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At-Risk Students' Perception of the Effectiveness of Alternative Schools

Tara D. Cunningham Cantey

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AT-RISK STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

By

Tara D. Cunningham Cantey

Bachelor of Science
Winthrop University, 1994

Master of Arts
South Carolina State University, 1998

Master of Arts
The Citadel, 2002

Educational Specialist
South Carolina State University, 2010

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Accepted by:

Leigh K. D'Amico, Major Professor

Terrance McAdoo, Committee Member

Suha Tamim, Committee Member

Bernice D. Cooper, Committee Member

Tracey L. Weldon, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. First, my parents, James S. “Butch” and Mildred Cunningham, who always saw the best in me and loved me unconditionally, I appreciate you for instilling the importance of education, going beyond parental requirements, and working tirelessly to ensure I lived up to my potential and reached my goals. Thank you for giving me what you were unable to have for yourselves. You are the true definition of LOVE and I am beyond BLESSED that God chose you to be my parents. I LOVE both of you dearly.

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Abstract

The need for new and innovative alternatives to traditional high schools has never been greater. Alternative schools operate today as a secret, hidden educational system, often providing much needed support for at-risk students. These schools often have little to no accountability for student achievement. Enrollment at alternative schools is increasing at an alarming rate mainly due to zero tolerance policies and students feeling disengaged with the traditional methods of education. For many years the education system has been rather traditional in teaching/content delivery format. One of the greatest advancements has been technology. However, during the Covid-19 virus pandemic, beyond the heavy implementation of technology, the educational system has had to transition to alternative methods of instruction and delivery. Subsequently, several strategies utilized and observations gleaned during this time can have a positive outcome on the operations, administration, environment, instruction, engagement, and performance at alternative schools. For students who are enrolled in alternative schools, implementation of pandemic methodologies can foster students' favorable perceptions of engagement and encourage their intrinsic motivation for academic and personal success--positive educational outcomes.

This action research sought to answer questions surrounding student achievement and their perception of the critical factors they deem are effective for success at an alternative school. Embedded by a theoretical framework developed from critical theory, self-determination theory, and student voice, this action research examined students'

lived experiences in an alternative school program and compared instruction of a traditional setting to determine if their educational needs were being met and identify any opportunities for improvement. Findings suggest that learning environment, flexible curriculum, and teacher-student relationships are paramount in the success of alternative schools.

Key words: Alternative School, Non-Traditional, At-Risk, Flexible Curriculum, and Action Research

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List of Abbreviations

AP	Advanced Placement
APA.....	American Psychological Association
BEDS	Basic Education Data Systems Codes
BPNS.....	Basic Psychological Needs Scale
DJJ.....	Department of Juvenile Justice
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NCEE	National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance
NCSE	National Center for School Engagement
PAS	Pathway Alternative School (Pseudonyms)
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
USDA.....	United States Department of Agriculture

Chapter 1: Introduction

Topic and Background

At the 2005 National Governors' Conference, Bill Gates proclaimed, "Our high schools were designed fifty years ago to meet the needs of another age. Until we design them to meet the needs of this century, we will keep limiting—even ruining—the lives of millions of Americans every year" (Murray, 2005, p. 1). While not an education scholar, Gates' comments reflect the concerns of many educators, policymakers, and scholars regarding the effectiveness of high schools in the United States. In fact, the Governors' Conference at which Gates spoke was convened specifically to discuss how to initiate change to improve high schools. In a very real sense, high schools are the final battleground for the lives of at-risk youth. The students have grown up and are often angry enough to cause severe problems for teachers, principals, and communities. Many of these students are filled with feelings of rage, hopelessness, and being overlooked, disregarded, and labeled resulting from the humiliations and ostracisms incurred by the traditional school experience. Oftentimes, the outcomes are often dropping out or expulsion; thus, decreasing graduation rates (Murray, 2005).

All students learn in different ways. For some, the traditional classroom setting may not be an effective means to obtain a high school diploma. There are many reasons that a student becomes at-risk of not graduating. Alternative schools have been the

salvation for some of these students. Smaller class sizes, and the individualized attention that comes as a result, are important aspects an alternative setting can provide. For various reasons, many students involved in the alternative school's curricular approaches have found academic and personal successes they did not find in the traditional classroom setting. Students learn most effectively by doing. Yet, the regular classroom setting continues to include textbooks and the teacher as the primary means of transferring knowledge. It is important to engage students in their own learning. Teachers need to help them see the connection between learning and application to the real world of work. However, there are other factors that are part of an effective alternative school program.

Schools in the United States have struggled with educating disenfranchised students for nearly 150 years. School divisions are continuously searching for new and creative curricula to address changing student needs. From the U.S. Department of Education to local school board members, educators are working to discover creative and accountable alternatives to address students that are having difficulty in traditional school settings. According to Cash (2004), alternative schools meet the variety of student and family needs and the social behaviors required for youth in today's world. Alternative programs also offer school and community leaders the opportunity to fulfill their legal responsibility to provide equal access to education for all students. The question that districts must answer is how will the instructional delivery model be designed?

In many instances, traditional educational settings do not meet the academic, social, and/or emotional needs of at-risk students. Many at-risk students are suspended or choose to drop out before completing the requirements needed to achieve graduation. Research suggests that students who experience a disconnect from mainstream learning

environments tend to suffer adverse effects in their adult lives. Many students find the opportunity to reconnect to the educational environment through alternative education settings (Barth, 1990). Students who are suspended from the traditional education setting are often disciplinary referrals assigned to nontraditional schools, also known as alternative schools. These schools must be equipped to meet the academic, social, behavioral, and emotional needs of students to increase the likelihood of success for the student—a decrease in deviant behavior and/or graduation.

An effective alternative program design has specific components that should prove beneficial in meeting the needs of at-risk students. First and foremost, alternative programs should be governed by leaders who are visionaries, supportive in nature, and strong in their leadership practices. These leaders should hire and retain staff members who have a genuine concern for the well-being and success of all students. All teachers and staff should demonstrate high expectations for themselves, as well as the students, and should maintain a highly engaging relationship with the students. There should be a holistic approach to teaching and the dispensation of services to students. The student-teacher ratio should be kept to a minimum to provide for a more individualized and flexible delivery of instruction. There should also be a comprehensive counseling program that encompasses a wide range of services provided for students with varying issues affecting their academic performance. The school should be safe and orderly, maintaining a family-like atmosphere. School leaders should indeed hold students accountable for their actions, while being fair and equitable in the execution of consequences and interventions for inappropriate behaviors. Through the students' perspectives, taken as a whole, by empirically understanding the dynamics of the

alternative school institutional culture, this study has the potential to advance the quality of services rendered in this academic environment (Gamble Townsend, 2011).

The focus of the writer's Dissertation in Practice (DiP) was to better understand the effectiveness of an alternative school program as perceived by at-risk high school students in grades nine through 12, specifically as compared to traditional schools.

Statement of the Problem

In a large rural and urban school district in South Carolina, approximately 120 students (95 males and 25 females) are re-assigned to the district's alternative school program because of discipline infractions, attendance, or poor grades. Certified teachers using the approved district's curriculum with a flexible delivery model instruct students placed at this alternative school. Without a clear understanding of why at-risk students succeed or dropout, it is difficult for educators to develop and implement or adjust successful educational programming to meet the needs of at-risk students in an alternative setting. Due to the lack of research involving at-risk students in a nontraditional setting, the critical factors that are needed for success are limited. This study sought to provide pertinent information needed from the perspective of the student and their lived experiences to gain insight into what assisted them with being successful.

Most of these students already experienced academic difficulties in the traditional high school with certified teachers. How did being in a smaller setting using a different instructional approach meet their needs? How was the program academically beneficial to student achievement? How are the needs of struggling students being met? This action research attempted to provide critical answers to the effectiveness of this alternative school program based on the perception of the students.

There is an increasing concern within the education community that as the at-risk population grows existing educational programs and schools are becoming less adept at addressing the needs of the nontraditional learners. Some educational leaders are responding accordingly, and nontraditional programs are increasing in number and size. While public education is experiencing a rise in alternative schooling, the practices and characteristics of these programs are not so widely known. Alternative education has been evolving largely in practice and not particularly through theory (Raywid, 2001). Such a difference in the evolution of alternative education has brought forth advantages and disadvantages for alternative education programs.

Alternative education programs have been criticized for development and implementation without sound planning, adequate staffing, and other organizational flaws (Raywid, 2001). Additionally, as alternative education programs grow in servicing at-risk youth populations, there is speculation that there is a shift in focus away from program factors not specifically tied to educational accomplishment (Raywid, 2001) and more toward resolving social ills. A shift in educational resources, including funding to support alternative education programs, often receives a critical eye. A review of the literature reveals studies have been conducted to determine the characteristics and effectiveness of alternative education programs, particularly in South Carolina (Doran, 2005). In addition to the scarcity of literature and empirical studies relative to the topic, those that are in existence are fairly dated. Given the continued challenge of keeping students in school and a rise in dropout prevention efforts, it is reasonable and timely to examine alternative measures aimed at keeping students in school, increasing academic achievement, and reducing behavioral challenges.

Prevatt and Kelly (2003) conducted a thorough review of the research evaluating dropout prevention programs and found that few studies have evaluated programs, their effectiveness, and that schools are not adopting research-based prevention programs. School efforts and responses aimed at reducing dropouts are designed and developed at the local level, and effective intervention strategies may not be getting noted or replicated. The usefulness and value of alternative schools is worth questioning. Questioning and examining the characteristics of alternative education schools and programs can provide information of practices and establish a framework of what alternative schooling is offering in the state of South Carolina. This information can then be applied to help educators better determine services that can be approximated or even replicated for the advancement of all learners.

Currently, there are 80 school districts in South Carolina, all of which offer an alternative school option that is managed by the local school district using guidelines provided by South Carolina Department of Education Alternative School Division. There is a misconception of the type of student that is enrolled in alternative schools. However, students with an array of ability levels attend non-traditional schools for a variety of reasons. According to Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela (2019), students enroll because of attendance issues, discipline infractions, medical problems, lack of motivation or family support to just name a few. However, it is important for students, parents, and educators to be aware of factors that plague at-risk youth. Identifying these factors will prove beneficial to educators and traditional school systems in assisting with developing and implementing strategies to help students be successful in traditional settings. Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela (2019) noted that there is limited research and documentation on

the non-traditional strategies that are employed in alternative schools to help students experience success. These strategies could serve as a blueprint for traditional schools to reach at-risk youths in the traditional setting.

The educational system has increasingly been using alternative schools to warehouse underperforming students considered disruptive to traditional schools (Lehr et al., 2009). The most vulnerable students, the most disadvantaged students, and the students most in need of academic intervention can be found in alternative schools (Arcia, 2006; Brown et al., 2009). Enrollment in alternative schools is increasing (Carver & Lewis, 2010), due in part to seemingly excessive use of zero tolerance policies (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force [APA], 2008; Martinez, 2009; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Traditionally underserved students are disproportionately suspended and expelled (APA, 2008) which results in pushing them out of their traditional schools and into alternative programs. Disenfranchised students are thereby marginalized. Although no standard definition for alternative education exists, there is consensus that alternative schools serve students labeled “at-risk” for academic failure (Lehr et al., 2009). Evidence shows current practices in many alternative programs do not result in improved academic achievement (Atkins et al., 2005; Kelly, 1993; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Muñoz, 2004; Warren, 2007).

Nationally, and in most states, alternative schools are not held to the same accountability standards as traditional schools (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Lehr et al., 2009; Martin & Brand, 2006). A few seemingly effective alternative programs have been identified and studied. Although these studies did not measure student academic achievement, they did identify program characteristics positively correlated

with student achievement in traditional schools (Atkins et al., 2005; Quinn, et al., 2006; Saunders & Saunders, 2001). In contrast, Warren (2007) stated, “research on effective alternative programs is almost nonexistent” (p. 14). This sentiment is echoed by Atkins et al. (2005), Foley and Pang (2006), Lehr and Lang (2003), Lehr et al. (2009), and Quinn, et al. (2006), who call for further research in all aspects of alternative education, emphasizing the need for research on student outcomes. The small amount of research published thus far has primarily used quantitative survey data conducted in cross case, statewide, or national studies. These surveys have pursued convergence in definitions, policies, and trends. The remaining qualitative studies have been primarily descriptive studies focused on policy, procedures, curriculum, and general environment, to identify components that either contribute to or hinder effective alternative education. A need exists in the literature for an in-depth study of student outcomes that not only obtains quantitative results, but also explains the results in more detail from the student perspective. Several studies of alternative schools have rightly emphasized the need to incorporate student voice into the research (Brown, 2007; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; de la Ossa, 2005; Loutzenheiser, 2002; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009), since to date, we know little about how well alternative schools are meeting the needs of the students who attend them.

Do alternative schools reengage their students? How does learning, academic achievement, and personal development in alternative programs compare to the outcomes at traditional schools? Is alternative education really an alternative or just a place to hide and hold disenfranchised students? Alternative program students are the best source for answers to these questions. This research sought to authorize the student perspective, by

making meaning of their experiences and telling their stories. If we want answers to the above questions, we need to listen to students “with the following convictions: that young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling; that their insights warrant not only attention but also the responses of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 359). School and district leaders in alternative education need the product of this research to help them implement recognized, effective practices that will increase student learning. Policy makers need to understand the systemic result of placing students in alternative education. Student outcomes need to be identified, measured, and described, to inform practitioners, policy makers and researchers throughout the educational establishment.

