# Defining Success in an Alternative High School: Resources for the Reframing of Education

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**Abstract:** This study looks at what it means to be successful in an alternative high school comprised primarily of adolescents who had been unsuccessful and/or marginalized in their previous schools. This paper uses ethnographic methods to focus on two students who were successful in the alternative school and the ideational resources those students used to participate in and reflect on the school. Two ideational resources are highlighted in this analysis – a critique of mainstream education and a focus on community education, providing insights into ways to re-engage students in school.

## Major Issues Addressed

I sat across from Nancy, a 17-year-old student at Redwood High School, the alternative school where I had been doing research for the past three months. I concluded my data collection by asking Nancy my final interview question, the catchall: 'Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you think I should know?'

'Maybe," she replied, "just to reiterate that Redwood has a lot of problems, but it also saved my life and it has saved a lot of peoples' lives and it's still like one of the most beautiful things that I've ever been a part of.'

I include Nancy's response as an introduction to the problem space that I seek to explore in this paper. On a grand scale I seek to understand the process in which students see school as life saving and beautiful. The metaphoric saving of lives is something that is not easily measured. However, that does not mean that it should not be studied. If we are to stem the tide of high school dropouts in public education, it is important that we study the ways students are successful in all educational contexts, but specifically the contexts that help catch students who have previously been unsuccessful in school. This research is an attempt to explore what it means to be successful for students who have been previously unsuccessful and/or marginalized in school. Specifically, in this study, I seek to understand the experiences and perspectives of students who are now successful in an alternative school community. This includes both an analysis of how these successful students participate in school and how they reflect on what it means to be a new student to the school. By understanding the ways previously unsuccessful/marginalized students learn and become successful members of their school community, I hope to better understand ways to increase access for the students who remain on the margins of education.

In this paper I ask the following questions:

1) What does it mean to be successful in an alternative high school?

2) What resources do students who are successful members of an alternative high school use to participate and define success and membership in the school community?

## Potential Significance

For this study, I pull from literature that looks at the resources that individuals use to construct their views of the world and their place in it (Barron, 2006; Nasir, 2012). Nasir identifies four components that help support students' identity development: ideational resources, material resources, relational resources, and the ability for students to put something of themselves into practices. In this paper I focus, in particular, on ideational resources, which Nasir describes as ideas about oneself, one's place in the world, and an understanding of what is valued, specifically which practices are valued in a community. I've chosen to use ideational resources because of how they guide students as they learn and participate in practice, guiding the types of people they are becoming. I hope to extend the work on ideational resources by looking at the ways outsider communities (such as alternative schools existing on the outskirts of mainstream education) use ideational resources to help the identity development, engagement, and success of youth.

There already exists a longstanding body of work that has studied how identities and forms of participation are produced and reproduced through social categorization in mainstream education and the informal contexts surrounding it (Crosnoe, 2011; Eckert, 1989; McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 2006; Willis, 1981; Wortham, 2005). While some studies such as Eckert, Fine (1991), and Willis have looked at resistant social groups, they are studied in contrast to adaptive social groups and the mainstream schools that help produce these groups. In her study, Eckert even mentions an alternative school populated by "burnouts", but maintains her focus on the mainstream high school. Each of this studies is invaluable, helping educators understand the processes of how social categories are produced in schools and the, potentially negative, impact

they can have on students. By placing my study in an alternative school, I want to add to this literature by examining how students previously unsuccessful and/or marginalized can be successful. The alternative context is critical to this examination, in that alternative schools, while still conventional in certain ways, introduce different values, norms, practices, and resources. Pope (2001) introduced the idea of 'doing school', which involves the mindsets and practices of, superficially, what it means to be successful in mainstream schooling, including completing assignments, getting good grades, meeting assignment deadlines, and teacher-pleasing behavior. In part, by looking at what it means to be successful in an alternative school, I am exploring what it means to 'do alternative school'. Those students who are successful in mainstream school are those who understand the rules of the game of 'doing school'. Eckert would say these students are more often the jocks of the school, who have greater access to the resources of the school. If alternative schools are, in part, a safety net to help prevent students from dropping out of school, then it's important as educators to understand the rules of the game in alternative schools.

