically engaged citizens (Kanter, 2012). The current study presents the BPS learning environment as one school that strives to provide such an education to its students.

**Student interest.** The amount of effort students put into their work depends upon three main factors. These factors include their level of interest in the subject or project, their emotional state on that day, and the person teaching the lesson or leading the project. Only two students report giving 100% of their effort on a daily basis, and seniors had the most trouble with responses claiming they were unsure of how much effort they put into their work, but that they
thought they could always do more to increase their effort and complete work. The more students care about what they are doing, the more effort they will exhibit in order to complete those assignments and projects (Pink, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The interest-based, learning through internship, and senior thesis projects demonstrate students’ abilities and understanding of information as it relates to a particular topic and connects with specific NYS learning objectives as well as with the BPS’s five learning domains. Students produce thought-provoking and creative presentations portraying the work they have completed during the quarter and what they have learned from that experience. The exhibitions allow students to share passionately about a product or information they have an interest in learning about through their own design, and provide opportunities for conversations about the learning process among the students, advisors, peers, and parents. Exhibitions put students at the center of their learning, hold them accountable for meeting the required learning goals, and emphasize the process of learning, not just their final product, which is more meaningful than bubbling in the correct answer on a test (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Students share that incorporating their interests “makes it easier” to engage in the lessons or work they are doing in class or their internships. The general structure of the school creates an environment that fosters a love for learning through relevant and interest-based content and projects. Students report the amount of effort they put into their work contributes to the literature on how centering learning around students’ interests can increase motivation and engagement.

**Motivation.** The conceptual framework for this study emphasizes the importance of promoting intrinsic motivation and addressing students’ psychological needs in order to produce favorable outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Vallerand, 2000). The building of genuine motivation through autonomy, mastery, and purpose (Pink, 2009), assists in helping students become
motivated and engaged in the learning process (Patterson, 2012). The structuring of the student experience focuses on learning through student interest, and motivation is a key component to students’ achievement at GVBPS. Through the incorporation of student interest in learning plans, students have a strong sense of ownership in their own learning (Levine, 2002). The students’ desire to attend GVBPS aligns with Deci and Ryan’s (2008) Self-Determination Theory regarding autonomous motivation and the fact that students identify with the value of the school’s learning activities and how those activities contribute to their sense of self.

GVBPS is not giving out knowledge and then testing it for the sake of gaining high-test scores, as many schools do (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Instead, students structure their learning through detailed learning plans, which they write every quarter, and then collaborate with an advisor to incorporate NYS learning requirements. Since GVBPS students are a part of this discussion and planning, they are probably more aware of the NYS standards than students in more conventional schools. The learning plans provide a comprehensive outline of the work that students agree to complete and present at their exhibition by the end of each quarter (Levine, 2002). The ability to have a choice in what one is learning is central to autonomous motivation within the Self-Determination Theory (Gagne & Deci, 2005), and students at GVBPS are given a variety of opportunities to make choices about their learning. Engagement in an activity happens when a person finds it interesting and wants to become involved in the process (Gagne & Deci, 2005), and the more that students are involved in their own learning, the more they will engage in the process.

As important as success is to the learning environment, failure is also significant in the learning process and provides opportunities for change and growth (Dweck, 2006). Students who are able to deal with failure are building autonomy, competence, and intrinsically motivating
themselves to meet and conquer challenges without giving up (Ryan & Deci, 2000). At GVBPS, students report that they are not afraid of failing, which they attribute to the constant support and guidance they receive from their advisors, other school staff members, peers, and parents. If a particular internship arrangement or project is not working, students have the ability to change their plans. In some situations, changing is not always so easy. One female student from the 401 group discussed how she took a college class that was extremely difficult and she wanted to drop it. Instead, she decided to stay in the class for the experience, despite the fact that she did not pass and receive credit for the course. Failure is a part of the learning process, and students at GVBPS are provided with opportunities that allow them to learn how to adapt and handle situations where failure may be a possibility, but does not deter them from trying.

According to students and school stakeholders, motivation is “huge,” and a contributing factor to student engagement and learning. The importance of internal motivation or self-motivation is a common thread among the school stakeholder responses. One advisor reports that when students arrive at GVBPS, many are completely motivated only by grades and typically are not doing well academically; therefore, the advisors and school staff emphasize building students’ intrinsic motivation in order for them to take ownership of their learning. Interestingly, Gillet’s et al. (2012) study on intrinsic and extrinsic school motivation as a function of age points out the “systemic linear decrease in intrinsic motivation toward education from elementary to high school,” (78) which supports the advisor’s observation that when most students come to GVBPS, they lack intrinsic motivation and are completely motivated by grades, an extrinsic motivator. Gillet’s et al. (2012) results show that concerning intrinsic motivation and self-determined extrinsic motivation there is a similar pattern of decline until the age of 15 years, and then an increase after that age. Intrinsic motivation is an influential part of students’ success at
GVBPS, and results in high-quality learning and creativity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The findings on motivation at GVBPS contribute to the limited literature on the self-determination model in alternative educational settings, as well as support the BPS model as an effective model for increasing student motivation through increased autonomy in the learning environment.

**Family.** The school staff and students see themselves as a family who supports one another throughout their time at GVBPS, which attributes to the strong relationships between the staff and students. Students at the original BPS, the Met, describe their advisories as a second family or, for some, their true family (Littky & Grabelle, 2004), and the students at GVBPS appear to have the same perspective about their own school. Peer relationships appear weaker in comparison to the relationships with staff members, but many of the students mention how there is little to no bullying and everyone gets along with each other. The weakness of peer relationships may be due to the emphasis on individualized learning, which creates a de-emphasis on group learning. There are conflicts from time to time between students, but they are encouraged to problem-solve and discuss disagreements until they reach a compromise. The relationship building among students, advisors, school staff, and parents at GVBPS is a direct reflection of promoting the Big Picture model of learning. The BPS model emphasizes the importance of an environment where at least one adult is making a concerted effort to connect with small groups of students (Littky & Grabelle, 2004), and the advisors and school staff at GVBPS focus on creating meaningful relationships with all students as well as with their parents.

The relationships that advisors form with their students provide another type of motivation for students to engage in learning (Littky & Grabelle, 2004), and are a mainstay of the BPS model. Four students specifically state that they see their advisors as their main motivators. These findings are comparable to Gillet’s et al. (2012) results that teacher support
has the most significant effect on students’ motivation as opposed to their parents’ support, and in the current study, students and parents reveal that the advisors are the main motivators in getting students to explore their passions and complete their work. The ultimate goal at GVBPS is to create lifelong, autonomous learners capable of supporting themselves socially and economically. These findings contribute to the limited literature on how the BPS model creates life-long learners through the concept of building meaningful relationships within the learning environment that provide support, motivation, and guidance to students.

The building of relationships is a major part of the structure at GVBPS, which is what makes the school atmosphere family-like. Students report the importance of support from advisors, peers, and family members as a part of their continued success at the school. The building and maintaining of relationships is what Deci and Ryan (2008) define as relatedness, which is essential to optimal functioning along with autonomy and competence. Relatedness may play a “major role in determining motivation, especially when people engage in social tasks and activities” (Vallerand, 2000, p. 317). Although the students struggle with identifying why the family-like environment is so important to their learning, students allude to the fact that like a family they can go to each other with anything.

Family involvement is another major factor in creating a supportive learning environment for students. At least one parent participates in his or her student’s learning by attending learning plan meetings, exhibitions, and providing support as needed throughout the academic year. These findings are comparable to Bryk’s et al. (2010) study on organizing Chicago schools for improvement, and how the building ties with local communities to influence the ability to develop student engagement and support learning. Bryk et al. (2010) find that in order to sustain and promote long-term improvements, a strong foundation of relational trust among teachers,
between teachers and parents, between teachers and the principal, and between teachers and students is necessary. The family-like atmosphere and family involvement blend in creating a strong and supportive learning environment for students. The parents’ perspectives reveal that the advisors completely engage their children in the learning process due to their highly supportive practices. Advisors and school staff show their support through endless communication with students and parents, which is a vital part of education (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Students and parents have advisors’ cell phone numbers, email addresses, and are welcome to stop by the school at any time. The advisors and school staff publish the TGIF newsletter, which highlights the current projects, academic work, internships, and volunteer work that students are engaging with each week. Advisors also communicate with parents regularly through phone calls, text messages, emails, and face-to-face meetings. There is absolute transparency between the school and the parents, which the parents report makes things easier for them. Absolute transparency at GVBPS means that everything is out in the open, there is consistent communication among advisors, school staff members, parents, and students, and everyone has a say in the decision making process. Each parent shares that their students have taken more responsibility and ownership of their learning during their time at GVBPS, which was not necessarily the case for two of the students when they attended traditional public school. The engagement of families in education in turn engages students and activates an integral support system that works to help both students and advisors do a better job (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). These findings about the family-like relationships at GVBPS and the encouragement of on-going family involvement adds to the literature on how the BPS model improves students’ learning through these specific methods.
Supportive learning environment. Along with consistent communication, the advisors and school staff provide support to students by staying after or arriving early to school, Purchasing extra materials or books, addressing conflicts that may interfere with the students’ work at school or their internships, and giving them rides to and from school or other appointments. At GVBPS, the school staff and advisors are extremely invested in helping all students succeed, and are willing to go above and beyond to make that happen. The advisors do not concentrate on grades and high-stakes test scores as indicators of achievement and success; they are more concerned with preparing students with social, academic, and career skills and strategies that will assist them beyond their secondary years. Occasionally, advisors do administer content-based tests to students, but there is less emphasis on testing at GVBPS than in other more conventional schools. This lack of focus on high-stakes testing aligns with the BPS model, since standardized testing is seen as not only a disruption to student learning, but also disregards several significant skills and personal qualities of a well-educated person (Levine, 2002). The advisors and school staff want their students to be independent and informed citizens who are able to sustain themselves within their communities and beyond; therefore, they provide multiple opportunities and experiences that allow students to explore their passions and interests in a variety of settings.