Study Rationale

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, changed the focus of education. This act increased the level of accountability for schools and placed a more profound emphasis on the educational practices affecting at-risk students. According to the National Center for School Engagement [NCSE] (2012), at-risk students are students that possess one or more of the described characteristics, but not limited to, being homeless or transient, involved in drugs or alcohol, abused sexually, physically, or emotionally, mentally ill, neglected at home or live in stressful family environments, lacking social or emotional support, and/or involved in delinquent activities such as gangs (www.schoolengagement.org, 2013). Based upon the fact that all the above are contributing factors to school failure that traditional schools were not or could not address effectively, alternative schools have emerged. Many alternative programs

successfully establish a caring and supportive environment that has a positive effect on student self-esteem and sense of belonging. However, most of these schools fail to provide a rigorous academic curriculum (Fairbrother, 2008; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Muñoz, 2004). The students that attend alternative schools thrive in a non-traditional environment. Therefore, they tend to excel in programs that are hands-on, and computer based (McCall, 2003).

Purpose Statement

There is a silent epidemic plaguing our most vulnerable students in traditional schools. To break the cycle of educational inequality, alternative schools need to offer an educational experience equal to or better than found in their traditional counterparts, because their average student body often live in poverty or other challenging socioeconomic circumstances. This study described and analyzed student achievement and experiences in an alternative school. The two-phased, explanatory case study gathered and analyzed quantitative data from a sample of students enrolled for 45 days or more. Then examine the reasons behind those results by interviewing the participants. Emphasis was placed on a narrative inquiry into student educational experiences as this study focused on understanding the lived experiences of students in alternative schools.

Researcher Positionality

As an advocate for children and former alternative school administrator, the researcher has been quite disappointed in the manner decision-makers in various school districts decide to educate those who could be considered a most vulnerable population. As a current special education teacher, it is the researcher's opinion that most districts have not allocated appropriate resources to alternative schools. Appropriate resources

would be defined as money, materials, support, and personnel in various areas of education and related service areas. Student achievement of at-risk students is suffering due to poor implementation of academic standards, delivery of standards, and the proper balance of challenge yet support. The desire is for this action research to be the catalyst for change in districts that may not provide the necessary support that at-risk students need to be academically and emotionally successful. A key goal for the data collected is to demonstrate the intersection of academic and emotional success of students placed in an alternative setting when critical factors are addressed. With this, the researcher hopes this action research serves as a springboard to have meaningful conversation with valid data to support much needed changes in current alternative school programs.

Research Question

The overarching question that guided this study: How do students attending an alternative school perceive the overall effectiveness of their school-based experiences and academic trajectory?

The secondary research questions were as follows:

- A. What are the students' perception of the curriculum and their achievement?
- B. How do students view the relation between their academic achievement using flexible practices versus using traditional methods using the same curriculum?
- C. What are the students' perception of the non-academic support received at the alternative school?

Assumptions

The assumption was that all students would answer the survey and interview questions truthfully. It was assumed the research participants understood the questions they were asked on both instruments. The researcher attempted to mitigate and reduce confusion but could not control errors in participants' understanding of questions and bias.

Scope

The scope of this study was limited to the only alternative school in a school district located in the Low Country of South Carolina. Although, the findings are limited to one school district within South Carolina, they may be relevant to other school districts in South Carolina and the United States. Conducting research outside this school district was not practicable, but that does not impede the findings from being applicable to other school districts with alternative schools because of the critical factors that at-risk students perceived as effective for success.

Theoretical Framework

This action research encompassed critical theory, student voice research and self-determination theory as the core theories of the literature that defined this body of work. Critical Theory was developed at the Frankfurt School by Horkeimer as response to works of Marx, Kant, Hegel, and Weber. Student voice research is situated within two main theoretical perspectives, critical theory and social constructivism. It is almost impossible to use critical theory in action research involving students and not mention student voice. Student voice research gives the basis for the students to be heard. Self-Determination Theory is the leading theory in human motivation. SDT was developed by

psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci and it grew out of the research on intrinsic motivation. Together, these three key components shaped this action research and linked it to proven literature and valid research.

Critical Theory

Critical theory is not only part of the researcher's epistemology, but it also provided the foundation for this study. Alternative education literature suggests a need for studies highlighting student experiences conducted with a critical theory or social justice perspective (Brown, 2007; Loutzenheiser, 2002; Muñoz, 2004; Poyrazli et al., 2008). "Critical theory is, at its center, an effort to join empirical investigation, the task of interpretation, and a critique of this reality" (McLaren & Girarelli, 1995, p. 2). Critical theory holds that researchers should question norms, look deep for answers, and embrace social, cultural, political, economic, and psychological complexity.

Student Voice

If critical theory is the foundation, then student voice is the rationale of this study. Through their stories, students provide intensity, depth and a unique perspective. Students are capable of expressing their views about their learning and school experience (Groves, 2010; Kruse, 2000; Storz, 2008). The voices of students are the starting point for critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1989; McLaren, 1994) and essential to successful school reform efforts (Fielding, 2001; Fullan, 2007; Lee, 1999; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Student perspectives are important to understanding how attending alternative school affects student academic, social and emotional wellbeing (Brown, 2007; de la Ossa, 2005). The voices of students help researchers appreciate how school contexts shape student behavior, and contribute or discourage persistence in school (de la Ossa, 2005;

Loutzenheiser, 2002; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). Students identify factors that contribute to or hinder motivational classroom experiences, thereby influencing their academic achievement (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; de la Ossa, 2005; Loutzenheiser, 2002).

Self-determination Theory

Most students arrive at alternative schools disengaged from the educational system. These students are often described as unmotivated, implying that they bring very little energy or commitment to their academic activities. Understanding student self-regulation and motivation are therefore central to the analysis of student outcomes in alternative education. This study uses self-determination theory (SDT) to provide a scaffold for that understanding (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

SDT posits that humans have three basic psychological needs, whose satisfaction is critical to wellbeing, health, and personal growth. These needs are innate and universal. Human beings strive consciously or unconsciously toward situations that support the satisfaction of these needs. The three needs are autonomy – feeling ownership for choices and behaviors, competence- feeling effective, and relatedness – feeling connected to others. To the extent an environment satisfies these needs, it supports engagement in and mastery of skills and concepts within it (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Substantial research has linked basic needs satisfaction to student classroom behavior, academic achievement, cognitive learning, and persistence in school (Brokelman, 2009; Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Ryzin et al., 2007). This is true across gender, age, and cultures (Chirkov, 2009; Guay et al., 2008; Jang et al., 2009; Sheldon et al., 2009; Shih, 2008). Support of these basic psychological needs has been correlated to

intrinsic motivation, which in turn has been associated with student engagement and academic achievement (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Ryzin et al., 2007). SDT places particular emphasis on support for autonomy. Research shows that specific teacher and administrator behaviors either support or hinder student perceived autonomy satisfaction and intrinsic motivation (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Teacher support for student autonomy has been correlated to the autonomy support they receive (Roth et al., 2007), providing an avenue for improving the instructional environment.

Alternative education schooling has theoretical and philosophical differences from traditional public schooling yet does not have a specific theoretical frame unto itself. Rather, alternative schools and programs tend not to be rooted in a traditional way of learning and have mixed theoretical and philosophical principles guiding varied teaching methods and instructional approaches. Such a difference in the evolution of alternative education has brought forth advantages, disadvantages, and criticism of alternative schooling. Upon review of literature and research commonalities of the guiding principles of student-centered, progressive, and holistic educational theories are evidenced in approaches to alternative schooling. While the intellectual aspects and identity of the student are primary within traditional schooling, alternative schooling views the student as a whole person, including the emotional, physical, social, and intellectual aspects of the student. Students are engaged in a world as it presents itself, not the world as divided into separate categories or disciplines. Alternative schooling is often distinguished from traditional schooling based on the emphasis upon human development. Alternative schools and programs focus more on the interests and capacities of the developing person than on adult expectations or views of what children

need to know and to be able to do (Crain, 2003). Such a developmental perspective is not unfamiliar to educational theory and related movements.

Alternative schooling, borrowing developmental and progressive perspectives, highlights a regard for all students as individuals. Traditional schools, while recognizing students as individual people, tend to be dominated by a standards movement in which all students are expected to meet the same measurable goals within the same time frame tending to place an emphasis on same-ness over individuality.

Methods

A two-phased, explanatory study described and analyzed the outcomes for students attending an alternative school operated by the District Office of Education in the Low Country of South Carolina. The study was participant-selection variant of an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The first phase was a quantitative exploration of student characteristics and perceived academic achievement through a survey. The purpose of this phase was to establish distinct data that reflects the students' experience at the alternative school in various stages and situations. This data was used to gauge the students' perception of critical factors that are needed for success at the alternative school. The second phase involved inquiry into student lived educational experiences of attending an alternative school. This phase intended to describe accomplishments, consequences, intellectual and personal development, attitudes, values, and beliefs that students acquire while attending an alternative program. The researcher also identified structural and cultural aspects that contribute to or hinder academic achievement in the second phase.

In the first phase, students completed a survey that compares critical factors at the alternative school to their experiences at their traditional school. The researcher designed a comparative narrative analysis survey. The survey was developed to seek variables that enhance the amount of success a program had when working with at-risk students.

Students from the first phase were the participants in the second phase that included semi-structured interviews on a strictly volunteer basis. These interviews captured each student's lived educational experience. The surveys and questionnaires provided detailed information that explained the students' perception of effectiveness of the alternative school. Integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies provided a more comprehensive picture of the educational experiences of students attending alternative school than either methodology could on its own.

Summary and Conclusion

My problem of practice involves at-risk students placed in an alternative school receiving the same core instruction as their peers in a traditional setting. Currently, the state of South Carolina mandates that all school districts provide an alternative setting for students, but has not fully funded a comprehensive program and strict guidelines that all must follow like California or New Jersey. Often districts are allowed to develop and implement their own curriculum and related support services. My research seeks to examine if the needs of the students are being met through the use of flexible curriculum and what are the perceptions of the students using this method. Alternative schools are the answer for at-risk students who otherwise would not graduate from high school. However, the decision makers should consider that online instruction can be developed programs and customized learning opportunities that can assist students

with taking responsibility for their learning at a pace that will yield success (McCall, 2003).

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Education is often viewed as the key to economic and personal fulfillment. Despite this view, not all youth succeed within the conventional educational paradigm. Many at-risk students receive an experience modified by technique, expectation, or environment. Others are educated in alternative settings administered by the local education system. According to a 2014 study by The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), students in alternative programs are often there because of academic or emotional challenges. These may include poor attendance, suspension, expulsion, family stress, emotional difficulties, learning disabilities, poor grades, disruptive classroom behavior, or pregnancy.

These nontraditional educational programs were introduced in the 1960s in attempts to reach students who had been unsuccessful in traditional school settings. In 1973, there were 464 alternative schools in various states; by 1975, there were 5,000 such schools nationwide. During the 2017-2018 school year, there were 10,900 alternative school programs in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Alternative schools have increased in popularity and in number and continue to serve a wider range of students with varying needs (Cash, 2004).

Kleiner, Porch, and Farris (2002) indicated that approximately 612,000 students nationwide were being educated in alternative educational programs at the beginning of the 21st Century. This comprised roughly 1.3% of the total student population. According to Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006), students enrolled in alternative education programs are

disproportionately poor, disabled, bilingual, and from minority groups. The National Center for Educational Statistics indicated that 735, 088 students were educated in nationwide alternative schools during the 2017-2018 academic year. While enrolled in these programs, students attend classes of, on average, 12-15 students (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006), with significant amounts of academic and behavioral support. In these environments, many are able to improve their academic performance and begin to exhibit behaviors that are more appropriate.

Alternative education programming—often featuring flexible scheduling, multiple means to earn credit, differentiated instruction, and personalized learning—offers at-risk students more customized options for achieving a high school diploma. While approaches vary considerably, alternative education options expand the number of viable pathways by which students may earn a diploma and prepare for college and career success. Alternative options provide, arguably, the strongest examples of how to develop and scale customized learning opportunities. Alternative education providers have substantial experience in integrating new technologies, comprehensive supports, and work-based learning opportunities into academic programming (Kimmons, 2015).

The purpose of this research is to examine and compare the effectiveness of an alternative educational program to a traditional educational program. This research also reviewed and expounded on general differences of alternative school and traditional school programs for at-risk students. After careful consideration and research, this study addressed the academic and emotional needs of at-risk high school students.

Alternative schools, according to the Rennie Center (2013) have more autonomy in choosing curricula and teaching methods than traditional schools. This leeway allows

greater flexibility in catering to students' academic and emotional needs. Some alternative schools take a holistic approach to education, providing students with therapeutic programs and support groups to help students with emotional challenges.