## Theoretical Approaches

In this paper I have chosen to foreground the construct of ideational resources to understand a) the conceptual resources available to the students to construct their identities and b) the ways that success was conceived amongst the school community. As students who have not been successful in school enter into an alternative school their ideas about themselves, their ideas about the world, and their ideas about their place in the world may likely need to be renegotiated in order for them to be successful. Similarly, the ideational resources available in any educational setting says a lot about the context. For example, positioning students as college-going is an ideational resource for the student to think about their world, themselves, and their place in the world. Positioning students as college-going also provides insight into what is valued in the school, home, after-school program, etc. In many ways the ideational resources that are available to students reveal, at least in part, how a given community views the world and the available identities within that community. For this paper, then, I conceive ideational resources as socially shared and constructed concepts, categories, and values that help orient individuals to what it means to be a successful member of a community.

In order to think about the socially shared nature of ideational resources within a school I also use Wenger's (1998) idea of 'mutual engagement' to think about the ways in which the alternative school community used ideational resources to define success. Wenger describes mutual engagement as the negotiated meaning behind certain practices. In order to understand what it means to be successful in an alternative school I look at the ideational resources that community members engage with to participate and reflect on their participation in the school community. In considering mutual engagement, I also consider the constructs of 'joint enterprise'' and 'shared repertoire' in mind as I analyzed observed practices and stories of the school. Joint enterprise is something on which there is a shared focus and value, negotiated in the moment. Wenger (1998) adds an historical element to the practices of a community with shared repertoire, describing them as resources created in a community over time through joint enterprise. These resources, he says, can include artifacts, stories, tools, and historical events. Together, mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire describe both what the community does together and their orientation to those tasks.

To understand success in an alternative school and what ideational resources students used to become successful in the school I also use Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of central and peripheral membership and what Wenger (1998) calls old-timers and newcomers. While practices and values are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated amongst participants, newcomers typically enter into a community on the outside or periphery. Over time, as they become old-timers, they may move towards central membership in the community. They may also remain on the periphery or leave the community. For this study, in order to understand what it means to be successful, I focused on students who are successful old-timers at the school, while recognizing the need to additional research on newcomers and following students on their trajectories in alternative schools.

## Methodological Approaches

This study is a case study of two high school students in an urban alternative high school community. Specifically, I followed the two students across classroom settings in one high school alternative program, focusing largely on the Advisory class that the two students shared. In the next sections I will discuss the research setting and participants, followed by sections focusing on the collection, analysis, and limitations of the data.

### Setting and Participants

<u>Redwood High School</u>

The setting for this study was in an urban alternative public high school. In 1970, seeking an alternative to educational options offered by the school district, a group of students, parents, and teachers founded Redwood

High School.  In the 2010-2011 school year, Redwood had 332 students and 25 teachers and support staff. In that same year the student body was comprised of 72% Caucasian, 7% Black, 2% American Indian, 8% Hispanic, and 7% Asian/Pacific-Islander. In 2010-2011 21% of the student body qualified for free or reduced lunch. In addition, in 2010 and 2011 Redwood scored higher on the state high school proficiency exam than both the district and state in Science, Reading, and Writing and in 2010 they were 2 percentage points behind the district average and one percentage point above the state average in Math. What is not captured in the school demographics and test scores is the high percentage of students who identify as GLBT. This information was reported in both student and teacher interviews and observations of the advocacy practices in the school. In addition, the school has been featured in local news stories on GLBT students. The GLBT population and the GLBT advocacy practices, such as gender-neutral bathrooms and course introductions where students say what pronoun they prefer, had implications on the ideational resources available to students at Redwood.

The setting for this study was chosen as an extreme case (Patton, 2003) when compared to the greater landscape of more conventional schools. Redwood High School caters primarily to students who, for one reason or another, have been disconnected or disenfranchised from mainstream education – this could be students who, while successful, self selected out of mainstream education or students who have had poor academic or social success in conventional schools. In addition, Redwood was chosen as a site because it was a formal high school community setting, but one that, based on school self-description, had a strong focus on integrating student choice, integrating students' out-of-school lives with their academic learning, and in which students' and teachers' roles were different than those in conventional schools.

