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ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION COMPLETERS: A PHENOMENOLOGIAL STUDY

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION COMPLETERS: A PHENOMENOLOGIAL STUDY

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Administration

By

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Pittsburg State University
Bachelor of Science in Education, 1988
Pittsburg State University
Master of Education in Educational Leadership, 1998

May 2013
University of Arkansas

ABSTRACT

Billy is a bright, wide-eyed little boy with bounding enthusiasm and wonder as he enters the doors of school on his first day of kindergarten. When the school doors open in Billy's sixth grade year the wide eyes and bounding enthusiasm have diminished only to leave behind dread and dismay at the thought of confronting yet another abysmal nine months of failure. How can we, as educators, better serve the needs of at-risk students like Billy? Shouldn't we ask them? What elements of the alternative education experience were significant to successful completion of the alternative education program? The phenomenological paradigm will provide the framework for all aspects of the qualitative study with the progressive education theory imparting the theoretical foundation.

Students, students' parents, administrators, and staff members of two alternative programs in the southeast Kansas area were the pool used to draw the participants. Criterion involved in selecting the student participants were those who were or had been enrolled in the middle level or high school alternative education program in two southeast Kansas districts, currently 18 years old or older, and who had successfully completed one or both programs.

Qualitative methods used to accomplish the research design for the elements of the alternative education experience significant to successful completion of the program were: (a) formal, semi-standardized, open-ended interviews with 12 current or former alternative education students, eight parents of program completers, and 10 alternative education staff members; (b) evaluation of student journals from the middle school alternative school; and (c) obtrusive and unobtrusive classroom observations.

In answering the research question, three major themes were consistently repeated from each participant group as significant to the successful completion of the alternative education

program: (1) a caring and committed staff; (2) instilling hope and confidence in the student and his or her abilities; and (3) staff members' relentless pursuit of continued achievements for all students.

Administrators concerned with meeting the needs of at-risk students may benefit from the findings of this study. The study lends value to guiding principles for the effective design of alternative education programs, implementation of effective educational strategies, and guidelines for alternative education hiring practices.

This dissertation is approved for recommendation
to the Graduate Council.

Dissertation Director:

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Dr. Carleton Holt

Dissertation Committee:

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Dr. Kit Kacirek

_____

Dr. Janet Penner-Williams

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey began many years ago with a continual still, small voice urging me to pursue a doctoral degree. I found it difficult to shake the feeling that God was guiding me to yet another degree to fulfill his direction and work for my life. God has been my constant source of strength and assistance in every aspect of this pursuit. I acknowledge him as a true partner in this accomplishment.

The doctoral process began with an informal interview with Dr. Carleton Holt who would later instruct me through several doctoral level courses and become my advisor as well. It was with Dr. Holt's insight, expertise, and patience that completion of the requirements for the doctoral degree in administrative leadership was met.

I would also like to acknowledge my instructors at the University of Arkansas, especially Dr. Kit Kacirek, Dr. Benny Gooden, and Dr. John Pijanowski. Dr. Kacirek was a guiding force for this dissertation as the qualitative analysis expert. Throughout the entire project she proved to be an endless source of information and encouragement. Many times I wanted to give up, only to witness Dr. Kacirek's calm, soothing support to see me through to completion. Dr. Gooden provided vast experience and wisdom as a practitioner in the field of educational administration. His bits of his wisdom and advice have served me well throughout my administrative career. I had the pleasure of being a student in the first class that Dr. Pijanowski taught at the University of Arkansas. I admired and appreciated his knowledge and instructional skills, while always trusting his judgment. Dr. Pijanowski was an original member of my dissertation committee. Unfortunately, due to family health issues, he had to resign his membership to provide extended support for his family. Dr. Janet Penner-Williams served as my final committee member. I never had the pleasure of having her as an instructor but enjoyed her input at our initial meeting to

accept membership to my committee and at the proposal meeting to approve my course of study for the dissertation.

I would like to thank my staff at Riverton Middle School, especially Michelle Ferguson, for their constant understanding and patience. Many days the stress of the course work and research study took its toll on me. The staff remained supportive, taking care of their classrooms, students, and more. I sing their praises quite frequently to anyone who will listen. They are a dedicated group of educators and my comrades in molding children's lives for the better, but most importantly, they are all my friends. They truly care about me. Their care was never more evident than through this doctoral journey. Michelle Ferguson is the middle school secretary. The title of secretary cannot even begin to embody what this woman does and what she means to me and this school. Michelle is my sister in Christ and has provided endless spiritual, emotional, and physical assistance during this long and arduous journey.

Finally, I would like to thank the two alternative schools that participated in this study. The administrators and staff members welcomed me into their school communities, appreciating my interest in their endeavors. I will always remain in awe of their dedication to their profession and their students.

DEDICATION

      This work is dedicated to my mom and dad. The importance of education was most evident in our home, with respect and responsibility for learning instilled at a very early age. My parents raised me in a home of strong Christian faith, encouraging independence, self-motivation, determination, and hard work. Throughout the doctoral project those traits were tapped to the core on numerous occasions. Even though neither parent attended post secondary education, all of their children went on to complete four year degrees, with five grandchildren graduating from college and three currently in pursuit of post secondary degrees.