There are various avenues that students can take to complete the requirements for a high school diploma. However, this study examined the effectiveness of alternative programs in helping students obtain their diploma or equivalent credential. According to Cash (2004), alternative schools meet the variety of student and family needs and the social behaviors required for youth in today's world. Alternative schooling also offers school and community leaders the opportunity to fulfill their legal responsibility to provide equal access to education for all students. The only question that the districts must answer is how do alternative school programs compare to traditional school programs?

Theoretical Framework

This research combined three overarching philosophies in its development and situation: Critical Theory, Student Voice, and Self-determination Theory. Because there is limited and/or obscured research on the effectiveness of alternative schools in various areas, it is vital to understand the theoretical framework that makes up this type of education. Three theories guided the development and outlined the findings of this action research.

Critical Theory

The primary research question for this study is grounded in critical theory and was developed after a critical review of research on alternative schools. As a result, critical theory must be the foundation to conduct this study. Examining alternative

schools to determine if they are providing a “true” alternative necessitates an investigation focused on collecting and analyzing data with an interpretive framework. When examined from the students’ viewpoint, a “true alternative” that provides them with what they perceive as critical factors for academic and emotional success as opposed to what others deemed appropriate. Asking the students’ perceptions and using that information to bring about change invokes action. It demonstrates critical theory’s goals of transformation and emancipation as noted by Guba & Lincoln (2005).

Critical theory is a vast, ever changing meta-theory. This theory is difficult to explain because there are many critical theories, and they are constantly changing but a central premise is challenging that there is only one-way of seeing or knowing (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). One of the main components that is found in critical theory is critical emancipation.

Critical emancipation involves identification of societal processes that prevent individuals and groups from influencing decisions that significantly affect their lives. The goal is to give a voice to the silenced. This part of critical theory is emphasized in student voice research, which seeks to provide students with the opportunities to take ownership over their learning and school experiences (Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007).

McNulty & Roseboro's (2009) research indicates that effective alternative schools listen to students and find ways to involve them in educational decision-making process. Daniels and Arapostathis (2005) reiterate that listening to students could help identify crucial factors to motivate reluctant learners. This action research is scaffolded by critical theory.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) aligns with the primary principles of critical theory in that “SDT is substantively focused on human liberation and enhancement, as well as on the association between our inherent tendencies toward active growth and realization of potentials and ambient social, economic, and cultural supports and obstructions” (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009, p.264). Critical theory focuses on every aspect of the student, while SDT focuses on the individual’s beliefs, experiences, and decisions. SDT assumes that a person’s behavior is determined by their perceptions and experiences. This assumption aligns with critical theory’s emancipation concept and is an appropriate frame for this research because it focuses on understanding lived experiences of at-risk students.

A commonality of SDT is the concept that all humans develop a sense of self and naturally strive to grow. Individuals search for new challenges and discover new perspectives (Ryan & Deci, 2002). People assimilate knowledge, customs, and values from their surroundings. Educators can use the natural curiosity of individuals to encourage innate tendencies and motivate and create active learners or they can introduce controls that stifle growth and result in disengagement of learning (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). SDT is a macro-theory of motivation and development that has been used by researchers for nearly 30 years in education to understand how aspects of school environment contribute or hinder individual student achievement.

There are some basic tenants that are related to SDT that are appropriate to examine for this research study. Ryan & Deci (2002) indicates that humans have basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are innate

and are found in all individuals regardless of age and culture. In addition, SDT suggests that individuals will strive to satisfy these needs, knowingly or unknowingly; and when given the opportunity, will gravitate toward environments that provide them.

Autonomy

Autonomy refers to the state of being in control of self. When the need of autonomy is satisfied, one feels that they are behaving in a way that is consistent with their values, interests and beliefs, even when outside influences are present. Many utilize autonomy and independence interchangeably, which leads to the misconception that there is opposition to structure. However, a person can autonomously act on requested behaviors if the requests align with an individual's values and beliefs. Research has linked students' perceived autonomy satisfaction to academic achievement and well-being (Brokelman, 2009; Jang et al., 2009). Often students end up in alternative school because of the conflict between their innate need of autonomy and the school's need for control.

Competence

The need for competence encourages individuals to seek experiences that correlates with their capabilities. Competence comes from feeling of confidence that one's skills are matched with the challenges of a task and is not something that can be acquired through skills or knowledge. You naturally have what it takes to complete the task. Growing competence satisfaction drives people to practice. Capabilities are attained and improved upon through practice (Ryan & Deci, 2002). In educational settings, students perceived competence has been associated with academic achievement, well-being, and persistence (Brokelman, 2009; Jang et al., 2009).

Relatedness

Relatedness is the feeling of being connected to others. It is the feeling of caring and being cared for by others. In alternative education research relatedness refers to as a “sense of belonging” (Poyrazli et al., 2008). Relatedness is about status or position, but about feeling a sense of security. It is concerned with being accepted by others and accepting others. Students perceived relatedness satisfaction has been correlated with well-being (Ryzin et al., 2009), academic achievement (Brokelman, 2009) and more satisfying learning experiences (Jang et al., 2009).

Students whose need for relatedness is satisfied are more likely to internalize and accept the values of those they have a connection with and environments in which they feel a sense of belonging with (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). In alternative programs that are deemed effective, there is an increase in a students’ sense of belonging. As noted earlier, there is a consensus among researchers that alternative schools with a caring and supportive environment are successful non-traditional programs (Poyrazli et al., 2008). Effective alternative or non-traditional schools appear to support students’ needs for relatedness better than traditional schools do.

Motivation

Motivation is intentionally taking actions to achieve goals. SDT believes that individuals seek challenges and experiences that integrate into themselves. Motivation is a component of SDT. There are three types of *motivation: intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation*. These types of motivation form a continuum of self-determination.

Intrinsic motivation

Intrinsic motivation is the most self-determined type of motivation and refers to pleasure and satisfaction that comes from participating in an activity from within. It does not require external rewards or penalties to encourage participation. The individual receives direct benefit from the experience.

External Motivation

External motivation can be positive and rewarding or negative and punishing. It is directly related to receiving an incentive to participate in the activity. According to Ryan and Deci (2002), external motivation is only effective periodically and/or temporarily with at-risk students. If a relationship is formed or the activity is not deemed a necessity by the student, the incentive is ineffective.

Amotivation

Amotivation is the lack of intention to act at all. It usually results from a lack of competence, not valuing the activity or the outcome or not expecting to have the desired results (Ryan and Deci, 2002). Autonomous motivation has been positively correlated with student achievement and positive outcomes.

Autonomous motivation and well-being are related to satisfaction of basic psychological needs being met. According to Ryan and Deci (2002) and Jung et al. (2009) students who perceive their teachers to be supportive of autonomy, competence, and relatedness have greater levels of perceived needs satisfaction and autonomous motivation. As this research examined students' lived experiences in alternative education, characteristics of support or hindrance of autonomy was identified.

Student Voice

Understanding what students think about their school experience is the final appropriate frame for this action research. Since the late 1980's, there has been a growing effort to listen to student voice in schools. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) stated that, "to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child" (p.168). Making the connection between student voice theory and critical theory is vital if educational research is going to make a difference in quality of students' educational experience and academic achievement. Dialoging with students gives a voice to students about their learning (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). According to research (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005) dialogue must involve mutual respect between student and teacher. Critical theory insists that educators must do more than just ask questions, it must involve inquiry and in-depth conversation. It requires educators to think critically about student thoughts and perceptions, and then act thoughtfully and purposefully on the findings (Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2002). When teachers dialogue with "at-risk" students, they can uncover structural impediments that usually go unnoticed (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). By dialoging with students using a narrative inquiry, this study discovered supports to help strengthen, and barriers that can be removed, to aid students in successful academic and behavioral outcomes at alternative schools.

Historical Context

The development of alternative schools began in the 1960s during time of great innovation and change. The emergence of alternative schools originated in a search for

the ideal school (Barr & Parrett, 1995, 1997). Ideal schooling situations would cause students and teachers to work in a learning community to which parents would want to send their children. Such a school would be a different model than traditional public high schools. Though one ideal school for all will never exist, a search by local design teams for their ideal school will lead to greater diversity in secondary education, one built first and foremost on the needs of students. Alternative schools, and the creation of ideal schools that meet the needs of all students in a diverse system, symbolize a successful approach to school reform (Barr & Parrett, 1995, 1997; Cash, 2004). Because well-conceived and developed alternative schools were often successful in educating all their students, alternative schools gradually became known in many places as schools for students at-risk of school failure.

Alternative education schooling has theoretical and philosophical differences from traditional public schooling, yet it does not have a specific theoretical frame unto itself. Rather, alternative schools and programs tend not to be rooted in a traditional way of learning and have mixed theoretical and philosophical principles guiding varied teaching methods and instructional approaches. Alternative education has been evolving largely in practice and not particularly through theory (Raywid, 2001). Such a difference in the evolution of alternative education has brought forth advantages, disadvantages, and criticism of alternative schooling. Upon review of literature and research commonalities of the guiding principles of child student-centered, progressive, and holistic educational theories are evidenced in approaches to alternative schooling. While the intellectual aspects and identity of the student are primary within traditional schooling, alternative schooling views the student as a whole person, including the emotional, physical, social,

and intellectual aspects of the student. Students are engaged in a world as it presents itself, not the world as divided into separate categories or disciplines. Alternative schooling is often distinguished from traditional schooling based on the emphasis upon human development. Alternative schools and programs focus more on the interests and capacities of the developing person than on adult expectations or views of what children need to know and to be able to do (Crain, 2003).

Often reflected in approaches to alternative schooling is the theoretical frame and movement of progressive education initially developed by Francis Parker and John Dewey. John Dewey observed that children take a lively interest in activities outside of school and believed that schools should be places where children also find learning exciting and meaningful (Dewey, 1959).

Alternative schooling, borrowing developmental and progressive perspectives, highlights a regard for all students as individuals. Traditional schools, while recognizing students as individual people, tend to be dominated by the standards movement in which all students are expected to meet the same measurable goals within the same time frame tending to place an emphasis on sameness over individuality.

As far back as the 1990s, alternative education frequently has been noted for its development as a promising strategy in reducing the dropout rate by attending to students' learning styles and needs so they can be successful beyond high school. In the last decade, a renewed focus on addressing the dropout crisis has emerged, catalyzed by national philanthropic foundations like the Youth Transitions Funders Group and America's Promise Alliance. In this context, national and state education policy

discussions have begun to consider alternative education options as part of a larger strategy to ensure all students are prepared for success in college and careers.

It is vital to the success of alternative students that their educational experiences incorporate both traditional and progressive educational methods. The traditional method would be the use of teachers to facilitate them through their online instructional program. The teachers would be used as guides as the students navigate their paths. The progressive method is the use of computers and peers to help with the learning. Both are intricate and vital to the success of the student and cannot effectively exist on its own.

Dewey (1938) discussed the importance of continuity for the learners. Teachers must understand that all students bring unique past and present experiences with them. These past experiences will affect and influence present and future situations. In an attempt to increase the graduation rate and decrease the dropout rate, teachers and administrators need to recognize and embrace how the present educational moment can affect all future moments for each student. Alternative education programs combat the factors hindering the progress of students in a traditional setting when they are allowed to use their past experiences, interest, and strength to customize their online learning program (Kimmons, 2015).

Alternative education school growth was rapidly expanding from its early inception (Raywid, 1981). Another factor contributing to the growth of alternative schooling was a rejection of the conventional views of education in lieu of different, or "alternative visions grounded in a genuine desire to support children's natural ways of learning and growth" (Miller, 2000, p. 339). However, this quest for innovation and a student-centered approach began to lose momentum in the early 1970s. The emphasis

shifted to a more conservative approach as federal education policies began to place greater emphasis on achievement standards. Alternative education schools and programs would soon become synonymous with "drop-out prevention programs", focusing on remediation over individual growth and creativity. Within the last decade, alternative education programs have reemerged. Though still often associated as a measure of drop-out prevention, alternative education schools and programs have been "designed to provide an alternative to dropping out of school, with special attention to the student's individual social needs and the academic requirements for a high school diploma" (NDPCIC, 2007, pg. 32). Yet, public education criticizes and has not fully accepted alternative education due in large part to its flexibility.

Alternative education has never achieved institutional legitimacy (Raywid, 1999). Although the program is often met with criticism, the alternative education movement is increasingly regaining momentum resulting in a proliferation of schools and programs (Ban & Parrett, 2001; Lang & Sleden, 2002; Raywid, 1994). Public schooling was established to bring forth the opportunity for all youth to learn, to achieve an improved quality of life, and to become productive citizens. It should then be the same for students who present as at-risk, given a variety of life's challenges. Just as with regular public schooling, Franklin (1992) notes,

“Alternative schooling is not an option, but an absolute requirement in every American community. Alternative schooling opportunities will be needed to accommodate the educational needs of its youth because the traditional school system, and particularly the traditional high school, can no longer serve the needs of the students and their family lifestyles common in the 1990s” (p. 6).