These opportunities and experiences give students the chance to find out what they may want to study in college or where they might like to work after graduation, which in the end gives them an advantage over other students who wait until after high school graduation to decide whether they want to go to college or into the workforce. Washor and Mojkowski (2013) explain how many people describe student success through good grades and high-test scores, but there are additional indicators of student success that may be more meaningful to students. These
additional indicators are, “obtaining enjoyable and productive work with good prospects for
growth, raising a family, contributing to the community, and figuring out how to navigate life’s
ups and downs” (Washor & Mojkowski, 2013, p. 53).

The students report feeling completely supported by the advisors and school staff, and
there is at least one person for each student to go to if there is a need. The attention to
establishing and maintaining high quality relationships appears to be a main contributor to the
students’ achievement and success at GVBPS. According to an audit report by Cohen (2014),
GVBPS has a graduation rate of 89%, and a brochure on the school (2013) reveals a 70% college
enrollment rate. On the US Department of Education blog site, Cameron Brenchley (2013)
reports that nationwide 78.2% of high school students in the 2009-10 school year graduated on
time, which is a considerable increase from the 73.4% documented in 2005-6. GVBPS is above
average in comparison to the national statistics with an 89% graduation rate (Cohen, 2014). The
US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) claims that 65.9% of high school graduates in 2013
enrolled in colleges or universities. According to the school district’s report card for 2014-2015,
87% of all students in the district (including GVBPS students) enrolled in some type of post-
secondary schooling (NYSED, 2015b). The support and guidance students receive from advisors,
school staff, and parents positively influences their abilities to productively engage and become
motivated in the learning environment. The relationships students create and the supportive
learning environment within GVBPS provide a strong example of how effective the BPS model
can be when implemented according to its principles, which contributes to the limited literature
on how the BPS model addresses the academic and social aspects of student learning.

Student identity. Throughout the student experience at GVBPS, students are establishing
identities of who they are and who they want to be. The supportive learning environment allows
students to be themselves and learn in ways that are most meaningful and productive to their preparation as young adults getting ready to go out into the world after graduation. All students describe their experiences at GVBPS as positive, and nine specifically state that the incorporation of personal interests into their work as the reason for the positive experience. It is not surprising that fun and happiness are evident within the structure of the student experience at GBPVS as these two factors are extremely important to a good school (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Students enjoy learning and are actively involved in the process, because they see relevancy and meaning to what they are studying in preparation for college or the workforce. Students discuss feelings of comfort and lower levels of stress within this type of learning environment, which contributes to their interests in learning. Littky and Grabelle (2004) would agree that these students are acquiring a love for learning, because they feel safe. The students share a selection of interests and projects that demonstrate who they are as individuals and how they see themselves as contributing members of the community. Through exploring their passions and interests, students are gaining social, academic, and career skills and experience that are necessary to establish themselves as active and productive members within their communities.

The conversations about current interests and projects reveal how individualized the learning is for each student. A school that is truly personalized will exhibit flexibility (Littky & Grabelle, 2004), which is accurate of GVBPS’s structure and how it assists students in designing their learning plans and projects. With ease and excitement, students explain the topics they are researching, the work they are doing in their internships, and the projects they are creating to demonstrate their understanding of the learning process and how the work connects to their lives. Students design their work around their interests, which motivates them to engage in locating information, having conversations to talk out ideas and receive feedback, and making plans for
college or work after they graduate. There is great variety in the work students are doing at GVBPS. Learning starts with the students, not the subjects or the classes (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).

All of the students’ projects are interesting and focus on their aspirations for what they will do after graduation. Some projects are more in depth, which reveals how everyone has different abilities and skills, and learns at different rates. In the 101, 201, and 301 groups, students are working on research papers, advisory projects, interest-based projects, and learning through internship projects. The depth of learning students experience in their projects ranges according to Bloom’s taxonomy, and develops their cognitive abilities with improving their attention to details, increasing comprehension, and expanding their capabilities to problem-solve (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The projects described in Chapter Six reveal students working through Bloom’s taxonomy from the first level of remembering information and literal questioning to evaluating and creating their own products to establish understanding of particular topics. Each of the projects is tailored to the students’ interests, addresses higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, integrates cross-curricular learning, and results in a product that they present at their next exhibition. Tatyana’s cosmetology project about not dying one’s own hair incorporates elements of chemistry and math with the mixing of hair dyes. Charlotte’s project on whether the angle a gymnast releases from the bar has any effect on the difficulty of the dismount emphasizes the use of math equations and physical fitness. Noah’s disassembling of Ipods and rebuilding of a computer involves technological knowledge. Gerald’s study of jazz fusion and the converting of major scales to jazz scales emphasize physics, the arts, and music. Amelia creating awareness and collecting supplies for local overcrowded animal shelters builds upon social skills and the ability to collaborate with the community. Andrew working with a
local construction company and building houses for the needy through his church focuses on social skills as well as math and engineering. George’s interest in creating a professional network for BPS students across the country to share information and create awareness for the work they are doing in their schools also encourages the use of technology, social skills, and working collaboratively with others towards a common goal. In order to complete these elaborate projects, students have to understand why they are doing the work, how they will accomplish their objectives through application and analysis, evaluate what works and does not work, and create a final product that represents what they have learned.

Faculty members incorporate NYS learning standards into the students’ projects, as students have to read for information by researching their topics, write to express ideas and understanding of the information they have collected, speak and listen during their exhibitions to present their findings and outcomes, while also listening to feedback from peers and adults. Additionally, students have to establish a command of the English language with appropriate use of conventions of Standard English and vocabulary within each of their projects and assignments.

A few students are also preparing for various Regents exams in their workshop classes, which are a NYS requirement for graduation. The 401 seniors are all working on their senior thesis projects, which not only demonstrate the students’ interests, but also give back or present valuable information to their communities. The students are more engaged and motivated through projects that are based on their own personal interests and applicable to their daily lives. The findings of students creating and establishing their identities as students and prospective community members through projects and work that interests them present valuable insights and contribute to literature on the BPS model, as well as the application of the Self-Determination
Theory within educational settings. According to the students, the structure of their learning at GVBPS is different from the traditional classroom setting, mainly because it allows them to create their own projects based on their interests. Students also share how the faculty and staff are more supportive and provide guidance with their projects, which is different from the support these students report receiving in traditional schools.

**College and career readiness.** All of the students reveal how the work they are doing at GVBPS is getting them college and career ready. The learning environment at GVBPS is similar to a college-learning environment, because students are self-directed and motivated to choose courses and internships based on their own interests and passions. Two students specifically state they never had any desire to go to college, and now after attending GVBPS they are considering it as a possibility. College preparation occurs through students’ work with WorkKeys, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SATs), American College Test (ACTs), college visits, and applying and enrolling in college courses. The close relationship with the local state school is useful in introducing students to college and allowing them access to the college environment. Two of the parents explain that their children would be going to college regardless of whether they attended GVBPS, but that GVBPS provides students with opportunities to explore different interests and careers, so they have a better understanding of what they would be doing in a particular major at college or at work in a career field. College is treated as an option for everyone at GVBPS. The administrator of GVBPS believes that the school could be doing more for students concerning the preparation for college, but that the career portion through internships, shadow-days, and service learning are a strong part of the students’ preparation.

Along with the school’s advisors and staff building relationships with students, internships are a strong part of the students’ learning and success at GVBPS. Students can begin
internships as early as their first year at the school. Students establish an interest in a particular field of work, and then the internship coordinator works to set up a shadow-day to test out the setting and its job expectations. Depending on how they feel about that experience, students may request to intern for a semester or a full year at that site, or may choose to keep looking for an internship site that aligns more with their interests and goals. Students intern with professionals at a variety of local sites: school districts, construction companies, recording studios, farming and heavy equipment shops, state and private colleges, comedy clubs, and animal boarding farms just to name a few. The students explain how their work within their internships “introduces what it will be like at the job,” “provides real-world experience,” “you get to test it out,” “it’s great for a resume,” “teaches how to communicate and build relationships with superiors and new people,” and overall is “extremely helpful.” The experiences students have within their internships appear to be invaluable. Internships allow students to have an authentic experience in a professional environment that motivates profound learning (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Washor & Mojkowski, 2013).

The students’ plans for after graduation indicate the success of GVBPS’s structure and the student experience. Fourteen of the 16 students discuss their plans once they graduate from GVBPS. Seven students are definitely going to college, four are going to work with the possibility of going to college later, one is moving to Canada to be with his girlfriend and pursue his interests, one student plans on definitely coming back to visit his advisor, and one student explains how she just wants to be successful. Unfortunately, one student left the study before he was able to share his plans for after graduation, and the other student, a 201, was not ready to share her plans yet. However, the responses overall show how students are thinking about college and career readiness in relation to their plans for after graduation.
Understanding the student experience from the perspectives of students, while also including advisors, school staff, and parents, creates an insight into how this alternative form of schooling works in the preparation and achievement of students to be college and career ready for life after graduation. Students are learning to be curious instead of just learning how to comply with standards by exploring multiple pathways toward a common set of goals. They are learning to be creative, while balancing the responsibility of being accountable for their work, which provides insight into how the BPS model is addressing educational standards of college and career readiness, while also preparing students to be academically and socially ready for life after graduation. In this alternative educational setting, students are exposed to all types of academic and career preparation, not just one specific pathway that adults have chosen for them. Overall, the findings from this study have implication for current teaching practices, educational reform initiatives, and the need for further research.

**Implications for Practice**

**Current Teaching**

Participants comment on the differences between the structure of GVBPS and the traditional high school frequently when they are asked to describe the student experience. In their experience, one of the most common methods of teaching in traditional schools involves the transmission and banking of information from direct instruction (Dewey, 2005; Saavedra & Opfer, 2012); however, at GVBPS students learn through exploration and project-based activities. These results present questions regarding the transmission model of education versus student-centered learning, an emphasis on quality over quantity, moving the focus from standardized test scores as indicators for student learning to reflective measures of growth and understanding, and an increase in accountability for students and their learning. The experiences
within the BPS model allow students to work through a sense of trial and error, testing out their ideas, and creating projects that represent their understanding of the learning process. There is an emphasis on the quality of the education as opposed to the quantity of information a student can regurgitate back on an exam (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Typically, students in a traditional setting rarely receive authentic opportunities to engage with information in a meaningful or relevant manner, because high-stakes testing has become the focus of many public classrooms.