      I want to thank my husband, John, for his support and patience through this long, difficult venture. His ability to manage for himself, not placing additional demands on me, allowed me the time and energy to meet the stringent challenges during the past few years.

      My sons, Aaron and Andy, are grown and live out of state with their families. Weekends are our only opportunities to spend time together. For two and half years my sons, their wives, and my grandchildren were understanding and supportive of my inability to visit due to the scheduled Saturday classes. They sacrificed time with me because they loved me and understood my desire to accomplish this goal. They continue to rejoice and celebrate my accomplishments, forever being proud of their mom and grandma. For those reasons and many others I am truly blessed to have such a loving and supportive family.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Barr and Parrett (2001) make the case that if a strong and prosperous society is to be sustained, we must not tolerate a system that is unsuccessful in educating a considerable number of its youth. Declining graduation rates are a concerning issue facing the public school systems and our nation as a whole. Disconnected and discontented youth continue to comprise a large proportion of the nation's teen population. These are the very students who are leaving high school without a diploma or a graduate equivalent degree (De La Ossa, 2005).

Today's adolescents exhibit a disparity of academic, social/emotional, and physical needs. No single educational environment addresses the requirements of all learners. Public school districts are finding it necessary to evaluate their current instructional settings and practices. Schools across the nation face the glaring challenge of considering alternative forms of education.

The term "alternative school" is applied to so many program structures and school settings that it resists a single definition (Trickett, McConahay, Phillips, & Ginter, 1985). Trickett, et al. defined alternative schools as programs that differ from the traditional public schools with regard to structure, philosophy, ideology, and setting. Boss (1998) describes Education Week's characterization of alternative schools as the state and school districts response to serve student populations who fail to succeed in the traditional public school setting.

Background of the Problem

It is apparent that some students fail to prosper in the traditional classroom setting. Debate has occurred throughout the years as to the source for ensuring academic success for all students. Is it the public school system? Is it the student? Can it be the parents? What about all stakeholders? The blame game focuses attention on the problem, not the solution. The system,

the students, the parents, and all additional stakeholders own accountability to effectively educate all students.

Traditional education has been known to focus on instruction as opposed to student learning. Historically the traditional approach to education has employed teacher-centered instruction with all students in the classroom taught the same material at the same pace. Teaching methods primarily support direct instruction and lectures. Students learn through listening and observation, with the majority of classroom assignments completed as individual, independent seatwork. Much of the content is textbook-driven and tends to stand-alone, keeping each content area independent of the others. Slight connection occurs between subjects and topics within a subject. Traditional schools spend little time or attention dedicated to social development, understanding the skills necessary for positive interpersonal relationships, and support for emotional well-being. Student/teacher relationships are often kept strictly formal and professional in the traditional setting, with school-to-home communication minimal and infrequent. (Ackoff, & Greenburg, 2008)

In 1983 America's public schools were accused of failing our nation's youth by falling short of meeting the educational needs of all students. The report, by the United States Department of Education, entitled *A Nation at Risk* (USDE, 1983) revealed a grave outlook for U. S. educational institutions. It was noted that schools across the country experience issues in the delivery of rigorous core content material, maintaining effective time on task, employing and retaining highly-qualified teachers, and an overall tendency in neglecting to maintain high achievement expectations for all students. Public schools are expected to lose billions of dollars each year due to students dropping out of school prior to graduation. The loss in public school funding just begins to touch the surface of the overall loss and cost to our country. Drop-outs are

more likely to find themselves at the poverty income level, with many living on government assistance, filing for unemployment, experiencing poor health, engaging in criminal behavior, or sentenced to prison terms in our penal systems. Adults without a high school diploma tend to take an unprecedented toll on our nation's progress and productivity. The USDE understands that the future of a society is dependent upon the effective preparation of the youth of that society.

Disconnected and discontented youth are "children at-risk" and those children are children frequently affected by problems in the home, school, or both. These problems put them in danger of not completing a high school degree (Rodenstein, 1990).

Public school design plus academic, social, and personal concerns are responsible for students failing in school and failing to graduate. A few of the most frequently noted causal issues are: (1) schools that disregard various student learning styles; (2) irrelevant curriculum; (3) inadequate counseling services; (4) delayed intervention; (5) habitual truancy; (6) substance abuse; (7) single-parent home; (8) one or both parents are high school drop outs; (9) one or both parents are substance abusers; (10) one or both parents have been, or are currently incarcerated; (11) extreme poverty; (12) teen parent; (13) unsuccessful in traditional school model; (14) below grade level performance in core content areas; (15) high mobility; (16) involvement in foster care system; (17) raised by grandparents; (18) verbal, physical, or sexual abuse; (19) neglect; (20) credit deficient; (21) gang affiliation; (22) behavior/discipline issues; (23) low self- esteem; and (24) lack of social group or appropriate social skills (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006).