Alternative schooling meets the diverse needs of today's students and their families, as well as the social behaviors required for the youth of our nation to become productive citizens. There is much anecdotal literature about the effectiveness of alternative schools in keeping students in school. Alternative schools have been successful in reducing truancy, improving attitudes toward school, accumulating high school credits, and reducing behavior problems (Cash, 2004). Alternative education schooling also affords the public school system and its leaders a way to fulfill its responsibility to provide equal access to education with the added benefit, for all involved, of reducing the dropout rate. Therefore, it seems to only leave to question what kind of alternative schooling should be designed and made available within the public school system.

The early alternative school movement has had a lasting influence on public education by putting forward the idea that a single inflexible system that excluded certain students could not be tolerated, and that schools designed to meet the needs of students who were not served by the traditional system had to be developed. To better meet student needs, flexibility was granted in school organization and the creation of student-centered learning environments. Although many early experiments were short-lived, in a seminal study Raywid (1981) identified elements of innovation that contribute to academic success among students who attend alternative schools. The methodology used by Raywid was a scholarly analysis and brought greater credence to the alternative education movement.

As with any movement, change was difficult, as many early alternative schools struggled to align their characteristic need for individualization of student learning with

the economic efficiency and accountability demands of the traditional educational system (Crain, 2003). Barr and Parrett (1997) later elaborated on the elements of effective alternative schools that Raywid (1981) and others identified and made the important assumption that for alternative schools to be truly innovative and lasting, it is critical that school creators pay simultaneous attention to all of the elements of effective alternative schools during the development and implementation process.

The questions for this research study were generated from a critical need to compare the effectiveness of alternative schools to that of traditional schools and the need to understand the students' viewpoint of their experience making this study grounded in critical theory. Examining alternative schools with the goal of determining if they provide a "real" alternative necessitates an investigation focused on collecting and analyzing data with an interpretive framework that accepts complexity, conceives knowledge as being socially constructed, and pays particular attention to the role power plays. When examined from the student's viewpoint, is it a "real alternative" that provides students with a fair and equitable education, as opposed to a "reasonable solution" when compared to traditional schooling. Asking how effective alternative schools are invokes action. It embraces critical theory's goals of critique and transformation, restitution, and emancipation (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Critical theory is a large, ever changing, meta or über-theory. This theory is difficult to define because, as Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) explain, there are many critical theories, these theories are continually evolving, and by its nature, critical theory refutes the existence of one specific way of seeing and knowing.

Students Enrolled in Alternative Schools

The most common form of alternative school operating today to serve youth in at-risk situations is designed to be part of a school district's comprehensive dropout prevention program. The alternative school is usually part of the middle or high school program offered to secondary-aged students. The students attending these schools typically are underachieving and usually are deficient in credits to graduate, may have some emotional or behavioral issues that some deem challenging, or need a more individualized approach to learning (Coles et al., 2009). Yet, they desire to stay in school and gain their diplomas, or they have been placed in the school by the court system. In many communities, these alternative schools offer unique components to meet the individual needs of the students to help them earn high school credentials.

According to Cash (2004), alternative education is designed to meet the needs of students deemed at-risk of dropping out who are not succeeding in the traditional setting. Students are provided with a variety of options that can lead to graduation and are supported by services essential to success. While each alternative education program is unique, most share some common characteristics. Alternative programs typically have small teacher/student ratio, small student body, learning programs specific to student's needs and learning style, and flexible school schedule with community involvement and support.

Who are these students that are deemed at-risk or high-needs students that are served in an alternative setting? "At-risk" is a term that has been used for over 50 years to describe students who are unsuccessful in the traditional school setting. "High-needs students" is the term that has been coined and used in the last few years. According to the

U. S. Department of Education (2016) high-needs students are students at risk of educational failure or in need of special assistance and support. These students include those living in poverty, those that attend high-minority schools that are far below grade level, those that left school before receiving a high school diploma on time, who are homeless, who have disabilities or English is their second language. The United States Department of Labor states that it is critical for students who are substantially behind to have access to alternative education options (Aron, 2006).

Despite diversity, however, all alternative education programs are held accountable for helping students master academic standards and must comply with educational laws and rules or seek appropriate waivers. In 1997, the South Carolina legislature passed alternative education legislation to provide funding to school corporations, via a state grant, to help cover additional expenses inherent in alternative education. To qualify as an alternative education program, the program must be an educational program for eligible students that instructs the eligible students in a different manner than the manner of instruction available in a traditional school setting and meet their individual academic needs (Miller, 2000).

An alternative school is any school that offers alternative learning experiences beyond those provided by traditional schools. Because alternative schools function differently, it is difficult to give one definition. The philosophy and structure of alternative programs vary from one school district to another.

Types of Alternative School Programs and Their Impact on Students

Alternative schools offer short-term or long-term programs. An alternative school with a short-term program may be designed to help students improve their behavior or

academic skills and then return to their home school, an option that may be more suitable for elementary or middle school students. When students return to their home school, it is important for them to receive assistance from a transition specialist in order to readjust and maintain the improvements. Long-term programs may be more appropriate for high school students. Although they take students away from their peers in their home school, long term programs are more effective (Lampley and Johnson, 2010). Students are taught employment-related skills and still graduate from the program with a diploma from the school district.

Graduation is possible because alternative schools are flexible enough to address the needs of many different individuals through computer-based and traditional instruction along with other supports. Computer-based instruction, a prominent feature within alternative schools, eliminates the location barrier and opens the classroom to many different avenues.

Student perception of a school's culture has an important impact on the school's and students' success. In their study, Saunders and Saunders (2001) found that students perceived their alternative school experience significantly better than that of their traditional school interactions. The students' perceptions included their interaction with teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Alternative School Instructional Models

On-line learning became popular in the mid 1990's as a method of helping to meet the demands of students who wanted to earn Advanced Placement (AP) credit for college. The schools started using online learning in areas where they were experiencing teacher shortages. Today, it is widely regarded as the dominant instructional delivery tool

for alternative programs (Kronholz, 2011). Online learning takes on various formats depending on the needs of the students a school serves. What may have worked in a traditional school with a teacher leading the class may not work in an online course (Goldstein and Behuniak, 2012). There are several pathways for online courses to be delivered; they include teacher led, teacher facilitator, program based, and student paced (Steen, 2008).

U.S. Department of Education (2016) highlights several key findings that were identified from 2006-2016. First, students that used an online instructional program for all or part of their classes, on average, performed better than their peers in the same class with face-to-face instruction. Second, instruction that combined online and face-to-face instruction were more advantageous than a purely on-line or face-to-face delivery model. While there were other findings, it is significant to note that learners using an online instructional method spent more time on task than students in the traditional face-to-face educational setting and found greater benefit from online learning.

John Dewey's book *Experience and Education* written in 1938 serves as the foundation of how education is viewed today. He stated that the main purpose was to prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life, by teachers using textbooks and being the main vessel of knowledge and conduct. Dewey recognized that the former method alone would not produce lifelong learners and thinkers and sought an additional method to help students become successful. According to Dewey, "The rise of what is called new education and progressive schools is of itself a product of discontent with traditional education" (p.12). Dewey was giving the basis for alternative

education long before educating students in an alternative setting and using alternative approaches was ever considered.

Models of delivery vary, but it is common for alternative schools to take advantage of computer technology. There are those that are strictly computer-based and those that combine computer-based with traditional instruction. For the combined method, the class may meet as a group in person for several sessions and via the Internet for others. During the Internet meetings, students may interact through chat rooms, email, or by posting on bulletin boards.

Mason (1998) a proponent of online instruction for nontraditional classrooms, argues that students that are enrolled in alternative settings benefit from the use of online instruction because it offers flexibility and puts the student in charge of their learning. He goes on to push the Integrated Model of Computer Based Learning in Alternative settings. However, it necessary to have knowledgeable facilitators to assist and guide students through some academia components and goal support. The Integrated Model consists of collaborative activities, learning resources, and joint assignments. Most of the course is conducted online through discussion and carrying out tasks. This model supports the notion of a learning community in which the group directs the content and flow of instruction. Real-time communication might be video, audio, and/or text based and supports small-group activities.

Communication in online instruction is often referred to as —interaction and is widely seen in the literature (Frey & Alman, 2003). Several studies have determined that there is a need for online courses for alternative students to offer a successful interaction component (Frey & Alman, 2003).

Online instruction is designed to be unique and specific to each student's needs. It is not a cookie cutter approach to education and should not be treated as such. The traditional classroom would prove to be more beneficial to at-risk students if they understood that all students have experiences that could be utilized to help shape their educational future with the proper facilitation.

Student Choice and Self-Determination Theory

Certain theories suggest that teenagers and young adults may perform better in web-based learning environments, because such environments cater to their individual needs and learning preferences more so than face-to-face environments (Raywid, 2001). The online learning environment gives teenagers an opportunity to take on a more active role in the learning process.

Not only do the teenager or young adult learner want to be responsible for their learning, but they also like to speak about the experiences of their learning. Through their stories, students provided intensity, depth and a unique perspective. Students are capable of expressing their views about their learning and school experience (McCall, 2003). The voices of students are the starting point for critical pedagogy and essential to successful school reform efforts. Student perspectives are important to understanding how attending alternative school affects student academic, social and emotional wellbeing (Young, 1990). The voices of students help researchers appreciate how school contexts shape student behavior and contribute or discourage persistence in school. Students identify factors that contribute to or hinder motivational classroom experiences, thereby influencing their academic achievement (Raywid, 2001).

Significant research has connected students' fulfillment of basic needs satisfaction to classroom behavior, academic achievement, cognitive learning, and persistence in school (Brokelman, 2009; Hardre & Reeve, 2003). This transcends across gender, age, and cultures (Chirkov, 2009; Shih, 2008). Support of these basic psychological needs are connected to intrinsic motivation, which in turn has been associated with student engagement and academic achievement (Niemi & Ryan, 2009; Ryzin et al., 2007). SDT places particular emphasis on support for self-sufficiency. Research shows that specific behaviors of teachers either support or hinder student perceived autonomy satisfaction and intrinsic motivation (Niemi & Ryan, 2009). Teacher support for student individualism has been correlated to the autonomy support they receive (Kaplan, 2007), providing a pathway for improving the instructional environment.

Summary

School reform and restructuring research into alternative schools has shown that if alternatives to traditional schools are available to students at-risk of school failure, they will succeed (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Young, 1990). Though alternative schools have been around for decades, out of the necessity of meeting at-risk students' needs they have departed from traditional practice and become innovative models of school reform (Raywid, 1983). Incorporating factors associated with critical theory, self-determination theory, and student voice, alternative schools have provided students with education and support systems that may better meet their needs. Alternative education, meaning alternative schools and programs, has also been recognized as a basic core strategy for dropout prevention (Reimer & Smink, 2005).

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Action research is research done by teachers for teachers who seek to gather information about how they teach and how their students learn (Mertler, 2014). Action research represents the blend of traditional and applied research with each mutually benefitting the other (Snyder, 2009) and differs from traditional research in that the researchers immerse themselves within the “actions” of teaching and learning. Carter and Little (2007) discuss the role of methodology in action research, defining methodology as the study of the description, explanation, and justification of methods, and the methods themselves. The methodology justifies the methods used, which are the practical activities of research: sampling, data collection, data management, data analysis and reporting. This chapter describes the research design methodology that was used to explore student educational experiences at the alternative school to determine if their academic needs are being met, their overall perception of their learning experiences while attending the alternative school and compare and contrast academic achievement in traditional and alternative educational settings.

The purpose of this action research is to identify an appropriate structure to successfully serve all alternative students and to determine if the students are receiving the academic and related support needed. It will attempt to answer the overarching question of: Are students receiving what they need academically and emotionally from

the alternative school and are they reaching their academic potential by utilizing a curriculum-based program?

Action research supports these goals as rigorous methodology that explores classroom practices with an end-result of improving practice and realizing educational values (Holly et al., 2005, 2009). Data in this study were gathered through an action research plan that consisted of mixed methods; surveys (quantitative data) and interviews with selected students (qualitative data). This chapter provides a justification for the methodology used to conduct the study, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures used, and a critique of the design, and concludes with the researcher's ethical responsibilities and a discussion on the design of the study.

The study took place in the fall semester of the 2021 school year at Pathways Alternative School (pseudonym). The researcher looked to capture the students' attitudes, feelings, and concerns about their academic progress and personal needs during their time at the alternative school and traditional school. For this mixed methods action research study, surveys and semi-structured individual interviews (with students) were used to better understand student experiences.

Research Design

Action research can take on several different models. The main goal of action research in education is to improve the lives of children, by improving the practices of the educator (Hine, 2013). For this study, mixed methods were used to document, describe, and analyze student achievement and experiences in an alternative school setting as compared to a traditional school setting. This research encompassed critical theory, student voice research and self-determination theory as the core frameworks of literature

that define this body of work and answer the research questions. A qualitative study searches for meaning and understanding, using the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2014). It was most appropriate to use a mixed method study because this methodology provided tools for the researcher to study complex phenomena within the context. Therefore, when this approach is applied correctly, it becomes a valuable method for research to develop theory, evaluate programs, and develop interventions. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2014), interviewing the participants would be beneficial when the researcher cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret their surroundings. In addition, it is necessary to interview when the researcher is interested in past events that are impossible to replicate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2014). Mertler (2014) suggests that the traditional one-size-fits-all professional development fails in comparison to action research. He goes on to further cite that action research provides teachers with improved problem-solving skills and increased professional self-esteem (Mertler, 2014).