Accountability for students in traditional high schools is not as high as it is for teachers, as their teaching performance evaluations continue to be linked to students’ performance on standardized tests. Conversely, at GVBPS students are accountable for their learning and meeting deadlines that will allow them to graduate on time, which adds to the literature on GVBPS and alternative education. The BPS model promotes students’ accountability by requiring students to provide daily or weekly updates of their progress with class assignments, projects, and internship work. The exhibitions at the end of each quarter hold students accountable for meeting deadlines, presenting accurate information, reflecting on their learning, and being able to answer questions and accept feedback related to their presentations.

Along with being accountable for their learning, students at GVBPS have developed a positive orientation toward mistakes and failures they have experienced (Dweck, 2007). They report not being discouraged as many students in traditional settings often feel, because they feel supported by the faculty and staff at GVBPS. The support and guidance they receive allows them to accept that failure is a part of learning through trial and error. Students share how some projects did not work out the first time, and that they had to start over. Some students also explain how they thought they would be done with a project in a certain period of time, only to find that they needed more time to complete the assignment. Students would then work with their
advisors to extend their deadlines or redesign their learning plan to accommodate their needs.

This positive orientation toward making mistakes and taking charge of one’s learning contributes to the literature on Self-determination theory and the BPS model.

As our industrial economy of the 20th century continues to evolve into a knowledge-based economy of the 21st century, the tracking of students into specific pathways of either college prep or career prep are not logical or practical in the preparation of all students (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Although middle and high achieving students usually choose the academic track (Kim, 2010), not all students are motivated by the academic path towards college or the traditional methods that go along with this track (Washor & Mojkowski, 2013). Therefore, in order for all students to have opportunities to be successful, many observers argue that students must have access to a comprehensive curriculum that blends academics and work experience, while promoting democracy, social justice, and social cohesion (Ravitch, 2010; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011; Weiner, 2007). When all students have access to an equitable education, not only do students succeed, but also the local communities are socially and economically rewarded (Dewey, 2005; Dunlop, 2013; NRC, 2012).

Furthermore, there is a heavy emphasis in most schools on testing and the analysis of data to improve instruction, teacher quality, administrative leadership, and student achievement. The current study shows how the GVBPS implements the BPS model in a way that engages and motivates students in the learning environment. Specifically, recommendations for other alternative settings and traditional classrooms are to create more of a focus around learning that involves students’ interests. Certain alternative settings may have the ability to engage students in internships or projects with community businesses that allows them to learn in a different setting. Traditional classrooms could provide opportunities for projects and lessons that are
student-centered and are applicable to their daily lives. The participants in the current study are still required to take standardized exams in addition to their work at GVBPS and have self-reported that they have done better than they thought they would have in the past. Therefore, minimizing the pressure of standardized testing, and increasing meaningful, student-interest projects and learning, may result in higher levels of autonomy and engagement in learning and success on tests. Students are able to develop their identities as learners over time within the GVBPS structure and routines. The GVBPS faculty and staff scaffold the structure and routines for students’ development and learning, which allows students to dictate how their learning will meet their needs and goals. The BPS model’s focus on flexibility and student-centered learning creates a positive learning environment for all types of learners. This environment promotes a strong sense of community, despite much of the students’ work being individualized. The advisory classes and exhibitions are two specific times during the students’ learning when they work on their social and soft skills.

The promising practices for the classroom that are evident at GVBPS are applicable and adaptable to schools that are more conventional. It is important to note that GVBPS maintains the philosophies and practices of the BPS model, while also adhering to NYS learning standards, and all students take the NYS Regents exams as required for graduation. In the classroom, listening to students and incorporating their interests in curriculum plans may increase engagement and motivation to participate in the learning process. Although personalized or individualized learning may not be feasible in all classroom settings, providing students with opportunities to engage in project-based learning gives them the chance to be expressive and creative with instructional material. Maintaining a flexible schedule or timeframe for assignments and projects allows students to work at their own pace and may reduce stress and
anxiety. Student ownership and accountability for learning may increase as their involvement in the organizing and planning of lessons increases. Learning cohorts or small numbers of students in classes is another practice that may be a challenge in larger schools; however, students at GVBPS share that being in smaller groups is one of the reasons they feel they are learning more and are more engaged in the process. If teachers focus more on the learning process and less on testing and test scores, then students may become more motivated to participate and be successful in the classroom.

In addition to teachers’ instructional practices in the classroom, opportunities outside of the classroom are just as important for motivating and engaging students. The practices of incorporating internships and enrollment into college courses may be more challenging for conventional schools to offer to students. However, organizing college visits and reaching out to the community and local businesses to make connections would be steps in the right direction. The investment of local businesses and the community is important to the success of any school, because it provides students with interactions and experiences that prepare them to be productive citizens. Opportunities to visit and/or intern at local businesses assist in preparing for students in the field of work and careers. Encouraging students to volunteer within the community is another preparation in social interactions and giving back without expecting something in return. Students are not just being prepared to go to college or work, but are also learning how to be productive and engaged citizens within their communities.

Schools that provide students with multiple opportunities to engage in academic and career opportunities create a learning environment that is more adaptable to all types of learners. Furthermore, social development is another critical part of student preparation. A supportive learning environment of teachers, school staff members, and parents is necessary for fostering
student success. The faculty, staff, students, and parents at GVBPS maintain a positive school culture, as it is a major part of the school’s structure. The students and faculty see themselves a community of learners who are more like family. Communication is a key element to the positive school culture, since everyone has the right to voice his or her opinions and concerns without penalty or harsh criticism. This is possible through the high-quality relationships among the advisors, staff members, students, and parents at GVBPS. These relationships focus on mutual respect and trust for one another. Advisors at GVBPS take the time to show they care about and value their students by learning about their lives outside of school and offering them support as needed for any situation in or out of school. Parent involvement is another major part of the supportive learning environment. Parents actively volunteer with school activities and events, support students with their assignments and projects, and participate in student exhibitions. The support and guidance students receive from adults contributes to their overall preparation as life-long learners and productive citizens within their communities.

**Educational Reform Initiatives**

Educational reform is an ongoing struggle to deliver ever more equitable and high-quality education to all students. In a statement about reform for the future, President Obama explicates how the strength of the American economy undeniably connects to the strength of the American education system (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2015). The current economy requires a workforce that is skilled, adaptable, creative, and equipped for success within the local and global marketplace. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), the strategic initiatives to foster real change within the K-12 reform movements involve a growing need to better prepare students for college and careers. About three-quarters of the fastest-growing professions require students to have some form of post-secondary education, often in science, technology, and engineering.
fields (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2015). There is a major push to reinvent the high school experience to ensure that all students graduate ready for college and careers, and one key reform effort is the Race to the Top program. The recently concluded program, Race to the Top, provided more than four billion dollars towards improving education through reform strategies that addressed college and career ready academic standards and assessments, using data to drive instruction, hiring highly qualified teachers and administrators, and focusing on low-performing schools in an effort to turn them around (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2015). The current study demonstrates that the BPS model has the flexibility to embrace all of these elements and maintain high educational standards, while implementing a student-centered curriculum that provides students with multiple pathways for learning.

Learning should not be a competition about grades. Students need more preparation in all aspects of the social, academic, and career domains, which incorporate an understanding for respect, responsibility, rigor, and relationships within the learning environment. Teachers need to be supportive and caring of all students, and form an understanding of what is important to them and their lives in preparing them for life after graduation (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). In Comfort’s et al. (1997) study, students’ perceptions about reform portray three themes: A connected and focused curriculum, flexible instruction, and a sense of community. Students find these three themes most important to their own learning, and yet, many of the current reforms do not address curriculum, flexibility with instruction, or creating learning communities. The current study presents evidence of how a connected and focused curriculum, flexible instruction, and a strong sense of community increase students’ perceptions of an engaging and motivating learning environment. The curriculum is student-centered, advisors provide instruction tailored to each student’s needs and interests, and meaningful relationships among school staff and students are
established and maintained. Each of these elements of educational reform in the current study provides support for how they are necessary for student achievement and preparation for life after graduation.

Limitations and Further Research

Limitations are a part of any research study. In this section, I discuss limitations of the current study, and the need for further research to address them. This study is one of only a handful on alternative learning environments like BPS that incorporate a comprehensive curriculum that blends academics with work experience. Previous research on the BPS model primarily focuses on teacher learning and professional development (Klein, 2007; 2008), negotiating dual accountability systems from the adults’ perspective (Suchman, 2012), and educational leadership (Squires, 2011). Only one study investigates BPS learning from the students’ perspectives at the secondary level, Riordan’s (2006) examination of students learning through internships. There is a need for more research that focuses on students’ perspectives in the BPS learning environment and how the structure of the environment encourages or hinders their achievement and preparation for life in college or the work place.

Thus, I pose the following questions, which this study raises but has not explored: Given the flexible nature of the BPS model, how are other BPSs across the United States implementing the proposed structure and beliefs associated with the school’s design? The building of relationships is a major part of the success and positive experience students share regarding GVBPS, and so how do other schools create supportive learning environments? Is parent involvement as consistent at other BPSs? The perspective of more parents is needed to truly understand the purpose of parent involvement with student achievement within this model of learning. How do community businesses and mentors understand the BPS model, and why does
it appear to work for some schools and not others? How can policies and strategies of the BPS model be incorporated into traditional public schools that might better serve all students?

The generalizability of this study’s findings is limited due to the single case study design. However, the study contributes a rich, descriptive account of how students are experiencing learning at one Big Picture School, as well as how different stakeholders perceive the students’ experience within this alternative model. Even a single case study, of course, can document findings that pertain in at least some situations. Future research may extend this descriptive account of students’ and educational stakeholders’ perspectives of the learning experience within the BPS model from other schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas.