My entry into Redwood High School was facilitated by previous informal meetings I had with principal and teachers at the school. Then, in 2011, I approached Trevor (an English Language Arts teacher who had been at the school for ten years) to see if his Advisory class would be a part of my study. At Redwood, Advisories are multi-aged (9th-12th grade) classes, made up of roughly 20 students. A core component of Redwood High School is its Advisory system in which every student has an Advisory that meets weekly and, in conjunction with Advisory, an Advisor with whom Advisees meet individually on a regular basis. Since Advisory was a core component of the program at Redwood and the focus of my research was on what it meant to be successful in the school, my study design began in an Advisory- first looking at the Advisory as the unit of analysis and, from there, identifying the case study students. Ultimately, Trevor left the decision of whether or not to participate in the study to his Advisory, inviting me in to present my case, a process that, while nerve-racking, I now wouldn't have had any other way. After three weeks of data collection in Trevor's Advisory class, I identified Nancy and Lori as focal students for my study.

## Nancy and Lori

Nancy and Lori represented elements of both typical sampling and variation sampling (Merriam, 2009). They were typical in that both Nancy and Lori were seniors at Redwood High School, with both students considering themselves artists and members of their Advisory and of the Redwood community. In order to focus on old-timers at the school, I chose students who had been students at Redwood for multiple years and were experienced members in the Advisory group. As per my research questions, I sought to understand what the ideational resources were used through the perspective of students who were successful old-timers at the school. Both Nancy and Lori were Caucasian, came from middle class backgrounds, and spoke English as their first language. While Nancy, Lori, and the interviewed teachers all indicated that there were successful old-timers at the school who were male, female, and transgendered and who came from varied economic, cultural, and racial backgrounds, the majority of Trevor's Advisory was Caucasian. While there was a mix of males and females in the class, my primary focus for selection was to choose successful old-timers who had different participation patterns from one another.

Nancy and Lori had noticeably different ways of participating in class. During class and Advisory, Nancy was outgoing and, while not domineering, would often talk during class, sharing insights and jokes. In contrast, Lori was quiet and reserved and, while she participated in small discussion groups, she rarely spoke in front of the whole class. Nancy was a self-proclaimed language arts student, was socially active, and co-taught a course with one of the teachers for new students to Redwood. She was in her third year at Redwood, having come from seven years at a Montessori school before having a series of panic attacks in ninth grade and feeling she could no longer continue with school the way she had. Lori was in her fourth year at the school, coming to the school after attending a public middle school where she had some minor disciplinary experiences and felt as if the adults in the school did not care. She was nearly fluent in Spanish and considered herself an artist, musician, and poet. A final difference between the two was the leadership role that they took in the school. Nancy took on a visible leadership role, co-teaching a class for incoming Redwood students and helped collect student input on a school improvement initiative. Lori on the other hand talked about wanting to give back to the school and participated in school initiatives such as a spring break community service trip to South America, yet I did not observe her taking on leadership roles in the school.

After identifying Nancy and Lori as focal students, I began to train my lens on them during Advisory. In addition, in order to triangulate my data, I observed each of them in another more academically focused class. For Lori, I observed her in a film class taught by Trevor and, for Nancy, I observed a class that she co-taught with another English teacher, Doris, for students who were brand new to the school. Both of these classes were chosen with the help of Nancy and Lori and the goal of observing Lori and Nancy in contexts that differed from Advisory. In addition to classroom observations, I also attended one-on-one meetings that Nancy and Lori had with Trevor.

## Data Collection

The analysis for this paper comes from three interviews with Nancy, three interviews with Lori, one interview with Trevor, one interview with Doris (Nancy's co-teacher), six observations of Trevor's Advisory class, three observations of Trevor's film class in which Lori was a student, three observations of Doris and Nancy's introduction to Redwood class (a sort of "Redwood 101" class), and Advisory-Advisee individual meetings between Trevor and Nancy and Trevor and Lori. In addition, I collected artifacts from the students, from the classrooms, and from the school. Throughout the data collection I kept an audio reflective journal, which I used as one form of triangulation during analysis.