This action research used a mix method design, allowing the research to be conducted in a natural setting, collecting data where the problem is occurring (Mertler, 2014.) The research included a survey to gain student demographic information as well as perceptions related to enrollment at a traditional school and alternative school. Additional data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. The interviews consisted of five questions, using a semi-structured format that allowed the interviewer to ask probing follow-up questions depending on their initial responses (Creswell, 2007). The notes from the interviews were used to provide a detail description of the academic environment at the alternative school.

Role of the Researcher

The terms action research and practitioner research are used interchangeably, as action research is used by practitioners who want to investigate and improve their practice. The advantage of practitioner research is in improvement. Carr and Kemmis (2012) view it as improvement of practice, understanding that practice, and the situation in which the practice takes place while Mertler (2014) adds that action research is done by teachers for themselves. As an integral part of the study, I conducted all phases of the study including developing and administering the surveys and conducting interviews.

There are advantages and disadvantages to participating in action research as a participant observer. According to Kawulich (2005) one main advantage is the improved quality of data collection and interpretation because the observer has access to behavior, intentions, and unscheduled events. As the participant observer, the researcher had access to the participants without being a direct participant. However, just as there are advantages, there are disadvantages as well. Kawulich (2005) suggests that participant observers who rely largely on observations to answer the research question can develop bias and a narrow view of the study.

This action research was rooted in collaboration, one of the intended benefits of action research. Mertler (2014) defines collaboration in action research as educators talking and working together.

Participants

Participants in this study were current Pathway Alternative School (PAS) students who had been enrolled for at least 45 days and no more than 90 days at the time of the study. PAS is a fully operational school program with faculty and staff. This is the only

alternative school in the district, and it serves students from all high schools in the district. Transportation is provided by the students by bus from the various high schools. Some students commute as many as 50 or more miles, while others travel a mere 2 miles. In the state of South Carolina, alternative schools should operate as a school; meaning operate as a traditional school, but they are classified as a program because they do not have a stand-alone Basic Education Data System (BEDS) Code. Students attending these programs must be linked to a home school with a BEDS Code. All students' academic performance, attendance, discipline, and infractions are connected to their home school and are updated on a weekly basis. All summative assessments are taken at their home school and the results are reported as part of the home school's report, even if the student received instruction at the alternative school site for nine weeks, a semester, or the entire school year.

Typically, students enrolled in alternative schools are those that are experiencing difficulties with academics, environmental issues (poor home life or delinquent peer association), lacking social or emotional support, homeless, or transient. The students who participated in the study came from the high schools in the district, account for 67.3% of the total student population at PAS, and all of them possess one or more of the typical characteristics of the alternative students in this study. They all were enrolled the same amount of time at the alternative school, and both attendance records and discipline infractions resemble each other within a 2% margin of error. Participants were enrolled in grades nine through 12 and identified their gender as either male or female.

Type of Programs

The alternative school rotates on 45- and 90-day cycles. Students are typically assigned to alternative placement following a disciplinary review for a variety of infractions that include, but are not limited to; academic probation, poor attendance, disciplinary infractions, and returning to the district from a facility for youth offenders. The program is divided into two terms: short-term (45 days) and long-term (90 days). Depending on the infraction students are assigned for a term of a quarter, 45 days or a semester, 90 days. On occasion, students may be assigned longer than 90 days due to infractions that occurred while attending the alternative school. Students and parents have the option to appeal their assignment within 10 days of receiving written notification of an alternative school placement. In addition, students that would like to remain longer than their assigned time, must submit a written request to continue their educational services at the alternative school within 5 days of their scheduled date to return to their home school.

Setting

PAS is the only alternative school in the district, and it serves students in grades six through twelve. There is an average of 102 students in the program. The school is located on the campus of the District's Annex. Located on the grounds of the District Annex are Adult Education, Facilities Management, Food Service, Technology, and Special Services in several different buildings. The alternative school is housed separately with no interaction between the general and alternative school population.

The student body is made of up males and females from different socioeconomic backgrounds, race, religious preference, ethnicity, and placement status (school, DJJ, or

parental choice). The school district is located in a mix of rural, urban, and island areas, with 10.7% of the citizens living at or below the poverty index. About 65.6% of the student population is eligible for free or reduced lunch because of a USDA grant; however, not all of them take advantage of this program. The district has a student population of approximately 37,219. There has been a steady increase in student population and decrease in teacher retention rate for the last five years. Schools in the district include 26 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, and 12 high schools. The student population is 63% White, 24% Black, Hispanic, 2% Native, 1% Islander, and 3% other. Students with IEPs, 504 plans, or another assistive plan makes up 25 to 28% percent of the population (based on the influx of students).

Design of the Study

Action research can take on several different models. This study continued to evolve until the researcher clearly identified all components of the study and narrowed the focus that would be most beneficial to the population of students being served, particularly in relation to the number of interview participants, number of interviews per participant, and interview questions. Presently, this study followed the general process as introduced by Mertler (2014) which *includes planning, acting, developing, and reflecting stages*. Within each of the four stages, there are some specific steps that must take place to ensure that the research is conducted properly.

Data Collection and Analysis

After meeting with research participants and parents and securing consent to participate, the data collection began.

Surveys

The return rate on the surveys was 100%. All 15 students took the survey after verification of parental consent and the informational meeting. Questions on the survey reflected their perceptions of student-center school culture and school effectiveness. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions with different answer choices. The survey was a modified version of the Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS). The researcher communicated with the students the importance of not putting any identifiable information on their survey. Questions on the survey reflect their perceptions of student-centered school culture and overall school effectiveness, which had components of autonomy, competence, and relatedness embedded in the questions. Students completed the surveys in a designated area within the school building. The researcher noted no issues with administrative policies or daily operations and management of the alternative school through casual observations when meeting with the principal of the alternative school to gather data.

Data was coded and entered in an Excel document. Totals for each category were calculated and analyzed based on the number of responses. The researcher checked the reliability of the instrument by reviewing the internal consistency of the BPNS and its subscales. The interview questions developed corresponded with the survey, to give the participants a greater opportunity to expound on their perception of the alternative school.

Interviews

A small recorder was purchased to record interviews to ensure that responses were transcribe correctly. Participants were aware of the recording and no identifiable information was used and the recorder was kept under lock and key. All persons were

asked to review and sign the transcribed interview responses as being accurate using their unique assigned code.

The semi-structured interviews were administered to a subsample of five students. All fifteen of the students that participated in the survey segment of the research were eligible to participate in the interview portion of the study. However, only five students volunteered to participate in interviews. The researcher reminded the participants that this study was strictly voluntary, and they would not be penalized for not participating in any or parts of the study. Therefore, only five students completed the interview phase. The individual, one-on-one, interviews took place in a secluded office on the campus of the alternative school. The interviews were conducted as a means of allowing the participants to express themselves in a judgment free zone. All interview questions were developed ahead of time to ensure consistency in topics covered and the data collected was compared in a relatively reliable manner. Mertler (2014) states that interview questions should be brief, clear, and simply stated. The questions were developed to follow Mertler's guidance and to coincide with questions from the survey. Questions included:

1. Describe the alternative school.
 - a. How does it make you feel?
 - b. What is a typical day like?
2. How did your experience at the alternative school prepare you or not prepare you for the return to traditional school?
 - a. What would have made the transition better?
 - b. How satisfied are you with the alternative school experience?
3. How does class size differ from the alternative school to your traditional school?
 - a. How has this difference, if there is one, affected your academics—both class and on assessments?
4. In terms of relationships, how well do you get along with your parents/guardians, siblings, and teachers, before you went to alternative school?
 - a. How well do you get along now?

- b. If improved, how have these relationships improved?
 - c. How did (does) your relationships with adults/teachers at the alternative school make (made) you feel?
 - d. How does that compare to your relationships with adults/teachers at the traditional school?
5. How well did (do) you get along with your peers before going to the alternative school?
- a. Describe your relationship with your peers.
 - b. How well do get along now?
 - c. How are your relationship influencing your behavior and academics now?
 - d. Give specific examples of how your relationships have improved, if they have, since attending the alternative school?
6. How did the adults at the alternative school prepare you for your transition to the traditional school?
7. What are some aspects of the alternative school that you miss at your current traditional school?
- a. How is your current school similar to the alternative school?
8. What non-academic services did you receive at the alternative school that you may or may not be receiving at the traditional school?
- a. Give specific examples
9. What are your future plans?
- a. Do you contribute these plans to your time spent at the alternative school?
 - b. Why or why not?
10. What would you like to share about your experience at the alternative school that was not covered in these questions?

To efficiently document and record research and ensure that all data was compiled in a functional and effective manner, the researcher coded the data as it was obtained. Coding is a method used to analyze data by identifying themes or codes that appear in qualitative data and then assigning intersections of data to those codes. Furthermore, codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to data (Miles & Huberman, 2014). Information gleaned from interviews were compiled into themes. The codes were determined by the emergent themes: Learning environment, curriculum,

relationships, school culture, and self-esteem. Interview quotes were cut into strips and placed into envelopes labeled with a key phrase or words themes. A notebook was divided into sections and documentation was placed into the corresponding section. Coding is essential to effective data analysis in qualitative research.

Qualitative researchers seek ways to demonstrate that their research is “trustworthy, plausible or credible” (Merriam &, Tisdale, 2016, pg. 244). To assist in ensuring research validity, a panel of experts reviewed survey and interview questions and made recommendations to ensure appropriate data collection. Lincoln and Guba (2010) identified four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Through this research study, the researcher has laid a foundation whereas the findings possess the ability to inform public policy and guide individual choice and community action. To ensure triangulation occurred, after interviews were transcribed, member checking (Creswell, 2003) was employed by providing participants copies of the transcript for them to review and approve for accuracy for research use. The researcher also used field notes to assist with triangulation.

Reflecting

This stage is composed of the final two steps which included sharing and reflecting (Mertler, 2014). It is not enough to conduct research, but one must share the results and what they learned. Not only does sharing the results of teacher-led action research projects with members of the teaching profession help narrow the gap between theory/research and practice, but it also provides the teacher/researcher with the opportunity to gain additional insight into the topic under investigation, as well as into

the research process itself. Sharing the results—either formally or informally—is the real activity that helps bridge the divide between research and application. Communicating results lends credibility to the process of conducting action research because teachers and others in the education profession tend to see this process as one that gives teachers a voice (Mills, 2007). The researcher intends to share the results with colleagues hoping to have the study repeated thereby making a positive impact on the curriculum design and in the life of alternative school students.

Summary and Conclusion

There is a tremendous need for research concerning alternative education. The purpose of this action research is to glean in-depth understanding of the experiences of students who are enrolled in an alternative school and answer questions regarding students' needs and achievement at the alternative school. This study sought to identify aspects of an appropriate educational structure to serve all alternative students to increase academic proficiency of students using virtual learning.

This chapter described the research paradigm in terms of the research questions, the methodology, and data collection methods, the type of analysis used, and the indicators of validity ensure quality action research. This study is designed to fully delve into the students' perceptions. The following chapters present the results of this investigation using the research questions as an organizing framework.

Chapter 4: Results

All aspects of alternative education need research, especially concerning student outcomes (Foley & Pang, 2006; Warren, 2007). The purpose of this study was to examine the educational experience of high school at-risk students attending an alternative school to determine if their academic and non-academic needs were being met and if opportunities for improvement exist.

The study involved collecting data from individual surveys and one-on-one interviews with students attending Pathways Alternative School (pseudonym). Purposeful sampling was used to select the students who attended PAS for a minimum of 45 days to a maximum of 90 days. These students were asked to complete questions about their lived experiences and academic and non-academic support they received. The interview questions were designed to allow the researcher to delve deeper into the students' perception of the support they received at the alternative school in comparison to their lived experiences in the traditional school setting. Both the survey and interview questions were designed for the students' voice to be the primary focus.

The overarching question that guided this study: How do students attending an alternative school perceive their school-based experiences and their academic trajectory?

- A. What are the students' perception of the curriculum and their achievement?
- B. How do students view the relation between their academic achievement using flexible practices versus using traditional methods using the same curriculum?

C. What are the students' perception of the non-academic support received at the alternative school as compared with the traditional school?

The literature suggests that schools that are more student-centered and use flexible learning strategies realize greater school effectiveness based on students' perception (Green, 2020). Listening to the perspective of students provided essential input to overall effectiveness and improving alternative education practices.

This study investigated the perceptions held by students at an alternative school in South Carolina. The students are transported from each high school in the district. The investigator focused on the students' perception of effectiveness based on the academic and non-academic support received at the alternative school and how these supports effect other areas of the students' lives, such as relationships and future aspirations.

Method

This study documented and analyzed students' lived experiences at an alternative school using a survey and one-on-one interview. The survey was divided into four parts. The first section of the instrument was designed to collect student demographic data. The second part of the survey was used to ascertain students' perceptions of student interaction activities. The third part of the survey measured the independent variables of innovative curriculum offerings and student-centered offerings. The last section of the self-report survey was to ascertain students' perceptions on school effectiveness in the alternative schools.