Another limitation to the study was the enrollment of participants. Only three students from minority populations agreed to participate even though roughly 40% of GVBPS’s students identify as African American or Native American. The lack of participation may have been due to controversies between the traditional high school faculty and community members, which may have discouraged parents of minority groups from becoming involved in the study. My positionality as a Caucasian, female researcher may have influenced the lack of participation due to mistrust or fear of misrepresentation of potential participants. This mistrust or fear of misrepresentation also constrained my ability to probe certain lines of inquiry with students of color whose parents did consent to participation. In addition, one participant abruptly left the school during the middle of the study, and was relocated to another alternative learning environment. I was not able to contact that participant after he left GVBPS. Despite trying to involve as many different school stakeholders as possible in the study, only two parents agreed to participate in interviews. The additional perspectives from parents and students of color would
have provided a deeper and richer understanding of the student experience within GVBPS, and should be considered for future research.

Lastly, I conducted my participant observations according to availability within my own schedule and focused on the days when there were the most students at the school. Therefore, I was not always observing on consecutive days, which left gaps of time where I may have missed interactions or experiences that could have contributed to my overall findings. Future research on the BPS model through an uninterrupted method may yield a different perspective.

The evidence and explanations provided by students and school stakeholders provide a glimpse into one alternative learning environment that focuses on student-centered learning. This is not a new concept, but there is no reason that the BPS model should be confined to so-called “alternative” settings or employed exclusively with disaffected or “at-risk” students. The BPS model presents a structure for learning that could be employed in conventional classrooms to increase students’ autonomy and engagement in the learning process. Further research is essential to understanding how these methods might create life-long learners and be implemented in other educational settings. This account may appear as “simply too good to be true,” but that is not the case. The student responses described in Chapter Three show their acknowledgments of not always feeling like a family, not completing work, the lack of effort in their work when they are not interested in it, failing grade levels, and being distracted by cellphones. These challenges are not exclusive to GVBPS and are evident in other types of learning environments. Despite these issues, GVBPS focuses on what does works, always puts the students first, and establishes the school as a work in progress that continues to emphasize informative teaching practices and collaboration with students, parents, and local businesses to provide students with multiple
opportunities to learn socially and academically in preparation to be college and career ready after graduation.

**Conclusion**

The role of education should be to stimulate and engage students in learning that fosters creativity and interest through opportunities to solve problems that engage their imaginations (Kumashiro, 2012; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). These opportunities and experiences allow students to build social and communication skills with other people that prepare them to be knowledgeable and interactive citizens within their communities (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Yet, most kids experience a culture of education within the United States that emphasizes conformity and achievement measured by standardized tests, which results in mundane teaching procedures that stifle and hinder students’ imaginations and curiosity in the learning process (Robinson, 2013). The current and growing pressures of accountability with standardized test scores continue to destroy authentic learning and creativity in classrooms (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Robinson & Aronica, 2015; Robinson, 2011). Students and teachers do not have time to explore various avenues of interest for problem-solving and acquiring knowledge due to high stakes testing influencing teacher performance evaluations (Kumashiro, 2012). With the pressures of standardized testing and high-stakes evaluations, the possible label of being ineffective as a teacher is stressful (Klein, 2008; Ravitch, 2013). Many teachers end up teaching to the test instead of providing authentic learning experiences to students (Ravitch, 2010).

The voices of students remain unheard in this debate, and unfortunately, the impact of these standards most heavily falls on them. The old system of tracking students into college or career pathways needs to shift to providing all students with the skills and opportunities to make
decisions regarding what they will do after high school graduation (Schwartz, 2014; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). This culture of compliance within education is not as evident in other high performing systems around the world, because within other systems teaching and learning are more individualized, teaching is a respected profession, and teachers and students are responsible and accountable for doing the work and showing growth (Robinson, 2013). These three features are not always apparent in schools within the United States, and many times teachers are the scapegoats for low test scores and poor student achievement (Kumashiro, 2012). The culture of compliance disengages students from the learning process (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Students are not learning to be curious and explore possibilities, but are instead learning how to comply with standardized expectations.

Alternative education offers a model for changing the traditional system that nurtures a culture of compliance to a system that promotes and encourages students to be creative, life-long learners. The BPS model of learning reflects a different way of thinking about how children can be educated that is not new, but has rarely been practiced. The advisors and staff keep things simple despite the complexities that are inevitable with educating today’s youth, and they do so through a common vision, communication, and strong leadership. Learning is personal and focuses on students’ interests and passions, which increases their motivation to engage in the learning environment. Additionally, the course work and internships are rigorous and hold students accountable for their own success. Advisors and school staff make building relationships a priority, and in turn, students feel less stress and more comfortable being themselves at school and in their internships. These trusting and meaningful relationships create a family-like atmosphere that blends into students’ actual family life. As the school staff puts it, “we enroll families,” and it is clear that the family-like atmosphere is a major benefit to the
students. Through these relationships, students feel a sense of worth and know that there is at least one person who cares about how and what they are doing in school. Sometimes family life at home is not all that inviting, but GVBPS makes sure that students feel welcomed and understood during their time at school. The flexibility and student-centered approach within the BPS model is impressive, and attributes to its success as seen in this particular school site.

Advisors, school staff, and parents are constantly encouraging students to take ownership of their learning and to voice their ideas and concerns on a regular basis. This supportive learning environment allows students to forge creative and productive self-identities that will serve them well in the world of college or work. Students establish skills of autonomy, mastery, and purpose within this type of learning, which are necessary for the ever-changing world.
Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval of Study

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
Institutional Review Board
MEMORANDUM

TO: Joseph Shedd
DATE: October 1, 2014
SUBJECT: Expedited Protocol Review - Approval of Human Participants
IRB #: 14-232
TITLE: The Big Picture School Model

The above referenced protocol was reviewed by the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) and has been given expedited approval. The protocol has been determined to be of no more than minimal risk and has been evaluated for the following:

1. the rights and welfare of the individual(s) under investigation;
2. appropriate methods to secure informed consent; and
3. risks and potential benefits of the investigation.

The approval period is September 30, 2014 through September 29, 2015. A continuing review of this protocol must be conducted before the end of this approval period. Although you will receive a request for a continuing renewal approximately 60 days before that date, it is your responsibility to submit the information in sufficient time to allow for review before the approval period ends.

Enclosed are the IRB approved date stamped consent and/or assent document/s related to this study that expire on September 29, 2015. The IRB approved date stamped copy must be duplicated and used when enrolling new participants during the approval period (may not be applicable for electronic consent or research projects conducted solely for data analysis). Federal regulations require that each participant indicate their unwillingness to participate through the informed consent process and be provided with a copy of the consent form. Regulations also require that you keep a copy of this document for a minimum of three years after your study is closed.

Any changes to the protocol during the approval period cannot be initiated prior to IRB review and approval, except when such changes are essential to eliminate apparent immediate harm to the participants. In this instance, changes must be reported to the IRB within five days. Protocol changes must be submitted on an amendment request form available on the IRB website. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB within 10 working days of occurrence.

Thank you for your cooperation in our shared efforts to assure that the rights and welfare of people participating in research are protected.

Jeffrey Stanton, Ph.D.
IRB Chair

DEPT: Teaching and Leadership – 150 Huntington Hall  STUDENTS: Amanda Alger
Office of Research Integrity and Protections
121 Bowes Hall, Syracuse, New York 13244-1200
(Phone) 315.443.3013  (Fax) 315.443.9889
orip@syr.edu  www.orip.syr.edu
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
Institutional Review Board
MEMORANDUM

TO: Joseph Shedd
DATE: September 25, 2015
SUBJECT: Renewal Approval - Expedited Review
IRB #: 14-232
TITLE: The Big Picture School Model

The request for renewal of your human subjects protocol has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and has been evaluated for the following:

1. the rights and welfare of the individual(s) under investigation;
2. appropriate methods to secure informed consent; and
3. risks and potential benefits of the investigation.

Your protocol is approved for implementation and operation for a period of one year, from September 29, 2015 to September 28, 2016. If appropriate, attached is the protocol’s approved informed consent document, date-stamped with the expiration date. This document is to be used in your informed consent process. If you are using written consent, Federal regulations require that each participant indicate their willingness to participate by signing the informed consent document and be provided with a copy of the signed consent form. Regulations also require that you keep a copy of this document for a minimum of three years.

CHANGES TO APPROVED PROTOCOL: By its very nature, research involving human participants often requires change in plans and procedures. You are reminded of your responsibility to obtain IRB approval of any changes in your protocol prior to implementing them, except when such change is essential to minimize harm to the participants. Changes in approved research initiated without IRB review and approval to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the participant must be reported to the IRB within five days. Protocol changes are requested on an amendment application available on the IRB website; please reference your IRB number and attach any documents that are being amended.

CONTINUATION BEYOND APPROVAL PERIOD: To continue this research project beyond September 28, 2016, you must submit a renewal application for review and approval. A renewal reminder will be sent to you approximately 60 days prior to the expiration date. (If the researcher will be traveling out of the country when the protocol is due to be renewed, please renew the protocol before leaving the country.)

UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS INVOLVING RISKS: You must report any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others within 10 working days of occurrence to the IRB at 315.443.3013 or orip@syr.edu.

STUDY COMPLETION: Study completion is when all research activities are complete or when a study is closed to enrollment and only data analysis remains on data that have been de-identified. A Study Closure Form should be completed and submitted to the IRB for review (Study Closure Form).
Thank you for your cooperation in our shared efforts to assure that the rights and welfare of people participating in research are protected.