I conducted three interviews with both Lori and Nancy. Each interview took between 45 and 100 minutes and was audio recorded. The interviews occurred either in school or at a local coffee shop. In the first interview I used a semi-structured and think-aloud protocols with a focus on probing the students' views of the school and their past and current experiences in school. In addition to the students, I interviewed Trevor (the students' Advisor) and Doris (the teacher with whom Nancy co-taught). I interviewed the teachers only after my observations and student interviews were complete, as I wished to capture the students' engagement with limited bias of the teachers. Teacher interviews were conducted primarily in order to triangulate data and included questions about the school and success at the school.

During my observations of the Advisory class, the Redwood High School 101 class, the film course, and the individual meetings, I shifted between acting as a non-participant observer and a participant observer (Merriam, 2009) depending primarily on invitation from the participants. I both took observational notes and audio recorded all observations. In addition to the audio recordings, I video recorded three of the observations of Advisory, focusing on the participation of the focal students. I chose to both audio and video record in order to create a record of how the focal students were participating during the class. My initial unit of analysis for Advisory was the joint enterprises or collective activities occurring during the class.

## Approach to Analysis

There were four phases of data analysis in this study: Open coding, focused coding based on theory and research questions, writing analytic memos looking in and across codes and data, and generating hypotheses about student engagement. Prior to these phases, all interviews, student meetings, and observed classes were either video or audio recorded. Recorded interviews were then transcribed verbatim using Inqscribe software. Similarly, class and student meeting recordings were content logged, with pertinent sections being transcribed. Video, audio, and transcripts were analyzed using ATLAS.ti software.

During open coding I read and reviewed the entire corpus of data, selecting five specific interviews to open code (two of each focal student and the interview of the Advisor). During this phase, various codes emerged around topics such as 'listening', 'emotional response', 'pressure', 'defines education', 'love/like', 'hate', 'school work', 'anxious', 'personal history', and 'self-care'. All codes during this phase of analysis were generated from the participants' own words and actions.

During focused coding I developed and applied codes based on theory and my research questions. Specifically, these codes were based around themes such as ideational, material, relational resources, and self-expression in practice (Nasir, 2012), mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998), and definitions of success.

In the third phase of data analysis I wrote analytic memos connecting the codes. In addition, during this phase I probed specific codes and the quotes and moments of participation associated with those codes. During this phase I also triangulated data across participants, interviews, and observations. An example of this was analyzing the ideational resources that the focal students engage in, triangulating interview data with the social practices they engage in during class.

In the fourth phase of analysis I looked across the codes and memos to generate hypotheses. Having generated these hypotheses, I looked across the data to test my assertions and identify any disconfirming evidence. Two particular ways that I sought out disconfirming evidence was looking closely at the observations to see if resources identified largely through interviews were present in practice. I also relied on teacher interviews to identify any disconfirming evidence, specifically to see if definitions of success and ideational resources were specific to the two case study participants. No strong disconfirming evidence was identified. As a final step I had fellow researchers look at the data to help confirm and modify my assertions.

## Data Quality and Limitations

In this study I was interested in definitions of success through the perspective of old-timers at the school. Doing so allowed me to see what ideational resources successful students used, providing a model of success. In order to understand, in detail, students' perspectives and experiences I focused primarily on two specific students. Limitations of this study are that it did not include newcomers to the school and was a small sample. However, the data I have collected and triangulated across interviews and observations looks deeply at the ideational resources successful students used to participate and reflect on participation in the school. A final limitation of the study is that, as a former alternative school teacher, the experiences that the study participants spoke of were often similar to experiences that I myself faced as an alternative educator. I attempted to address this limitation through triangulation, peer review, and grounding myself in the words and actions of my participants.

## Major Findings

During one of her interviews Nancy, one of the two focal students from this study, discussed the challenges of co-teaching a course for students who were new to Redwood High School.