The independent variables measuring academic innovation and supportive services were combined to create the composite variable of overall student-centered

interactions. The decision to include students from all four grades is an effort to increase the variability in the effectiveness as perceived by students.

The interview allowed students to elaborate and give details on their experiences at the alternative school and how those experiences influenced their lives.

Data Collection and Analysis

PAS is made up of students from middle and high schools throughout the district. Students are divided into a middle school section and high school section of the school. Each section is separated by grade level as a traditional school. The average pre-pandemic enrollment was approximately 110 students. Currently, the district has implemented several precautionary measures for enrollment to help contain Covid-19. However, the alternative school students have been on quarantine several times due to infection or exposure of the virus.

Demographic Data

For participation in the study, 20 students were eligible to participate in the study. Permission was obtained from 13 parents as well as two students who were of age to give consent for their participation. The principal arranged for a student meeting at the school for the researcher to meet the students and explain the study. The researcher met with the students, explained the study, issued the participants' letter, and answered any questions that the participants had. The 15 participating students were issued the survey in a group setting where they were instructed to read the survey and answer the questions as truthfully as possible and without any input from their peers. No talking or discussion of the survey was allowed during the administration of the questionnaire. Students were encouraged not to discuss the survey outside of the research center. Of the students

surveyed, one-third (five students) agreed to the one-on-one interview. Over a two-day period, the five students met with the researcher for an in-depth interview on their alternative school experience and perspective. There were two females and three males (one White female, one Black female, one Hispanic male, and two Black males) that participated in this phase of the study.

Participants

The student population is the lowest it has been since the school's inception. There were 30 students enrolled at the time of the data collection; of the 30 students, only 20 students met the requirements of and eligibility for the study. Of the 20 students, three students wished to participate but were declared ineligible due to lack of parental consent. Of the remaining 17 students, 15 students agreed or obtained parental permission to participate in the study. The gender demographics of participants were three females and 12 males. The ethnicity of the participants was 80.01% African American, 13.33% Caucasian, 1% Hispanic, and 5.66% Other. Of the participants surveyed, one student had been at the alternative school three times, once as a middle schooler and twice as a high school student. There was one student who was previously there as a high schooler, and the others were there for the first time. The students who participated in the interview consisted of one honor rolled student, one student that received support in a special education resource class, and three were average students passing their classes with a C or better. Of all of the participants, three expressed interests in the military, one wants to become a truck driver, three want to attend a four-year college or university, two would like to attend a technical college, two were undecided about their future, one wanted to

find full-time employment, and three had not given much consideration of future plans at the time of the study.

Survey

Most students responded that Pathways was moderately or greatly supportive, caring, encouraged a sense of belonging, and established expectations. Students were more likely to indicate to a “great extent” related to established expectations with 40% of students selecting that choice. In the other areas, students were more likely to indicated to a “moderate extent” (33%-40%) or “little extent” (33%-40%). Few students indicated “not at all” (7%-13%). Table 1 highlights the number of responses in each category.

Table 4.1 *Number of Respondents based on Environment and Atmosphere Items*

Action	Great Extent	Moderate Extent	Little Extent	Not at All
Supportive	3	6	5	1
Caring	3	5	6	1
Sense of Belonging	3	5	5	2
Established Expectations	6	6	2	1

Most students responded that Pathways was somewhat helpful in getting them focused on school and determining the factors that have hindered them from reaching their full potential at their traditional or home school. A few stated that it was extremely helpful with a minuscule amount indicated not helpful at all. Table 4.2 highlights the number of responses in each category.

Table 4.2 *Number of Respondents based on Extent of Helpfulness*

Extremely Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Not Helpful at All
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4	10	1
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Students that attend alternative programs usually have poor attendance at their traditional or home school. Most of the students indicated that Pathways has had a significant or moderate positive impact on their attendance. Meanwhile, a few indicated that it has little, no impact or negative impact on their daily school attendance. Table 4.3 highlights the number of responses in each category.

Table 4.3 Number of Respondents based on Attendance Impact

Significant Positive Impact	Moderate Positive Impact	Little Positive Impact	No Impact	Negative Impact
4	5	2	3	1

Several critical factors were influenced by enrolling at Pathways. Some of the areas included grades and academic skills, discipline infractions, relationships, goals, and self-esteem. Many students responded “yes” (27% - 73%), “no” (13% - 33%), or “unsure (0-33%)” to indicate if a particular area was impacted by them enrolling in Pathways. Most students indicated that they perform better in class, make better grades, complete more homework and class assignments, and have better reading skills. Whereas fewer students indicated they had better writing skills and better peer relationships. Table 4.4 highlights the number of responses in each category.

Table 4.4 Number of Responses related to the impacts after enrolling in Pathways

Action	Yes	No	Unsure
Positive attitude towards school	7	4	4
Perform better in classes	11	3	1

Make better grades	11	2	2
Complete more homework & class assignments	11	2	2
Better reading skills	11	2	2
Better math skills	7	4	5
Better writing skills	5	4	6
Better peer relationships	4	5	6 (Maybe)
Fewer discipline infractions	10	4	1
Less tardiness	11	4	0
More self-confidence	8	2	5
More self-discipline	8	5	2
Better relationships with family	9	2	4
Desire to finish school and graduate	9	2	4
Set future goals	10	4	1
Optimistic about future	7	3	4
Smaller class size on view of school	9	5	1
Plan to return to traditional school	8	3	4

Interviews

Coding requires that the researcher granularly identify, and label different topics expressed by participants. Therefore, codes are labels that clearly identify topics that emerge in data. It is a repetitious process that requires several thorough reads of the transcripts. When the initial coding is complete, the researcher looks for ways to integrate

the individual codes into overarching categories or themes that are similar and combine them together.

The researcher then determines if there are any codes that can be tied together to create larger categories or themes. The researcher must pay close attention to the information to determine if there are any negative or discrepant data. Negative data conflicts with the main data or is so contradictory that it must be included in the results. Discrepant data is another perspective and offers counterbalance to the first impressions of the researcher (Ary et al., 2014).

For this study, the researcher reviewed the transcripts using a thematic analysis approach. After multiple reviews, the final coding structure included individual codes that captured student perceptions. Data analysis took place through a process of open coding based on patterns identified within the data, sorting codes into broader categories and interpreting the emerging themes. No identifiable markers were noted in the coding of the data as to protect the identity of the participants. Each interview question and subsequent answers were reviewed with each individual participant to ensure that the information that was given was transcribed correctly and to identify meaningful information related to the research questions. Each text was manually coded into common themes by an open coding process. The coding process resulted in the following open themes:

- School Environment
- Student/Faculty Relationships
- Peer and Family Relationships
- Goals Setting

- Academics

The researcher analyzed the coded statements of participant’s experiences to identify any relationships. Therefore, looking for any underlying meanings among groups of codes. This process allowed three overarching themes to emerge. The themes are learning environment, curriculum perceptions, and teacher-student relationships.

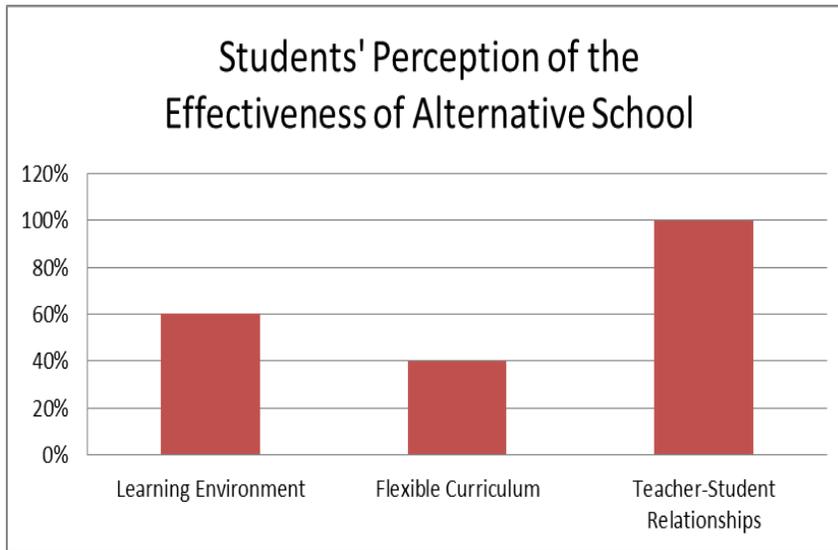


Figure 4.1 Students’ Perception of Effectiveness

Figure 4.1 indicates the students’ perception of effectiveness of the alternative school based on their interview results. Students were asked to place the emerging themes in order from greatest to least as to the area that they perceived to be the most important in terms of success at the alternative school. All five of the surveyed students indicated that the relationship with the teachers was most overwhelming. Teacher –Student relationship was 100% the most important factor. It was noted that the students valued the relationship that the teacher formed with them as the major component for success. The teachers provided extrinsic motivation in terms of care, support, and understanding that led to intrinsic motivation. The students did not want to disappoint the teachers

academically or behaviorally. Therefore, as for teacher care, it was determined by the students that teacher-student relationship was the most important factor in alternative school success.

Students scored learning environment as 60% and curriculum as 40% in terms of importance to their perceived success. Although they are valued factors, students indicated that the teachers control the environment and how it makes them feel and deliver the curriculum in a flexible manner. Therefore, the teacher is the common denominator present in all three themes.

Results

The three identified themes address the sub questions of the research. Each theme is presented here in the context of the research sub question addressed along with portions of salient data to support such finds.

Theme 1: Learning Environment

Participants described various experiences while attending Pathways Alternative School as uniquely different and extremely rewarding. These findings serve to address the first sub question of this study- What are the student's perception of the curriculum and their achievement? One student, Student 5, describes the school as different. "Not good different, not bad different. Just different and different is better than what I am used to at school." This student stated that they were unable to put into words the feeling that comes over them when entering the school. Then she settled on, "it feels like home and that feeling makes me want to do my best." The honor student felt that the teachers taught to the middle of the class but appreciated the effort that they made to provide him with more challenging assignments. "The math teacher connected with my math teacher

at my homeschool, and I am completing the same assignments and projects as my class. That's awesome and shows how much they care about us being successful." One student stated that they were struggling at both schools but found more accessibility to the teachers and the curriculum at Pathways than their homeschool. Two of the students believed that the teachers were creative with the curriculum and offered them a variety of ways to demonstrate learning instead of the traditional paper and pencil assessment.

Students described the school environment as one of the most important contributing factors to their achievement at Pathways Alternative School. Student 3 describes the environment characteristics as a contributing factor to their personal ability to avoid inappropriate behavior and focus on doing what is best for him academically. For instance, he stated,

... since it's not that many students and stuff, classes are a lot smaller, and the kids get along better. There is less drama and news. We do not have much mess here. When I was at my old school with a lot of kids and drama, there was always something going on to distract from listening to the teacher or completing assignments. Here is different. The teachers listen to the students and try to help them. My grades are better because I am not in any drama anymore.

Another participant, Student 1, reported that being placed at Pathways Alternative School was the best thing that could have happened to her and her grades. She stated that, "Here I go to class on time. There are no crowded hallways or fights. I do all of my homework, classwork, and study without being told to do so." She added that the adults respect the students, and the students respect the adults at Pathways.

In addition, three other participants described the school environment as one that makes learning fun. Student 4, states that the teachers “let you do what you need to help you learn. I like music, and I can have my headphones in to do my work. I do better with music.” Student 5, said, “They let me have time to myself when needed. I am feeling upset, they do not pressure me, they give me space and time to pull myself together. After a few minutes, I am able to concentrate on my work again. This helps me be a better student.” Student 2 echoed the same sentiments as her peers, “My grades are better because I understand what the teachers want. They make learning fun, and I don’t feel like a dummy when I ask questions.” Overall, the students felt that the curriculum was easily understood because the teachers made them feel comfortable and safe in the learning environment.

Theme 2: Students’ Curriculum Perception

Participants described various situations that answered the second sub question of this action research study. Analysis of the data revealed how students view the relation between their academic achievement using flexible practices vs. using traditional methods using the same curriculum.

One participant, Student 3, described feeling that he thought their academic experience at Pathway Alternative School as inferior to his academic at his traditional school. When he began the program, he was bored with the assignments and completed them with ease. After the teachers realized his academic abilities, they sought innovative ways to keep him interested in the work and he completed the same assignments he would have at his home school

Other participants, Student 1 and Student 4, stated that the flexible curriculum worked for them. They felt that they were not missing anything academically by being at Pathways. Student 1 said, “I am allowed to work at my own pace and get a better understanding of what I am doing. When I came to Pathways, I could not divide without assistance. Now I can divide and solve equations.” Student 4, states, “I use my same textbooks from my old school, but I get to show what I know or complete a project instead of taking a test on my Chromebook”. “I really like that!”

Student 5, “I believe the smaller class size is the major difference in understanding the lessons.” He goes on to state, “That here, the teacher is not competing with the student to be in control of the class. I am able to concentrate on what is being asked of me.” “Also, the teacher show us different ways to solve the same problems. That makes it easier for us to make a connection with one method or the other.”