Peter Vanable Ph.D.
IRB Chair

DEPT: Teaching and Leadership – 150 Huntington Hall

STUDENT: Amanda Alger
Appendix B: Recruitment and IRB Approved Consent Letters

Recruitment Letter for Parents & Students

Dear Parent/Guardian of (insert student name),

Hello! My name is Amanda Alger and I am a doctoral student at Syracuse University. I am also a certified educator, having previously worked as a high school English teacher in Charlotte, North Carolina for seven years. Currently, I am in the Teaching & Curriculum doctoral program at Syracuse University, which requires me to conduct a dissertation research study in order to complete my program of study and graduate. Due to my previous experience as a high school educator, I understand how important it is to convey positive educational messages to the public. I would like your permission to invite your child to participate in two, one-on-one interviews and a focus group session with other students at the Big Picture School. I would also like to invite you to be interviewed, if you are interested in participating.

This semi-formal educational study will examine students’ perspectives on the Big Picture School model as well as how other educational stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and school counselors perceive students’ experience within this model of learning. I am interested in student-centered learning and how that influences motivation and engagement in the learning process. Students in grades 9-12 and between the ages of 14-17 are eligible to participate. I would like to interview your child at his/her convenience and each interview will take about 30 minutes at the Big Picture School. I would also like to request each student participant to meet in a focus group for one-hour after all individual interviews are completed. The focus group session will be conducted at the Big Picture School site as well. In addition to the interviews and focus group session, I will review general school documents such as newsletters or bulletins on programs offered within the school. All data collected for this study will be kept strictly confidential. All names and any distinguishing characteristics of individuals participating in this study will be changed prior to any publication of this material.

Please share all of the information included in this letter regarding involvement in this research study with your child. If you and your child agree to participate in the study, please read, sign, and return only the signature pages of the parental consent document and student assent documents to me at the Big Picture School. The letter and first pages of the consent and assent documents can be retained for your files. Once I receive the signed signature pages, I will sign and return fully endorsed copies of the forms to your child.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, feel free to contact me by phone at 315-725-6871 or email me at alalger@syr.edu or contact my research supervisor Dr. Joe Shedd at 315-443-2685 or jbsched@syr.edu. I will be adhering to all ethical guidelines of Syracuse University, as well as the school district. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or if you cannot reach the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

Sincerely,

Amanda L. Alger
Student Researcher
Dear Educational Stakeholder,

Hello! My name is Amanda Alger and I am a doctoral student at Syracuse University. I am also a certified educator, having previously worked as a high school English teacher in Charlotte, North Carolina for seven years. Currently, I am in the Teaching & Curriculum doctoral program at Syracuse University, which requires me to conduct a dissertation research study in order to complete my program of study and graduate. Due to my previous experience as a high school educator, I understand how important it is to convey positive educational messages to the public. I would like to invite you to participate in one individual interview for approximately 30 minutes regarding your perception of how students experience learning within the Big Picture School.

This semi-formal educational study will examine students’ perspectives on the Big Picture School model as well as how other educational stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and school counselors perceive students’ experience within this model of learning. I am interested in student-centered learning and how that influences motivation and engagement in the learning process. Educational stakeholders over the age of eighteen are eligible to participate. The interview will take place at the Big Picture School with a time scheduled at your convenience. In addition to the interview, I will review general school documents such as newsletters or bulletins on programs offered within the school. All data collected for this study will be kept strictly confidential. All names and any distinguishing characteristics of individuals participating in this study will be changed prior to any publication of this material.

If you agree to participate in the study, please read, sign, and return only the signature pages of the educational stakeholder consent document to me at the Big Picture School. The letter and first pages of the consent document can be retained for your files. Once I receive the signed signature pages, I will sign and return a fully endorsed copy of the form to you.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, feel free to contact me by phone at 315-725-6871 or email me at alalger@syr.edu or contact my research supervisor Dr. Joe Shedd at 315-443-2685 or jbsheed@syr.edu. I will be adhering to all ethical guidelines of Syracuse University, as well as the school district. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or if you cannot reach the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

Sincerely,

Amanda L. Alger
Student Researcher
Recruitment Letter for Parents

Dear Parent/Guardian of (insert student name),

Hello! My name is Amanda Alger and I am a doctoral student at Syracuse University. I am also a certified educator, having previously worked as a high school English teacher in Charlotte, North Carolina for seven years. Currently, I am in the Teaching & Curriculum doctoral program at Syracuse University, which requires me to conduct a dissertation research study in order to complete my program of study and graduate. Due to my previous experience as a high school educator, I understand how important it is to convey positive educational messages to the public. If you decide to allow your child to participate in this research study, I would like to invite you to participate in one individual interview for approximately 30 minutes regarding your perception of how students experience learning within the Big Picture School.

This semi-formal educational study will examine students’ perspectives on the Big Picture School model as well as how other educational stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and school counselors perceive students’ experience within this model of learning. I am interested in student-centered learning and how that influences motivation and engagement in the learning process. Parents/guardians of a student who is participating in the study are eligible. The interview will take place at the Big Picture School with a time scheduled at your convenience. In addition to the interview, I will review general school documents such as newsletters or bulletins on programs offered within the school. All data collected for this study will be kept strictly confidential. All names and any distinguishing characteristics of individuals participating in this study will be changed prior to any publication of this material.

If you agree to participate in the study, please read, sign, and return only the signature pages of the parental consent document to me at the Big Picture School. The letter and first pages of the consent document can be retained for your files. Once I receive the signed signature pages, I will sign and return a fully endorsed copy of the form to your child.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, feel free to contact me by phone at 315-725-6871 or email me at alalger@syr.edu or contact my research supervisor Dr. Joe Shedd at 315-443-2685 or jshed@syr.edu. I will be adhering to all ethical guidelines of Syracuse University, as well as the school district. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or if you cannot reach the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

Sincerely,

Amanda L. Alger
Student Researcher
Hi! I am graduate student at Syracuse University soliciting students for research purposes in order to investigate student perspectives of learning at the Big Picture School. I am interested in hearing about your experiences here at the Big Picture School. Students in grades 9-12, and between the ages of 14-17 are eligible to participate. The time commitment would be 30 minutes for each individual interview, and 60 minutes for the focus group session. The individual interviews and focus group session would be located and conducted at the Big Picture School. Would you be interested in participating in a research study that includes two one-on-one interviews and a focus group session with your peers?

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, feel free to contact me by phone at 315-725-6871 or email me at alalger@syr.edu or contact my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Joseph Shedd at 315-443-2685 or jbshedd@syr.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or if you cannot reach the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

If yes, I have an introductory letter, assent form, and consent form that I would like you to share with your parent/guardian. Please return the forms back to me as soon as possible here at the Big Picture School if you are going to participate.

If no, do not return the assent and consent forms. Thank you for your time.
Parental Consent Document

My name is Amanda L. Alger and I am a doctoral student at Syracuse University, in the Teaching and Leadership Department. I would like to invite your child to participate in my research study entitled, The Big Picture School Model. The purpose of this research is to investigate how students experience the Big Picture School model of learning. This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Syracuse University. Participation in this research is voluntary, and your child may withdraw at any time without penalty.

I am interested in learning more about the student experience and learning at the Big Picture School. As part of my study, I am inviting your child to participate in two one-on-one interviews and a focus group session that I will conduct. In the interviews, I will ask your child to talk about his or her experiences and perspectives as a Big Picture School student. The focus group session will include all students I have interviewed, and will be an open discussion about ideas that students have raised in the interviews. Although confidentiality cannot be guaranteed during the focus group session, participants will be asked not to share information discussed in the session with people outside of the study.

I estimate the interviews will each take approximately 30 minutes of time during the school day, will be conducted in a quiet and secure room in the Big Picture School building, and will be scheduled at your child's convenience. The focus group session will take approximately one hour of time in an available classroom at the Big Picture School, and will be scheduled at the convenience of the majority of participants. All interactions will be audio taped and the tapes will be kept confidential. If you do not want your child to be recorded during the interview, I will ask to take handwritten notes if possible. Since the focus group session will be audiotaped, all participants must agree to be audio recorded during the focus group session in order to participate. The audio tapes created will be utilized to transcribe and code information shared during our interview, so that themes across participants can be developed. I will also be collecting school announcements, newsletters, and other school handouts related to the Big Picture School experience.

All information will be kept confidential. This means that I will assign a code number to the student responses, and only my supervisor and I will have the key to indicate which code number belongs to which participant. Additionally, before each interview I will ask your child to choose a fictitious name for the purposes of maintaining confidentiality. In any articles or presentations using this data, all identifying information will be changed to protect your child's identity. Please note that this promise of confidentiality does not apply if your child discloses: (a) an intention to harm himself/herself or another person, and (b) an incident of child abuse or neglect. In the event of a disclosure, we are mandated by the state of New York to notify the appropriate agencies.

Your child's identity will be linked to the audiotaped material itself only through a fictitious name that he or she chooses. The audio tapes will be destroyed when the transcription process is finalized, and only the researchers will have access to that information. In any articles that I write or any presentations that I make, I will attribute your student's contributions to the self-selected fictitious pseudonym and will not reveal details (or I will change details) about where he or she lives or works.

Parental Consent Document 1

150 Huntington Hall / Syracuse, New York 13244-2340
315-443-7685 315-443-9679 315-443-1468 / Fax 315-443-3399
The benefit of this research is that your child will be helping us to understand the experiences and perspectives of students and teachers who experience the Big Picture School model of learning. The risks to your child while participating in this study are possible stress or emotional discomfort in interviewing about his or her experience as a student, and possible embarrassment if someone the student knows identifies him or her as the source of information or opinions I include in my findings. These risks will be minimized because the questions I ask will not be deeply personal, your child may choose to stop at any time, may take frequent breaks, and the person he or she will be meeting with will be specially trained and sensitive to all of these issues. Most importantly, your child will have the complete say on what information or opinions he or she decides to share.

It is preferred that all participants complete both the interviews and focus group session. However, if your student is only able to partake in the interviews, I would still appreciate his or her participation. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so he or she may choose to participate or not. Your student’s agreement to participate now is not binding, meaning if he or she decides to take part and later no longer wish to continue, he or she has the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

If you or your child has questions or concerns about the study, please feel free to contact me by phone at 315-725-6871 or email me at alalger@syr.edu or contact my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Joseph Shedd at 315-443-2685 or jbsshed@syr.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or if you cannot reach the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

Please share all of the information included in this assent form regarding involvement in this research study with your child. If you agree to allow your child to participate in the study, please read, sign, and return only the signature pages of the student assent documents to me at the Big Picture School. The first pages of the assent documents can be retained for your files. Once I receive the signed signature pages, I will sign and return fully endorsed copies of the forms to your child.