> You, like, have to close up so much and build up so many shells in order to exist in other schools. At Redwood, the way you exist at Redwood in the most efficient fun way is to completely unzip, but that's really hard for people because we don't teach that at all. It's the opposite of what we teach, and so everybody figures it out in our own way and sometimes people never do.

Nancy presents the idea that students build up defenses to survive in mainstream education, but that in order to be successful at Redwood one needs to take down those defenses. In my analysis, I identified two categories of ideational resources that Nancy and Lori used to become successful at Redwood. One category of resources focused on the world outside of Redwood, specifically *critiquing mainstream education*. This ideational resource was presented as allowing the students at Redwood to view their past educational experiences as a product of the educational system and not their own failures as students. However, external critique extended to looking at the social injustices that exist in society and Redwood, as a part of society. The other category of ideational resources looked inward and was focused on the *community of Redwood*. The specific resources within this category included a new model of adult-student relationships, of school community, and of the content of school extending beyond only academic disciplines. These two categories of ideational resources were identified through the student participants discussion of their past experiences at Redwood, their views of newcomers to the school, and how they described and participated in Redwood during the study. In the remainder of the paper I will go into greater detail, explaining each of the major categories of ideational resources and how they relate to success at Redwood.

## A Critique of Mainstream Education

For Lori and Nancy, existing in the community at Redwood was often framed in the context of other schools and students' previous education, specifically the ways in which conventional schools, including the schools they had previously attended, were constraining and uncaring environments. During my first interview with Lori, I asked her about middle school, before she came to Redwood. Lori was typically soft spoken, her voice calm and steady. Yet, when she started talking about middle school her voice got louder and she began to appear physically agitated as she told me about the school principal's indifference towards her. "I was just a kid," she said, "and they were an adult and they had nothing to do with me and they did not care". She they went on to recount episodes from middle school where the adults interacted with her as unsympathetic disciplinarians. At another point in the interview Lori analyzed her experiences in middle school. "I feel like there's a, there's just a certain like system of like certain things that like mainstream high schools want you to learn like their way and no other way." In these quotes mainstream schooling is positioned as uncaring and rigidly structured. Throughout Lori and Nancy's interviews it was clear that Redwood was viewed as existing outside of mainstream education. Lori described her anger during her time in middle school, anger that came bubbling up when she spoke about her middle school experiences, yet she was also able to abstract her experiences in middle school, lumping her middle school in with the rest of mainstream education.

In her interviews Nancy described the process of developing a critical framework of mainstream education, a process that can be difficult for newcomers to the school, especially when it involves one's emotionally turbulent educational history. "These kids fucking hate adults," she said, "They've hated adults for so long and just like have been let down by adults consistently for most of their lives." In this quote Nancy identified that newcomers often come to Redwood with a certain view of school and education, one in which adults are the problem. These students come to Redwood with potentially harmful ideational resources. It could be argued that the students also come with relational resources (friends), material resources (clothing, cigarettes), and ways to write themselves into school practices (ditching, non-participation), all which contribute

to their school-going identities. The ideational resources that newcomers have previously used and those present in the alternative school then may be in conflict.

Nancy discussed the transition from mainstream schooling to Redwood as "people wrestling with letting go of the structures that have been shoved into their bodies". Developing a critique of mainstream education was one way that Redwood tried to help newcomers in the process of 'letting go'. I saw parts of this process during observations the class Nancy co-taught for students new to Redwood. Through discussion, Nancy and her co-teacher, Doris, elicited students to tell stories of their own educational history in which they felt marginalized or constrained. Through these shared stories, the students engaged in a common problem of being constrained by past educational experiences. Additional resources were provided when Nancy had the students watch a short animated lecture by Sir Ken Robinson (RSA Animate, 2010). In this short video Sir Ken Robinson discusses the ways in which the current educational system follows a manufacturing model and restricts creativity. Nancy also asked the class to read a chapter by Alfie Kohn (2006) that critiqued the unexamined practice of homework. Kohn argued that homework was almost completely unnecessary and was actually harmful to students. After reading the text, the class discussed the rare times that they felt homework was valuable. Both of these instances sought to engage newcomers in a form of self-expression by metacognitively evaluating their education experiences and that of mainstream education and positioning Redwood as a different form of schooling. While both the video and the reading were material resources, they provided ideational resources for the types of things that were put in question at Redwood and, through that, the possibilities of being successful in school.