It is evident that the alternative school is using the same textbooks, pacing guides, and academic standards as the traditional schools; however, the students are experiencing more academic success at Pathways than the traditional school. For example, Student 2 states, “The work is the same, but I understand it better now. The teachers will bring in real life examples of what they are trying to teach and they are not in a hurry to complete the unit. They really have a lot of patience and is not on timeline. Because they relate the lessons to things we are interested in, we are learning without realizing that we are completing assignments and learning.”

Theme 3: Teacher –Student Relationships

The relationships that they formed were noted as an additional reason for their academic success. The students noted that the positive interactions with teachers and

peers had a lasting effect on how they viewed school and relationships. The data answered the third sub question of what are the students' perception of the non-academic support received at the alternative school as compared with the traditional school.

The students expressed their true feelings about the bond they have formed with the teacher and others because of Pathways Alternative School. Student 3 stated, "The teachers are encouraging and because they believe in you, you try harder to make better decisions." The students expressed how the support of the teachers have influenced other aspects of their life. For example, Student 2, "Every day is a new day. If we had a bad day on yesterday, they do not hold that against you. They do not hold grudges and every day we have clean slate. I like that because it make me more responsible for my actions."

"Before coming to alternative school, I never thought about my future. The teachers show concern about us in more ways than just academics. Every week we have guest speakers that motivate us to dream beyond these walls. I want to become a truck driver one day and eventually own my own business. I never thought it was possible before coming here," stated Student 5.

Student 1 said that the alternative school did not have an effect on his relationships with peers or family members. He already had great relationships established. However, they have helped him to be more of a leader among his peers.

Students 3 and 4 iterated that their relationships at home have improved because of the communication skills that they have learned at the alternative school. Student 3, "My stepdad and I did not get along at all. In fact, I hated him living with us and telling me what to do. However, the skills I received in character class has helped me to understand that I need to be tolerable of him and express my feelings of dislike for his

rules in a more respectable manner.” Student 4 indicated that the teachers serve as mentors as well as teachers. “The teachers ask about things that I enjoy doing outside of school. They let us know that it is okay to talk with them about things other than school. When I expressed that I wanted to become a coach and teacher, he offered to mentor me. I have never had a teacher to show interest in me before.”

Before the pandemic, Pathways offered students opportunities that extended beyond the school walls. There were pictures displayed showing the students involved in various activities that were off school grounds. Student 1 emphasized that he had never gone to the zoo before attending Pathways. “I never went to the zoo before coming to the alternative school...well, I kinda went to the zoo. We did a virtual zoo trip because of the pandemic. It was cool and stuff...but I bet to go in person would be great!”

The students raved about the counseling program and the preparation of transiting back to their traditional school. Student 3, “I love the counselor here! She is always meeting with us to talk about grades, making good choices, and setting goals.” Student 5, “The counselor evaluated my transcript, and gave me a map to early graduation.” Student 2, believe that the counselor has given advice for life, “She told me to move in silence, and watch the company that I keep”.

When asked about leaving the comfort of the alternative school and returning to their home school, the students expressed similar feelings. The desire to “leave” Pathway, as stated by Student 4, summarizes the sentiments expressed by two participants when discussing changes in their behavior and outlook for the future since enrolling at the alternative school. Another participant, Student 1, explained, “...I’m good, I want to

leave and put what I have learned to use. I am ready to get started with my future and I don't plan on coming back, but I will miss this place, especially the teachers.”

Summary

The current study sought to improve the understanding of how at-risk students perceive the effectiveness of alternative schools as facilitating positive academics and self-regulation skills as a strategy to promote positive outcomes. The findings of the current study reveal that positive student-teacher relationships had the greatest influence on the students. The students felt a connection with the teachers at Pathways Alternative School that was not formed at their traditional schools. As a result of the encouragement and patience of the teachers, the students worked extremely hard to meet their expectations. According to the participants, the teachers showed a genuine interest in them as individuals.

Students indicated that their grades were improved resulting from the flexibility of the curriculum as compared to the traditional teaching styles of their home school. Pathways allowed students to be creative and demonstrate learning using non-traditional methods. The teachers used a variety of methods that played to their strengths. Participants expressed the ability of working at their own pace gave them more control than traditional school. In addition, to the teachers being patient, they allowed the students to work in the environment in which they thrive. For example, they could listen to music, sit on the floor, chose activities from choice boards, etc. It was personalized learning at its best.

The data also revealed that opportunities described by some participants, as mentorship or character classes, assisted them with goal setting which was very

influential in helping to make plans about their future. They indicated that Pathways gave them hope for the future and being successful. This was something that no one talked with them about at their traditional schools. In addition to future goals, that attribute the alternative school with bettering their personal relationships with family members and peers. The alternative school equipped them with the necessary tools to make rational decisions and to realize that actions have consequences.

Overall, the data indicate that the students perceive a well-organized alternative school with caring, innovative teachers that are concerned with the total child is extremely effective on an at-risk student's academics and behavior. The dedication of the teachers is key to the effectiveness.

Chapter 5: Implications and Conclusions

There are several definitions or interpretations for “alternative schools” and “at-risk students” found across the field of education. Although there is not a unanimous universal definition for the terms, there are some significant themes and best practices that are exhibited in alternative schools and the effect they have on the students they serve. These include but are not limited to, class size, flexible curriculum, non-academic support, school culture, and teacher support. While action research studies that involve students, teachers, other stakeholders, and traditional education practices are plentiful, research focusing on at-risk students and their perception of the influences that contribute to their success in an alternative setting is scarce.

The purpose of this study was to gain knowledge and information from the perspective of “at-risk” students on their perceptions of the effectiveness of alternative schools. In this context, school effectiveness is defined as educating and meeting the academic and social needs of students in an alternative setting, which can be attributed to greater academic and social success because of smaller class size, positive teacher-student relationships, academic innovation, and supportive services. Fifteen non-traditional students participated in the first section of this study. The participants were students enrolled in the alternative school for a minimum of 45 days, including males and females, diverse ethnicities, and various school experiences. All fifteen students completed the 25-question survey anonymously. The survey focused on questions about the environment and atmosphere of the alternative school, the impact on their life in

terms of helpfulness, school attendance, and the effects after enrollment at the alternative school. The second phase of the study consisted of an in-depth interview of 10 questions that was used to collect data on the student's perceptions regarding the effect of the impact of the alternative school on their academic success. Five of the 15 students in participated in the first phase were interviewed. The interviews were recorded, and the data was coded into three themes: learning environment, curriculum perceptions, and teacher-student relationships. The data was disaggregated and analyzed to determine the students' perception of the overall effectiveness of the alternative school. This chapter provides a summary of the research project along with implications of the study and recommendation for further research.

Statement of the Problem

Due to research scarcity and a holistic understanding of why at-risk students succeed or dropout, educators have difficulty planning, developing, and implementing or adjusting successful programming for alternative schools and the students they serve. In the absence of empirical research gleaned from at-risk students, the composite of vital factors needed to be identified for school leaders' strategic planning for fostering the success of at-risk students is generally unknown. This study sought to determine the effectiveness of alternative schools and subsequently, the researcher hoped to identify critical success factors based on the perception of the students attending these schools via students' voices and lived experiences.

Research Question

Are alternative students' perception of academics and social supports predictive of success? The study gathered information from 15 non-traditional students through a

survey and five of the 15 nontraditional students through interviews in an alternative school located in the low country of South Carolina. The overall research question is supported by three sub questions that were used for the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of at-risk students' perception of the effectiveness of the alternative schools in comparison to a traditional school.

- A. What are the students' perception of the curriculums and their achievement?
- B. How do students view the relation between their academic achievement using flexible practices versus using traditional methods using the same curriculum?
- C. What are the students' perception of the academic and non-academic support received at the alternative school as compared with the traditional school?

Findings

The results provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of alternative schools through the students' perspective. In reference to the learning environment, students consistently discussed the differences between their traditional and nontraditional school experiences. Many students stated they felt overwhelmed and overlooked at their traditional schools. They also expressed that they were lost in the shuffle and their days were often full of "nonsense drama and distractions," according to Student 2. The teachers were often disconnected and uncaring. According to the students, feeling overwhelmed and lost was one of the reasons they were unable to function in the traditional school environment. Large classes were a contributing factor to feeling misplaced. Teachers often had less time to provide individualized instruction and pay attention to their needs. They also felt that the large class sizes limited their access to the teacher and was a breeding ground for trouble and peer distractions. Students felt that

teachers exhibit uncaring behaviors by catering to the smart students that needed less attention and support.

Welcoming, supportive, caring, peaceful, and relaxed are all adjectives the students used to describe the learning environment at the alternative school. In addition, the environment encouraged setting goals by having college banners throughout the school along with military and workforce posters. The students stated that it forced them to consider their aspirations and preparation for life after high school. The students indicated that the size of the alternative school was beneficial to the learning environment. Some of the students came from schools with as many as 3,000 students and some were from schools as small as 700. Students stated that the size of the school made them feel like they were at home among family instead of at school with uncaring strangers.

The students reported that the smaller environment provided fewer distractions, little to no incidents of drama and a safe environment. In reference to safety, the students spoke of physical and emotional stability. As indicated by the students, physical involvement involved little to no arguments, fights, or violent school disruptions. The administrator and school resource officer are very clear about expectations at the intake process.

Concerning emotional safety, students indicated that the school focused on more than academics and behavior. They care about them as individuals and will provide support in any area of their lives. Students expressed that teachers provided advice as needed or when asked for help. In addition, students iterated how the admin team or

teachers gave them encouraging words in the morning to get their day started in a positive manner.

Because of the alternative school being small, class sizes are smaller as well. Students described that the smaller class size allowed teachers to provide them with individualized attention, be flexible with the curriculum, and tailor assignments and assessments that fit their learning styles. In addition, the students noted that they were able to work at their own pace and use a variety of ways to demonstrate knowledge, unlike at their traditional schools where they moved at the pace of the class and had limited ways to demonstrate knowledge.

As high school non-traditional students in a non-traditional setting, they enjoyed the structure of the school day at the alternative school as compared to the traditional school. Students had flex blended classes with only two major classes per day. Flex blended classes consist of on-line and face-to-face instruction. This allows for students to spend more time on problematic assignments with direct instruction from a certified teacher or work ahead at their own pace using an on-line program. The students stated flex blended was less chaotic than traditional school and allowed them to take ownership of their learning. Some of the students expressed that graduation is in their view because of the nontraditional learning experience.

All the students discussed the student-teacher relationship as the most important factor to their success at the alternative school. While describing the non-traditional teachers, they referred to them as understanding, patient, compassionate, fair, consistent, supportive, and non-judgmental. Students stated that every day was a new day with a clean slate, and the teachers made them feel cared for, believed in, and wanted them to

graduate and be productive. Students believed that the teachers were concerned about them as a person. They wanted to know about them outside of school and genuinely showed concern for them in all areas of their lives. The students indicated that coming to school in a bad mood was unacceptable. There is always an adult willing to listen to their problems and not chastise them for their behavior. Several students stated that the administrators and teachers were encouraging about graduating and setting goals beyond high school. They created an atmosphere of success regardless of past mistakes.

Students gave detailed accounts of teachers holding them accountable for their actions. They noted that the teachers believed they were capable of success and responsible; therefore, they tried to live up to their high expectations. Students indicated that respect was reciprocated, and they were treated like young adults and individuals. The teachers wanted to know them personally and not judge them by the packet that accompanied them to the alternative school.

At the alternative school, students felt motivated to attend school regularly and complete assignments in a timely manner. Students indicated that they were always greeted in the mornings and in the afternoons upon leaving. If they were absent, the teachers always greeted them with concern or made them feel like their presence was missed. The students further indicated that the teachers wanted to build a positive relationship with them.

Students felt valued by teachers because they were concerned with providing strategies for handling conflict when they returned to the traditional school. In addition, the teachers required the students to strive for high school graduation and set goals for life after graduation. According to the students, the teachers went out of their way to help

create healthy relationships with peers and family members. The character education classes challenged the students and helped them build self-confidence, the students exclaimed. The students indicated that the character education classes were akin to therapy, and this was a much-needed factor that is not offered at their traditional school. All the students indicated that they were motivated to perform at their best because the teachers believed in them, and they trusted the non-traditional educator. Something that is missing at their traditional school.

Connection to Research Literature

The results of this study of students' perception of the effectiveness in alternative education support previous studies of similar topic. As indicated previously, research by Berman and Woodworth (1995) states that academic innovation is key to assessing students' knowledge level who have not been successful in the regular classroom. The present study affirmed that at-risk students perceive that they are most successful when they have ownership of their learning and demonstrate knowledge in a variety of ways.

According to Gottfredson's (1999) research, alternative schools that have clear expectations have students that exhibit positive behavior and make academic strides. Students can make better choices and grades in a school where there is consistency and clear expectations. This study supports Gottfredson's findings (1999) and aligns with the non-traditional students' perception at PAS. Griffin, Richardson, & Lane (1994) concluded that students feel more supported and comfortable at smaller schools, and this is in line with statements made by the non-traditional students of this study. In addition to their findings on smaller school, it was concluded that student-teacher relationships are fostered because of the smaller more intimate environment. Wiest et al. (2001) echoes

Griffin et al. regarding positive student-teacher relationships within effective alternative schools. Both studies indicate that successful teachers in the alternative school environment are good communicators that encourage students by building trust and relationships. The students in this study perception of the effectiveness of the alternative school clearly aligns with the results of the previous two research.