Sincerely,

Amanda L. Alger
Student Researcher

Syracuse University IRB Approved

SEP 30 2014 SEP 29 2015

Parental Consent Document 2
All of my questions have been answered; my child __________________________ is under (Print Child’s Full Name) the age of 18, and wishes to participate in this research case study. I have retained a copy of this assent form.

Please check all that apply:

___ My child will participate in the interviews and focus group session.

___ My child will participate in only the interviews.

___ I agree for my child to be audio taped in the interviews.

___ I do not agree for my child to be audio taped in the interviews.

Signature of Student’s Parent/ Guardian __________________________ Date __________________________

Print Name of Student’s Parent/ Guardian __________________________ Date __________________________

Signature of Investigator __________________________ Date __________________________

Print Name of Investigator __________________________ Date __________________________

Syracuse University IRB Approved

SEP 30 2014 SEP 29 2015

Parental Consent Document 3
My name is Amanda Alger, and I am from the School of Education, at Syracuse University (SU). I am asking you to participate in this research study because you are a high school student enrolled the Big Picture School.

A research study is a way to learn more about people. In this study, I am trying to learn more about students' experiences and perspectives within the Big Picture School model of learning. I am interested in hearing about how you view your learning and how you incorporate your interests into your school projects and internships.

If you decide you want to be part of this study, you will be asked to take part in two individual interviews and one focus group session. The interviews will take about 30 minutes during the school day, and will be conducted in a secure room in the Big Picture School building. You will be asked to choose a fictitious name at the beginning of the interview, which will maintain your confidentiality. The focus group session will take about 60 minutes during the school day, and will be conducted in a secure room in the Big Picture School building. Although confidentiality cannot be guaranteed during the focus group, I ask that you and your peers do not share information that is discussed during the session with others outside of the study. Please note that this promise of confidentiality does not apply if you share information about hurting yourself or others, or indicate signs of abuse or neglect. In the event this information does become evident, I will have to notify the appropriate agencies.

There are some things about this study you should know. You may feel possible stress or emotional discomfort in interviewing about your experience as a student, and possible embarrassment if someone you know identifies you as the source of information or opinions I include in my findings. These risks will be minimized because the questions I ask will not be deeply personal, you may choose to stop at any time, and may take frequent breaks. Most importantly, you will have the complete say on what information or opinions you decide to share.

Not everyone who takes part in this study will benefit. A benefit means that something good happens to you. I think these benefits might help in understanding the Big Picture School model of learning, how students experience this model, and how student interest is incorporated into the curriculum.

When I am finished with this study, I will write a report about what was learned. This report will not include your name or that you were in the study.

Voluntary means that you do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. I have already asked your parents if it is ok for me to ask you to take part in this study. Even though your parents said I could ask you, you still get to decide if you want to be in this research study. You can also talk with your parents, grandparents, and teachers before deciding whether to take part. No one will be mad at you or upset if you decide not to do this study. If you decide to stop after we begin, that is okay too. You can also skip any of the questions you do not want to answer.
You can ask questions now or whenever you wish. If you want to, you may call me at 315-725-6871 or email me at alalger@syr.edu or you may call Dr. Joseph Shedd at 315-443-2685 or jsheddd@syr.edu. If you are not happy about this study and would like to speak to someone other than me, you or your parents may call the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 315-443-3013.

Please sign your name below, if you agree to be part of my study. You will get a copy of this form to keep for yourself.

_________________________________________  ________________________
Signature of Student                        Date

_________________________________________  ________________________
Print Name of Student                        Date

_________________________________________  ________________________
Signature of Investigator                    Date

_________________________________________  ________________________
Print Name of Investigator                   Date

Syracuse University  IRB Approved

SEP 3 0 2014    SEP 2 9 2015

Informed Assent Form  2
Consent for Parent Participation Document

My name is Amanda L. Alger and I am a doctoral student at Syracuse University, in the Teaching and Leadership Department. I am conducting a research study for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy under the supervision of Dr. Joseph Shedd, an Associate Professor in the Teaching and Leadership Department. I am inviting you to participate in this study entitled, The Big Picture School Model. The purpose of this research is to investigate how students experience the Big Picture School model of learning.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Syracuse University. Participation in this research is voluntary, and you may choose whether or not to take part. You may also withdraw at any time without penalty.

I am inviting you to participate in a research interview that I will conduct. In the interview, I will ask you to talk about your observations, experiences, and perspectives on what contributes to the successes and challenges of structuring and supporting student learning in a Big Picture School. I estimate the interview will take approximately 30 minutes of your time, will be conducted in a quiet and secure room at the Big Picture School, and will be scheduled at your convenience. All interactions will be audio taped and the tapes will be kept confidential. If you do not want to be recorded during the interview, I will take handwritten notes of our discussion. The audio tapes or handwritten notes will be utilized to transcribe and code information shared during our interview, so that themes across participants can be developed. I will also be collecting school announcements, newsletters, and other school handouts related to the Big Picture School experience.

All information will be kept confidential. This means that I will assign a code number to the interviewee’s responses, and only my supervisor and I will have the key to indicate which code number belongs to which participant. Prior to the start of the interview, I will ask you to choose a fictitious name for maintaining confidentiality. In any articles or presentations using this data, all identifying information will be changed to protect your identity. Please note that this promise of confidentiality does not apply if your child discloses (a) an intention to harm himself/herself or another person, and (b) an incident of child abuse or neglect. In the event of a disclosure, we are mandated by the state of New York to notify the appropriate agencies.

Your identity will be linked to the audiotaped material itself only through a fictitious name that you choose. The audio tapes will be destroyed when the transcription process is finalized, and only the researchers will have access to that information. In any articles that I write or any presentations that I make, I will attribute your contributions to the self-selected fictitious pseudonym and will not reveal details (or I will change details) about where he or she lives or works.

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping us to understand the experiences and perspectives of parents related to how students experience the Big Picture School model of learning. This information should help us to provide an understanding of how students experience learning when their interests are put at the forefront when designing the academic curriculum. The risks to you while participating in this study are possible stress or emotional discomfort in interviewing about your experience as a school.
stakeholder, and possible embarrassment if people you know identify you as the source of some information or comments that might be included in my findings. These risks will be minimized because the questions you will be asked will not be deeply personal, you may choose to stop at any time, you may take frequent breaks and the person you will be meeting with will be specially trained and sensitive to all of these issues. Most importantly, you will be free to choose what information and comments you feel comfortable sharing. If you no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. Your agreement to participate now is not binding, meaning if you decide to take part and later no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, feel free to contact me by phone at 315-725-6871 or email me at ala1ger@syr.edu or contact my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Joseph Shedd at 315-443-2685 or jshed@syrd.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or if you cannot reach the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

If you are interested in participating, please read, sign, and return only the signature pages of the consent document to me at the Big Picture School. The first pages of the consent document can be retained for your files. Once I receive the signed signature pages, I will sign and return fully endorsed copies of the forms to you.

Sincerely,

Amanda L. Alger
Student Researcher
All of my questions have been answered, I am over the age of 18, and I wish to participate in this research case study. I have retained a copy of this consent form.

Please check all that apply:

____ I agree to be audio taped in the interview.

____ I do not agree to be audio taped in the interview.

__________________________  __________________________
Signature of Parent/Guardian  Date

__________________________  __________________________
Print Name of Parent/Guardian  Date

__________________________  __________________________
Signature of Investigator  Date

__________________________  __________________________
Print Name of Investigator  Date

Syracuse University  IRB Approved

SEP 3 0 2014    SEP 2 9 2015

Consent for Parent Participation Document 3
School Stakeholder Informed Consent Form

My name is Amanda L. Alger and I am a doctoral student at Syracuse University, in the Teaching and Leadership Department. I am conducting a research study for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy under the supervision of Dr. Joseph Shedd, an Associate Professor in the Teaching and Leadership Department. I am inviting you to participate in this study entitled, *The Big Picture School Model*. The purpose of this research is to investigate how students experience the Big Picture School model of learning.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Syracuse University. Participation in this research is voluntary, and you may choose whether or not to take part. You may also withdraw at any time without penalty.

I am inviting you to participate in a research interview that I will conduct. In the interview, I will ask you to talk about your observations, experiences, and perspectives on what contributes to the successes and challenges of structuring and supporting student learning in a Big Picture School.

I estimate the interview will take approximately 30 minutes of your time and it can be scheduled at your convenience. All interactions will be audio taped and the tapes will be kept confidential. If you do not want to be recorded during the interview, I will take handwritten notes of our discussion. The audio tapes or handwritten notes will be utilized to transcribe and code information shared during our interview, so that themes across participants can be developed. I will also be collecting school announcements, newsletters, and other school handouts related to the Big Picture School experience.

All information will be kept confidential. This means that I will assign a code number to your responses, and only I will have the key to indicate which code number belongs to which participant. In any articles or presentations using this data, all identifying information will be changed to protect your identity.

Your identity will be linked to the audiotaped material itself only through a fictitious pseudonym of your selection. The audio tapes will be destroyed when the transcription process is finalized, and only I will have access to that information. In any articles that I write or any presentations that I make, I will attribute your contributions to the self-selected fictitious pseudonym and will not reveal details (or I will change details) about where you live or work.