However, while ideational resources are offered to students as they enter into Redwood, the adoption of these resources is not the same for every student. Both Lori and Nancy identified the fact that students' personal histories influence the speed to which they take on the ideational resources such as a critique of mainstream education. "Redwood isn't enough of an all encompassing scenario to bring everybody out that, out of what their pushed into," Nancy said during one of her interviews, "I think that we do a good job with people who haven't been completely poisoned by the culture that we live in, but there're people who we can't reach." In another one of the interviews with Nancy I asked about the students in the class she was co-teaching. In her response she identified a sub-group from the class.

> Like, they've already got Redwood down and they're just going to keep getting awesomer and awesomer. Like they came to Redwood already Redwood kids and there's a certain amount of people who just do that. I was one of them. You just come to Redwood and you're already a Redwood kid and so you don't need to spend a lot of time becoming a Redwood kid. So they came and just opened up.

In this quote Nancy brought up the idea of alignment in that students come to Redwood with more or less experience engaging in the ideational resources and practices present at Redwood. Those students who have self-recognized experiences engaging in the ideational resources present at Redwood, those students Nancy described as 'already a Redwood kid', are immediately on an inbound trajectory towards becoming an old-timer in the school, quickly adopting the resources available at the school. Put another way, for some students the boundary between past educational environments and Redwood may be more malleable, blurring the line between newcomer and old-timer. However, students that are unfamiliar with the ideational resources present at the school may not as easily become successful at the school. This may result in students remaining on the periphery of the school or perhaps dropping out.

## School as Community and Family

As I mentioned earlier in the paper, the ideational resource of critiquing mainstream education was directly connected to the fact that they were now attending a school that they saw as outside the mainstream. In both student interviews and classroom observations, Nancy and Lori referred to the school community as the 'Redwood Bubble', indicating that there were somewhat different norms inside versus outside the bubble. In a class discussion about school improvement that I observed, Lori advocated for more work in the community in order to learn about the norms outside of school and to promote what the school stood for.

While Lori and Nancy critiqued mainstream education and their own educational histories, they framed Redwood as an open and welcoming community that was rarely divided into cliques. Nancy described her thoughts when she was a newcomer to the school: "Redwood is the best place in the world, Redwood is so fantastic, it's social justice oriented, the community is completely accepting, like magnanimously beautiful." Similarly, Lori described her initial months at Redwood: "And I just feel like I knew every single person… like I was pretty much friends with everyone and that was pretty great." When asked about the elements of the school that contributed to their sense of community both students immediately referenced Advisory.

## Advisory as an Entry Point

Logistically, Advisory at Redwood met once a week and was a time when students heard school wide announcements. However, it was also a time that the students and the Advisor simply spent time together – sharing humorous readings, group discussions about classes or movies, or eating bread that someone had baked. When asked what the goal of Advisory is, Lori said, "we just laugh, we just goof around and I'm always just laughing… we always get into the greatest conversations and I just feel like it's a great part of Redwood." At other points in the interview Lori described Advisory as "just kind of like a family within the community", helping students "get close to people and just like realize that school isn't just about work. You know, it's about community and interacting with other people that you wouldn't normally." In both of these quotes Lori described the ideational resource that Advisory provided, in which the roles of students and teachers, Advisory norms, and the forms of self-expression were based on laughing and existing as a small community. Advisory provided an example of how to interact with the world at Redwood, with old-timers modeling this process to newcomers. In a similar fashion, Nancy discussed the importance of Advisory for a new student to the school, describing it as "a safe space where you can be in a large group of your peers… and have it not be related to homework in any kind of context… Advisory is like where you ask questions when you're terrified."

Thinking back to earlier in the paper when Nancy brought up the idea of unzipping, it seems that the practices of Advisory acted as a resource to help students "unzip" and be successful at the school in non-academic terms. According to Nancy, Advisory provided a smaller community in which new students could become more successful members of the school, participating in the joint enterprises of laughing, talking, and asking questions about the opportunities and practices of the school. This then opened the potential for students to become successful members of the larger school community.