This present study indicates that, while their other factors associated with alternative school effectiveness, academic flexibility, and innovation are extremely significant. The other factors include learning environment, which consists of a smaller school and smaller class size, and positive student-teacher interactions.

Although dated and limited, this research supports the literature that students perceive the effectiveness of alternative schools to be rooted and grounded in an innovative approach to education with dedicated teachers. Critical Theory, Student Voice, and Self-determination Theory are the cornerstone for developing the framework for an effective alternative school based on the students' perception.

Implications

This study has implications for practitioners, policy makers and researchers. This section addresses implications for educators in alternative schools, educational leaders, and future researchers.

The delivery of instruction and reaching students is important. Education focus is shifting to personalized instruction, facilitated by the integration of educational technology. Alternative education needs to be at the forefront of this transformation as highlighted by the participants in this study. Research conducted by Aron (2006) aligns with this work as well and found that alternative school programs need to focus on

academic learning, develop engaging and creative instruction, establish a culture of high expectations, and make learning relevant and applicable to each student's life, educational and career goals. Other recommendations include:

- Educators should be provided with appropriate professional development on effectively teaching a diversified group of students.
- Educators need to implement personalized learning into their daily routine and use flexible approaches to the traditional curriculum.
- Educators need support and training in empathy.

Recommendations for Policy

Policy recommendations are developed and implemented to improve current educational programs and practices. Students are required to attend school until the age of 17. In an effort to identify at-risk students to provide support and interventions to assist them with academic and behavioral success. Some of the implications for school policy based on the findings from this study are as follows:

- Districts and schools should advocate for additional funding to reduce class size. Smaller class sizes would allow teachers more time to provide direct instruction and give students one-on-one time.
- School districts should advocate for flexibility with school hours which would allow for more flexibility with scheduling.
- Districts and schools should advocate for additional funding for counselors and mentors for students.

Limitations

This study focused on the phenomenon of alternative school enrollment of studies should be viewed cautiously. This study utilized a small sample size from one alternative school, and the respondents were only able to respond based on their experiences, which may not be representative of all students enrolled at alternative schools. Although demographic information was obtained, the researcher was unable to assess responses based upon gender and/or ethnicity. In an effort to generalize the results beyond the one at-risk school in the Low Country of South Carolina, it would be necessary to replicate the study across a larger pool of alternative high schools in South Carolina and across the United States and perhaps compare various aspects of demographics.

At-risk students' perceptions of effectiveness at alternative schools that lead to academic and emotional success were studied and developed for considerations by districts as well as future studies and continuing research. However, to obtain a broader view of the factors that lead to effectiveness, one would need to ask similar questions to teachers and parents who are directly involved with alternative schools.

Lastly, the goal of this study was to identify those best practices that lead to the effectiveness of the alternative school based on the students' perceptions. Student-teacher relationships, class size, and flexible curriculum were perceived by at-risk students to increase their academic and behavioral success. However, the study focused only on one specific alternative school and there are many types of alternative school and options that students may have for an alternative education.

Action Plan

The researcher understands that education is in a transformative stage due the national pandemic and teacher shortage. However, there is a need for action to take place in an effort to serve at-risk students in an environment conducive for learning. The researcher poses for the traditional school to offer a forty minute mini-block in the school schedule where all available personnel (administrators, counselors, etc.) provide intense remediation in a small group setting. This mini-block will reduce class size and give the students the needed time to decompress and thrive in a smaller environment. In addition to the mini-block, schools could institute “Club Day” once or twice a month. All available personnel would choose a club that correlates to their hobbies and interests and invite students to join the club. Two of the mini-blocks of time could be used for “Club Day”. Students would be able to join clubs of their interest, interact with teachers and peers in a setting that is not based on academics, and students and teachers would have the opportunity to develop relationships using their skills and hobbies. These activities or similar activities would mimic the three themes that the alternative school students perceived as effective in the alternative school that could be transferred to the traditional school.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study was conducted at a small alternative high school in South Carolina. It would be informative to repeat this study in different types of alternative schools, at all grade levels across South Carolina and the United States to see if the students’ perceptions of the factors remain consistent. In this study, three major themes emerged: learning environment, flexible curriculum, and student-teacher relationships. Further

studies should seek to determine if these three categories emerge in multiple alternative settings, or if new themes arise to create a new category. In addition, the potential researcher could include teachers' perceptions of alternative schools by comparing and contrasting their educational experiences in both traditional and alternative school settings.

Factors that lead to academic success in alternative schools are far more difficult to identify than what was used in this simple survey and interview study. It would be helpful if quantitative research was conducted to statistically identify which factors are the most significant. The comparison of norm referenced and criterion reference assessments from traditional school and alternative school would be helpful to support the themes and provide school leaders with critical information that could be used in all alternative schools to improve academic and behavioral success for at-risk students. In addition, the research should be conducted once the pandemic has been mitigated to have consistent participants and a larger participant pool in the study.

Summary

Research indicates at-risk students perceive certain factors as imperative to their academic and behavioral success to obtain a high school diploma. The purpose of this study was to ascertain at-risk students' perception of the effectiveness of an alternative school environment. This study examined at-risk student perceptions through surveys and interviews and determined that learning environment, flexible curriculum, and positive student-teacher relationships were three most influential factors for academic and behavioral success. These findings illustrated that when students perceive a small safe accommodating learning environment, with innovative and creative individualized

instruction, and accepting, caring, and positive student-teacher relationships, they embrace their opportunities to earn their high school diplomas and plan for the future. This study also illustrated these at-risk students perceived that the aforementioned learning environment, flexible curriculum, and student-teacher relationship were present at a high school alternative school located in the Low Country of South Carolina. Although this was a small study, it did consider at-risk students' perceptions rather than educators, parents, or traditional students.

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Appendix A

Glossary of Key Terms

Alternative Education Program/Alternative Schools: According to Education Week's online glossary (these terms broadly refer to public schools which are set up by states or school districts to serve populations of students who are not succeeding in the traditional public school environment. Alternative schools offer students who are failing academically or may have learning disabilities or behavioral problems an opportunity to achieve in a different setting. While there are various types of alternative schools, they are often characterized by their flexible schedules, smaller teacher-student ratios and modified curricula.

At-risk Student: Describes a student with socioeconomic challenges, such as poverty or susceptibility to teen pregnancy, which may place him or her at a disadvantage in achieving academic, social, or career goals. Such students are deemed "at risk" of failing, dropping out, or "falling through the cracks" at school (Education Week's online glossary). This term also refers to a student who is at a risk of educational failure, as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with early withdrawal from school before completion or graduation (Doran, 2005).

Basic Education Data System (BEDS) Code: a code unique to schools that link certain demographics and identifying information to the school without entering the school's name

Dropout: For the purposes of research, the U. S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (Laird et al., 2006) describes the dropout in two ways, the event dropout and the status dropout. The event dropout descriptor represents students who left school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. The status dropout descriptor represents individuals who are not enrolled in high school and who do not have a high school credential, irrespective of when they dropped out.

Dropout Rate: The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (1996) reports three types of dropout rates: 1. event rates reflect the percentage of students who drop out in a single year without completing high school; 2. status rates reflect the percentage of the population in a given age range who have not finished high school or are not enrolled in school at one point in time; and 3. cohort rates reflect the percentage of a single group of students who drop out over time.

Evidence Standards: The US Department of Education (2008) identifies evidence standards through studies that provide the strongest evidence of effects: primarily well conducted randomized controlled trials and regression discontinuity studies, and secondarily quasi-experimental studies of especially strong design.

High School Completion Rate: Defines the percentage of students who graduate within four years of entering high school.

Individual Education Program (IEP): An IEP is a special education program that is tailored to each student's needs according to higher disability(s) (Kleiner, Porch & Farris, 2002, p. 10).

Online Instruction: A course where most or all of the content is delivered online via web-based. Typically has no face-to-face meetings.

Zero Tolerance: Federal and state policies that mandate specific consequences or prescribed punishments for delinquent acts and do not allow anyone to avoid the consequence.

Appendix B

Participant's Letter

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Tara Cunningham Cantey. I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Curriculum and Instruction and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying students' perception of the effectiveness of alternative schools. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey about your expectations and experience at the alternative school and meet with me for an interview about your experiences at the alternative school.

In particular, you will be asked questions about your academic engagement and interactions with peers and instructors. We will discuss the impact that the alternative school has made on you for returning to the traditional school setting and future plans. You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. The meeting will take place on the alternative school campus in a private room or a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about 45 minutes. The session or interview will be audio taped so that I can accurately transcribe what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by members of the research team and destroyed upon completion of the study.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location at the University of South Carolina. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed. So, please do not write your name or other identifying information on any of the study materials. Participants and /or their parents, have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. No one will be compensated for participating in the study. This is on a strictly voluntary basis. BCSD is not conducting nor sponsoring this action research.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at (843) 687-3385 or taracantey11@gmail.com or my faculty advisor, Dr. Leigh D'Amico at (803)777-8072 or damico@mailbox.sc.edu.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please contact me at the number listed below to discuss participating.

With kind regards,
Tara Cunningham Cantey
Tara Cunningham Cantey
437 Camelia Lane
Lake City, SC 29560
(843) 687-3385
taracantey11@gmail.com

Appendix C

Student Survey

Alternative School Student Survey

Please circle the letter by the response that best reflects your experience at the Alternative School.

1. To what extent did you find the environment and atmosphere at the Alternative School to be supportive?
 - A. Great Extent
 - B. Moderate Extent
 - C. Little Extent
 - D. Not at All

2. To what extent did you find the environment and atmosphere at the Alternative School to be caring?
 - A. Great Extent
 - B. Moderate Extent
 - C. Little Extent
 - D. Not at All

3. To what extent did the atmosphere and environment at the Alternative School create a sense of belonging?
 - A. Great Extent
 - B. Moderate Extent
 - C. Little Extent
 - D. Not at All

4. To what extent were expectations of you while attending the Alternative School established?
 - A. Great Extent
 - B. Moderate Extent
 - C. Little Extent
 - D. Not at All

5. To what extent did you find the overall helpfulness of the Alternative School to be?
 - A. Not helpful at all
 - B. Somewhat helpful
 - C. Extremely helpful

6. To what extent did enrolling in the Alternative School have on your attendance?
 - A. Significant positive impact
 - B. Moderate positive impact
 - C. Little positive impact
 - D. No impact
 - E. Negative impact

7. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you have a more positive attitude towards school?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure

8. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you perform better in your classes overall?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure

9. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you make better grades?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure

10. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you complete more homework and classroom assignments?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure

11. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you have better reading skills?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure

12. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you have math reading skills?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure

13. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you have better writing skills?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure

14. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you pass more or all of your classes?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure

15. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you get along better with other students?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Maybe

16. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you have behave better at school (fewer discipline infractions)?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure

17. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you show up for school and class on time more often (less tardies)?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure
18. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you have more self-confidence?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure
19. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you have more self-discipline?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure
20. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you get along better with parents and siblings?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure
21. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you have more of a desire to finish school and graduate?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure
22. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, have you thought about and planned for the future more than prior to enrolling in the ASP?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure

23. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, have you been more optimistic about the future?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure
24. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, have the size of the classes made a difference in the way you view school?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure
25. After enrolling in the Alternative School Program, do you plan to return to a Traditional school setting?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure

Appendix D

Participant's Interview Questions

11. Describe the alternative school.
 - a. How does it make you feel?
 - b. What is a typical day like?

12. How did your experience at the alternative school prepare you or not prepare you for the return to traditional school?
 - a. What would have made the transition better?
 - b. How satisfied are you with the alternative school experience?

13. How does class size differ from the alternative school to your traditional school?
 - a. How has this difference, if there is one, affected your academics—both class and on assessments?

14. In terms of relationships, how well do you get along with your parents/guardians, siblings, and teachers, before you went to alternative school?
 - a. How well do you get along now?
 - b. If improved, how have these relationships improved?
 - c. How did (does) your relationships with adults/teachers at the alternative school make (made) you feel?
 - d. How does that compare to your relationships with adults/teachers at the traditional school?

15. How well did (do) you get along with your peers before going to the alternative school?
 - a. Describe your relationship with your peers.
 - b. How well do get along now?
 - c. How are your relationship influencing your behavior and academics now?
 - d. Give specific examples of how your relationships have improved, if they have, since attending the alternative school?

16. How did the adults at the alternative school prepare you for your transition to the traditional school?

17. What are some aspects of the alternative school that you miss at your current traditional school?
 - a. How is your current school similar to the alternative school?

18. What non-academic services did you receive at the alternative school that you may or may not be receiving at the traditional school?
 - a. Give specific examples

19. What are your future plans?
 - a. Do you contribute these plans to your time spent at the alternative school?
 - b. Why or why not?

20. What would you like to share about your experience at the alternative school that was not covered in these questions?