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping us to understand the experiences and perspectives of school stakeholders related to how students experience the Big Picture School model of learning. This information should help us to provide an understanding of how students experience learning when their interests are put at the forefront when designing the academic curriculum. The risks to you while participating in this study are possible stress or emotional discomfort in interviewing about your experience as a school stakeholder, and possible embarrassment if people you know identify you as the source of some information or comments that might be included in my findings. These risks will be minimized because the questions you will be asked will not be deeply personal, you may choose to stop at any time, you may take frequent breaks and the person you will be meeting with will be specially trained and sensitive to all of these issues. Most importantly, you will be free to choose what information and...
comments you feel comfortable sharing. If you no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. Your agreement to participate now is not binding, meaning if you decide to take part and later no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, feel free to contact me by phone at 315-725-6871 or email me at alalger@syr.edu or contact my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Joseph Shedd at 315-443-2685 or jbsheed@syr.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or if you cannot reach the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

If you are interested in participating, please read and complete the form of consent. A second copy of this letter is provided for your files.

Sincerely,

Amanda L. Alger
Student Researcher

Syracuse University IRB Approved

SEP 3 0 2014 SEP 2 9 2015

School Stakeholder Consent Form 2
All of my questions have been answered, I am over the age of 18, and I wish to participate in this research case study. I have retained a copy of this consent form.

Please check all that apply:

___ I agree to the interview.

___ I do not agree to the interview.

___ I agree to be audio taped in the interview.

___ I do not agree to be audio taped in the interview.

-----------------------------------
Signature of Participant

-----------------------------------
Print Name of Participant

-----------------------------------
Signature of Investigator

-----------------------------------
Print Name of Investigator

Syracuse University  IRB Approved

SEP 3 0 2014  SEP 2 9 2015

School Stakeholder Consent Form 3
Appendix C: Interview Protocols

Potential Questions as Semi-Structured Individual Interview Protocol

This project utilizes qualitative case study research methodology. As a methodology based in postmodern theory, the researcher will attempt to keep with the tradition of capturing the participants’ words and letting the analysis emerge. We have provided an open-ended, semi-structured research guide as a fluid framework for the interview. Each interview will open the same, asking the student about their experiences at the Big Picture School.

After that, it is not expected that the remaining questions will be asked sequentially, that all questions will be asked of all participants, or that the list of provided questions is exhaustive. Rather, I offer the questions below as representing possible directions in which I anticipate the interviews may go.

“Please describe what your experience at the Big Picture School has been like for you with respect to learning and the incorporation of student interest in writing academic curriculum.”

From there, the following questions may be asked dependent on participant response:

- How did you become involved in the Big Picture School?
- What are your interests?
- What is your current project?
- What motivates you to complete this project, and possibly future projects?
- How does the advisor work collaboratively with you to design an academic curriculum?
- How does the faculty encourage you to have a voice in making decisions about your learning?
- How is your learning supported by the faculty?
- How is your learning supported by your family?
- How are you experiencing college and career readiness during your time at the Big Picture School?
- How is the faculty culturally responsive to your educational needs?
- How is motivation a factor in the learning environment and/ or experience?
- What intrinsically motivates you to engage in learning?
- What extrinsically motivates you to engage in learning?
- How do your advisor and/ or mentors provide feedback about your work?
Potential Questions as Semi-Structured School Stakeholder Interview Protocol

This project utilizes qualitative case study research methodology. As a methodology based in postmodern theory, the researcher will attempt to keep with the tradition of capturing the participants’ words and letting the analysis emerge. I have provided an open-ended, semi-structured research guide as a fluid framework for the interview. Each interview will open the same, asking the stakeholder about their perceptions of the student experience at the Big Picture School.

After that, it is not expected that the remaining questions will be asked sequentially, that all questions will be asked of all participants, or that the list of provided questions is exhaustive. Rather, I offer the questions below as representing possible directions in which I anticipate the interviews may go.

“Please describe your perception of how the student experience is structured at the Big Picture School with respect to learning and the incorporation of student interest in writing academic curriculum.”

From there, the following questions may be asked dependent on participant response:

- How did you become involved in the Big Picture School?
- How does the advisor work collaboratively with students to design an academic curriculum?
- How does the faculty encourage students to have a voice in making decisions about their learning?
- How does the faculty support student learning?
- How do families support student learning?
- How are students experiencing college and career readiness during their time at the Big Picture School?
- How is the faculty culturally responsive to students’ educational needs?
- How do advisors and/or mentors provide feedback about student work?
- How do advisors and/or mentors monitor student learning?
- How is motivation a factor in the learning environment and/or experience?
Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol

Potential Questions as Semi-Structured Focus Group Protocol

This project utilizes qualitative case study research methodology. As a methodology based in postmodern theory, the researcher will attempt to keep with the tradition of capturing the participants’ words and letting the analysis emerge. We have provided an open-ended, semi-structured research guide as a fluid framework for the focus group sessions. Each session will open the same, asking the students about their experiences at the Big Picture School and following up with questions from the individual interviews.

After that, it is not expected that the remaining questions will be asked sequentially, that all questions will be asked of all participants, or that the list of provided questions is exhaustive. Rather, I offer the questions below as representing possible directions in which I anticipate the focus group sessions may go.

The following questions may be asked dependent on participants’ response:

- Why is a stress-free, comfortable, caring, supportive learning environment important?
  - How does it affect your learning?

- What makes something engaging?
  - What factors contribute to your engagement in the learning environment?
  - What causes lower levels of engagement?

- Describe how much effort you put into your work.

- How rigorous are the projects and academics?

- Why are the internships useful? What are the internships preparing you for?

- Describe your relationships with your peers.
  - How often do you work on projects together?

- Why is the family-like/community atmosphere important?
  - How does it affect your learning?

- What is the role of motivation in the student experience?

- What are the major differences between BPS and traditional high school?

- Why does BPS work for you?

- What are your plans after graduation?
Appendix E: Template of Learning Plan for the Real World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Grade:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advisor:</td>
<td>Quarter:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent(s):</td>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>REAL WORLD LEARNING EXPERIENCES</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am meeting the learning goals through the following experiences:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LTI:</strong></td>
<td>ER-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Project Timeline: Final products I will show at my exhibition:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADDITIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES:</th>
<th>I am meeting the learning goals through the following experiences:</th>
<th>Final products I will show at my exhibition:</th>
<th>Project Timeline:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language Exploration:</td>
<td>ER-</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SR-</td>
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<td>QR-</td>
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<td>CO-</td>
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<td>PQ-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Education:</td>
<td>Skill-</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strength</td>
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<td>Health</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Endurance/Stamina</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Flexibility/Agility</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADDITIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES:</td>
<td>I am meeting the learning goals through the following experiences:</td>
<td>Final products I will show at my exhibition:</td>
<td>Project Timeline</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent Reading:</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(3 book minimum)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work Keys</td>
<td>Raise two levels in the 3 main categories.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Add 1 additional category of choice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Double O&quot; 101</td>
<td>Living Environment:</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lab Activities:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lessons:</td>
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<td>Integrated Algebra:</td>
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<td>Lessons:</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADDITIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES</td>
<td>I am meeting the learning goals through the following experiences:</td>
<td>Final products I will show at my exhibition:</td>
<td>Project Timeline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Social Reasoning Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aesthetic Expression (expand possibilities)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Qualities I am working on:</td>
<td>Documentation of my progress that I will show at my exhibition:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
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<tr>
<td>EMPIRICAL REASONING</td>
<td>QUANTITATIVE REASONING</td>
<td>COMMUNICATION</td>
<td>SOCIAL REASONING</td>
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<td>----------------------</td>
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<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I prove it?</td>
<td>How do I measure,</td>
<td>How do I take in and</td>
<td>What are other people's</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| This goal is to think like a | compare or represent it? | express ideas? | perspectives on this? | process? 
| scientist: to use empirical | This goal is to think like a | This goal is to be a great | This goal is to think like a |
| evidence and a logical | mathematician: to | communicator: to | historian or anthropologist: |
| process to make decisions | understand numbers, to | understand your audience, to | to see diverse perspectives, |
| and to evaluate hypotheses. | analyze uncertainty, to | write, read, speak and listen | to understand social issues, |
| It does not reflect specific | comprehend the properties | well, to use technology and | to explore ethics, and to |
| science content material, | of shapes, and to study how | artistic expression to | look at issues historically. |
| but instead can incorporate | things change over time. | communicate, and to be exposed | -How do diverse communities |
| ideas from physics to | -How can I use numbers to | to another language. | view this? 
| sociology to art theory. | evaluate my hypothesis? | -How can I write about it? | -How does this issue affect |
| -What idea do I want to | -What numerical information | -What is the main idea I | different communities? 
| test?                   | can I collect about this? | want to get across (thesis)? | -Who cares about this? To |
| -What has other research | -Can I estimate this | -Who is my audience? | whom is this important? |
| shown?                 | quantity?              | -What can I read about it? | -What is the history of |
| -What is my hypothesis?| -How can I represent this | -Who can I listen to about | this? 
| How can I test it?     | information as a formula or | it?                    | -How has this issue changes |
| -What information (data) do | diagram?               | -How can I speak about it? | over time? 
| I need to collect?     | -How can I interpret this | -How can technology help me | -Who benefits and who is |
| -How will I collect the | formula or graph?      | to express it?           | harmed through this issue? |
| information?           | -How can I measure its | -How can I express it | -What do people believe |
| -What will I use as a control | shape or structure? | creatively?             | about this? 
| in my research?        | -What trends do I see? | -How can I express it in | -What social systems are in |
| -How good is my | -How does it change over | another language? | place around this? 
| information?           | time?                  |                         | -What are the ethical |
| -What are the results of | -What predictions can I |                         | questions behind this? |
| my research?           | make?                  |                         | What do I think should be |
| -What error do I have? | -Can I show a correlation? |                         | done about this? 
| -What conclusions can I |                       |                         | What can I do? 
| draw from my research? |                       |                         | 
| -How will I present my |                       |                         | 
| results?               |                       |                         | 
|                       |                       |                         | -How can I demonstrate |
|                       |                       |                         | respect? 
|                       |                       |                         | -How can I empathize more |
|                       |                       |                         | with others? 
|                       |                       |                         | -How can I strengthen my |
|                       |                       |                         | health and well-being? 
|                       |                       |                         | -How can I communicate |
|                       |                       |                         | honestly about this? 
|                       |                       |                         | -How can I be responsible |
|                       |                       |                         | for this? 
|                       |                       |                         | -How can I persevere at |
|                       |                       |                         | this? 
|                       |                       |                         | -How can I better organize |
|                       |                       |                         | my work? 
|                       |                       |                         | -How can I better manage |
|                       |                       |                         | my time? 
|                       |                       |                         | -How can I be more self- |
|                       |                       |                         | aware? 
|                       |                       |                         | -How can I take on more of |
|                       |                       |                         | a leadership role? 
|                       |                       |                         | -How can I work |
|                       |                       |                         | cooperatively with others? |
|                       |                       |                         | -How can I enhance my |
|                       |                       |                         | community through this? |
References


to gains in youth development? *Teachers College Record,* 106(4), 631-688.