## Teachers as Advisors, Advocates, and Friends

Advisors also acted as an important relational and ideational resource. Lori talked about the valuable role that Advisors play, saying: "It's just so important to have like that one person that you look up to there to help you through everything and not just school shit, like everything in your life." In this quote Lori talked about the value of having an adult who is involved in more than just schoolwork. Indeed, she had adopted the ideational resource in which having teachers involved in your life is prioritized. Nancy further identified the different roles of teacher and student when she said, "I'm really good friends with Trevor [her Advisor] I think, I like to think that, and I really care about him a lot." Similar to Advisory, Advisors at Redwood are very much a relational resource for the students. Advisors provided a positive relationship that helped students connect with the practices at Redwood. However, through the relational resources of Advisory and Advisors, students are also introduced to ideational resources that redefine what relationships look like in school amongst students and with adults. So, too, are students provided ideational resources that redefine how time in school is spent and the definition of school success. Within this ideational resource that Advisors provide, the role of a teacher and the role of a student shift and the boundaries of teaching are no longer confined to the school day or specific content. Nancy discussed the ways in which adults at Redwood presented themselves as relational and ideational resources. "The teachers really do a lot of work to like make sure that students know that they care about them and trust them. That's a really important thing at Redwood, that the teachers trust the students." It's important to note that, in Nancy's quote, teachers are not just relational resources by the nature of supporting the students, but that they trust the students as well. Again, this relational resource provided an ideational resource model of adult-student relationships.

# Relevance to the Conference Theme

The themes identified in this paper provided insight into what it means to be a successful participant at Redwood. They also provide insight into the ideational resources available to students to become successful at the school and some of the processes of doing so. The ideational resources of critique and building community played different and complimentary roles in transitioning students to becoming old-timers to the school. The ideational resources promoted Redwood as being different from other schools, while also helping students simultaneously rewrite their past educational experiences and identities and creating new ones. Instead of viewing their prior educational experiences as a product solely of themselves or their mismatch to the setting, this process of renarration asked the students to adopt an awareness of the limitation of the structures of their previous educational experiences. Students were also pushed to consider school as a community and a family, a model of school relationship different than much of mainstream education.

It may be useful for learning environments to consider the resources of critique and community when trying to help student renegotiate their educational identities, especially with students who have built up defenses in mainstream schooling. Considering alternative schools specifically, this study indicates that alternative schools always exist in comparison and in contrast to mainstream schools and that the ideational resources provided in alternative schools are bound up in this alternative-mainstream relationship. It may be useful for alternative schools to leverage this relationship to mainstream schools, like Redwood did, developing

ways to help students re-engage in school. It may also be beneficial to consider the ways that new adult-student relationships, school community, and integration of students academic, social, and emotional lives played into the process of students becoming old-timers in an alternative school. Finally, in considering newcomers and old-timers, it may be useful to consider how these distinctions are in part a product of time in a community, but also students' familiarity with the resources, roles, relationships, and norms available in the alternative school.

This paper contributes to the conference theme of learning and becoming in practice by looking at some of the ways alternative school students learn to become successful students in school. In considering learning and becoming in practice, it is important to include the processes and practices of learning and becoming for students who have not been successful in school, in particular the ways that these students have re-engaged in school. Nancy and Lori identified that becoming a Redwood student entailed a process of renegotiating what in meant to learn and to be in school. By focusing on the ideational resources that these students used, I've presented potential ways to help more students become successful in school, increasing the possibility of, as Nancy put it, saving lives.

## Endnotes

(1) All names of schools and participants are pseudonyms
(2) By 'unsuccessful' I cast a wide net, considering success in mainstream schools to be both academic and social in nature. By 'marginalization' I mean the social process of individuals feeling powerless in their own education. Often marginalization involves historically marginalized groups such as racial and ethnic minorities, youth labeled disabled, and youth identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning youth (LGBTQ).
(3) Willis does follow "the lads" into informal settings where they are the dominant culture and Eckert makes note of the working class settings that help inform the culture of burnouts.

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