Handbook of complementary methods for research in education (3rd ed.) (pp. 111-122).


AMANDA L. ALGER, M.Ed., N.B.C.T.
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Academic Preparation

Doctor of Philosophy in Teaching & Curriculum
School of Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
Dissertation Topic: The Big Picture School Model
Anticipated March 2016

Masters of Education in Reading Education K-12
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC
May 2008

Bachelor of Arts in English and Secondary Education
State University of New York at Cortland, Cortland, NY
May 2003

Teaching Experience

University Teaching & Tutoring

SUNY Polytechnic Institute
Instructor
• COM 306: Report Writing and Technical Communication 2015 – Present

Syracuse University
Instructor
• EDU 400/ EED 640: Safe and Healthy Learning Environments Spring 2015
• EDU 204: Principles of Learning in an Inclusive Classroom Fall 2013

Tutor
• Writing 105; 109; 114; 195; 205; 207; 209
• Office of Disability Services 001
• Reading 001
• College Learning Strategies 105

Teaching Assistant
• DASA Training for Teachers, Administrators, & Coaches Spring 2014
• EDU 400/ EED 640: Safe and Healthy Learning Environments Fall 2014
• EDU 204: Principles of Learning in an Inclusive Classroom Spring 2013

Testing Administrator & Reader
• Office of Disability Services 2013 – 2014
Public School Teaching & Tutoring

Rome City School District

Rome Free Academy
- *English 9 Honors and Regents Teacher* 2015 – Present
- *Journalism* 2015 – Present
- *Knight Times Newspaper* 2015 – Present

Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District

Alexander Graham Middle School, Charlotte, NC
- *Arts & Literacy (Grades 4-6) Summer School Teacher* Summer 2010

E. E. Waddell High School, Charlotte, NC
- *Advanced Placement in English Lit. & Composition (Grade 12) Teacher* 2009 – 2010
- *Freshman Academy (Grade 9) Teacher* 2009 – 2010
- *Teaching Mentor* 2007 – 2010
- *Arts & Literacy (Grades 4-6) Summer School Teacher* Summer 2009
- *World Literature and Composition (Grade 10) Teacher* 2005 – 2009
- *Extended Day/ Saturday Literacy (Grades 9-12) Tutor* 2005 – 2008

Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School, Charlotte, NC
- *ESL & Literacy (Grades 4-6) Summer School Teacher* Summer 2005; 2006

Northridge Middle School, Charlotte, NC
- *English Language Arts (Grade 8) Teacher* 2003 – 2005
- *Extended Day/ Saturday Literacy (Grades 6-8) Tutor* 2003 – 2005

Teaching Credentials

Syracuse University Future Professoriate Program 2012 - 2014
- Certificate in University Teaching

College Reading & Learning Association International Advanced Certified Tutor (Level II)

National Board Certification in English Language Arts/ Adolescence and Young Adulthood

Professional New York State Certification in English Language Arts, grades 7-12

North Carolina “M” (Masters) English/ Language Arts Licensure, grades 6-12

North Carolina Literacy Specialist Licensure K-12 (Level II)
Research & Graduate Assistantship Experience

Research Assistant & Curriculum Designer  
Spring 2014  
Department of Teaching & Leadership, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY  
- Collaborated with Professor, Dr. Mara Sapon-Shevin to design an interactive and meaningful curriculum on the topics of DASA (Dignity for All Students Act) and child health and safety, which is a requirement for teacher certification

Graduate Assistant with Field Relations  
Spring 2014  
Department of Teaching & Leadership, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY  
- Oversaw the upkeep of observations and evaluations of student teachers on the School of Education’s e-Placement system  
- Collaborated and organized travel arrangements and ongoing support for student teachers with the Director of Field Relations, Mr. Thomas Bull

Research Assistant  
2012 – 2013  
Department of Reading & Language Arts, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY  
- Organized, coded, analyzed, and prepared written analysis of data from a research study conducted by Assistant Professor, Dr. Robin Danzak of Sacred Heart University, and Distinguished Professor of Education, Psychology and Communication Sciences, Dr. Louise Wilkinson  
- Developed a manuscript on teaching writing to bilingual middle school students

Research Assistant  
Fall 2012  
Department of Reading & Language Arts, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY  
- Located scholarly articles and materials on the use of books on tape, digital books, and talking books for preschoolers and young children’s literacy instruction, and organized research data into spreadsheets for Assistant Professor, Dr. Rochelle Dail  
- Assisted in the Reading & Language Arts Center when needed

Grant Funded Experience

Grant Coordinator with the Jefferson-Lewis College Access Project  
2014 – 2015  
Supportive Student Services, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY  
Principal Investigator: Mr. Robert Wilson, Director of Supportive Student Services
New York State Higher Education Services Corp. ($49,988)  
- Collaborated with Mr. Wilson, Dr. Melissa Luke of the Human Development and Counseling Department, and other counseling graduate students to connect college-ready low income students to colleges and universities that match their academic achievement levels by providing customized information and assistance throughout the college application process  
- Arranged team meetings and trainings for academic coaches  
- Corresponded with school counselors from seven public school districts served by the grant about available resources, workshops, and presentations for students and parents
Grant Coordinator with the Jefferson-Lewis College Access Project 2012 – 2014
Supportive Student Services, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
Principal Investigator: Mr. Robert Wilson, Director of Supportive Student Services
New York State Higher Education Services Corp. ($49,995)

- Collaborated with Mr. Wilson, Dr. Melissa Luke of the Human Development and Counseling Department, and other counseling graduate students to connect college-ready low income, first generation students to colleges and universities
- Provided support, workshops, and resources to school counselors, students, and parents involved with the grant
- Maintained records for grant activities and meetings

Research Assistant with The School Leader Communication Model 2010 – 2012
Department of Teaching & Leadership, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
Principle Investigator: Dr. Benjamin Dotger, Associate Professor
The U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (IES) ($498,849)

- Conducted qualitative research with Dr. Dotger, observing teacher and administrator clinical simulations and focus group sessions
- Transcribed, coded, and analyzed clinical simulation data between teachers or administrators and standardized individuals serving as parents, students, and paraprofessionals to enhance teacher and school leader preparation
- Developed and published a manuscript: Challenging parent, challenged curricula: Utilizing simulated interactions to enhance school leader preparations

Peer-Reviewed Publications


Conference Presentations


**School-Based Presentations & Workshops**


Alger, A., & Wilson, R. (Spring, 2014). *Successful budgeting for college and life.* College Access Challenge Grant workshop with high school seniors on budgeting tips and strategies for life after high school and in college. Lyme Central School, Chaumont, NY.

Alger, A., & Wilson, R. (Spring, 2014). *Successful budgeting for college and life.* College Access Challenge Grant workshop with high school seniors on budgeting tips and strategies for life after high school and in college. Copenhagen Central School, Copenhagen, NY.

Alger, A. (Fall, 2013). *Writing college essays.* College Access Challenge Grant presentation and workshop with high school students on how to write effective college application essays, application essay examples and resources provided along with information about scholarships and applications, Copenhagen Central School, Copenhagen, NY.

Alger, A., & McNamara, S. (Summer, 2013). *Student success at college.* College Access Challenge Grant presentation included a discussion of tips and strategies for high school students transitioning and being successful at college, Jefferson Community College, Watertown, NY.

Alger, A. (Spring, 2013). *Being successful in college.* College Access Challenge Grant presentation to high school students informing them of the differences between high school and college, what colleges look for, statistics of college graduates and high school graduates, and how to transition and maintain success while at college, Lyme Central School, Chaumont, NY.
Alger, A. (Spring, 2013). *Being successful in college*. College Access Challenge Grant presentation to high school students informing them of the differences between high school and college, what colleges look for, statistics of college graduates and high school graduates, and how to transition and maintain success while at college, Thousand Islands Central School, Clayton, NY.

Alger, A. (Spring, 2013). *How to prepare and present a mini-lesson to students*. Presentation for pre-service school counselors enrolled in COU 749: Leadership and Program Implementation in School Counseling, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.

Alger, A. (Fall, 2012). *Advice for parents and school counselors*. College Access Challenge Grant presentation to parents and school counselors visiting Syracuse University in regards to what to expect and how to advise high school, first-generation students preparing and applying for college, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.

## Service

### Service to the University

**Ed TPA Task Reviewer**
Syracuse Inclusive Elementary and Secondary Program, Syracuse University  
Fall 2014

### Service to the Community

**Scholarship Coordinator for Boonville Elks**  
Boonville Elks #2158, Boonville, NY  
2015 – Present

## Honors & Awards

**The Berj Harootunian Award for Outstanding Academic Achievement & Meritorious Dissertation Research in the Field of Teacher Education**; Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY  
2014-2015

**Outstanding Teaching Assistant**; Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY  
2014

**Teacher of the Year**; E.E. Waddell High School; Charlotte, NC  
2009 - 2010

**Kappa Delta Pi**; International Educational Honor Society; Omicron Pi Chapter  
2008

**Sigma Tau Delta**; International English Honor Society; Epsilon Chi Chapter  
2002
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Organizations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Educational Research Association (AERA)</td>
<td>2011 – Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kappa Delta Pi</td>
<td>2008 – Present</td>
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