Wells' (1990) study reveals that academically disengaged students experience academic failure due to aggressive or passive refusal to impart continuous academic progress in the classroom. Most academically disengaged students are capable of continued academic success but due to a few, or many, of the at-risk factors previously stated, become disenchanted and

distracted. Their desire to perform academically wanes. These students fail to complete assignments, fail to turn the assignments in on time, or both. They struggle to attend physically and mentally. There is little, if any, effort or involvement on the part of the learner, even when a multitude of interventions and strategies have been employed over time.

Quinn and Rutherford (1998) recognized that social disengagement may occur prior to or after the academic disengagement. Some students become involved with peers that have already entered into academic disengagement. These students tend to follow suit and begin the downward spiral of withdrawing academically and socially. Others begin to give up on learning, distancing themselves from their former peer group. These students journey into isolation or become involved with students of the same mindset toward their education.

Social disengagement not only occurs in the school setting but in the home and family, as well. There is a pattern of distancing between the student and his or her immediate family members. In many instances immediate family members have created the distance first, leaving the child no alternative but to disengage (Quinn, & Rutherford, 1998).

Considering the complexity of the academic, social, and emotional challenges facing America's youth, it is difficult for schools to know how to address this critical situation. Time, personnel, effective approaches, resources, and funding are all obstacles that prevent schools and programs from intervening in an appropriate manner.

Public school systems have been designed and funded to meet the educational needs of the general population. Funding of public schools is, in part, one of the major contributors of failure to address the disparity of needs of all learners. Teaching to the diverse needs of all students requires more money, more time, more space, more flexibility, more resources, more instructors, more specialization of instructors, more counselors, and more counseling services.

Students, who do not qualify for special education services, but still experience special academic, social, and emotional needs, tend to receive the same design of instruction as those who perform in the middle and upper academic range. As a nation, public schools deliver a primarily "one-size-fits-all" instructional design. The students able to learn within the generic instructional framework offered by the school, are the students who are able to succeed in the traditional public school setting. Students unable to learn in this framework are not so fortunate. Serious effort to adapt, intervene, and develop strategies to address the needs of at-risk learners have only occurred in the last 10 to15 years. (Greenburg, 1987)

Alternative Education

This qualitative study will describe the foundations for successful alternative education programs that deal with what Raywid (1983, 1994a & b) refers to as Type II and III alternative schools. Type II schools are last chance programs. Students enrolled in these programs are in jeopardy of suspension or expulsion and substantial academic and behavioral interventions are employed. Type III schools are designed specifically for the academically and socially disengaged learner. Academic remediation is complemented with social and emotional guidance, in the attempt to return the student to the regular school setting.

Raywid's (1983, 1994a & b) Type I schools will not be considered in this study because they are schools of choice and selected for the unique programs or curriculum they offer. These schools are not a typical placement for the at-risk teen.

Historical Background

The public alternative schools movement found its place in American education in the turbulence of the 1960s. The movement was highly influenced by the works of John Dewey and fashioned in existential philosophy and humanistic psychology (Alexander, Dewey, & Hickman,

1998). Students in these schools were engaged in the governance of the school and in establishing personal goals and learning activities, with a strong emphasis in project-based, real-world experiences. The enrollments were small in number with a caring atmosphere among staff and students. Relationships of students and faculty were grounded in dignity and respect (Neumann, 2003).

Although this movement was the forerunner of alternative education in the United States and shares many of the basic constructs of all varieties of alternative schools, this original alternative school movement was based on individual choice and greater autonomy in learning objectives and activities (Neumann, 2003). Raywid (1994a & b) refers to this type of a program as a Type I alternative school. These schools are innovative, offering unique programs and more commonly known as magnet schools. Families choose these schools for the explicit programs they can offer their children (Raywid, 1983, 1994a & b). Schools of this nature are still an option in certain parts of the country today. This particular style of alternative program is not an example of the type of programs examined in this study.

Morley (1991), who began his work in alternative education in the late 1980s, recognized that schools must meet the diverse needs of their students, rather than to expect the students to conform to a single structure of educational environment. It is in the best interest of society to ensure that all youth are educated, at least, to the level of a high school diploma. Schools are obligated to provide a myriad of structures and environments in order that all learners may acquire one that best fits their learning style and learning situation. Alternative education must be a perspective, not just a procedure.

One of the more recent developments in the history of alternative education was the disbanding of the Safe School Coalition (SSC) and subsequent creation of the National

Alternative Education Association (NAEA, 2006). Prodding from education organizations led

previous officers of the SSC to continue positive endeavors in structuring appropriate education

for the needs of at-risk students. They committed to creating a professional association dedicated

to alternative education and alternative education options. The NAEA is a volunteer organization

devoted to sharing information, advocacy, and best practice for alternative learning and teaching.

Research Problem

While many students fail to successfully complete alternative education programs, what

makes some successful?

Due to the way many alternative education programs are configured within the local

public school system there are no valid data revealing program completer rates of programs

across the nation. Most alternative programs do not separately report completers of alternative

programs. These students are simply merged with numbers of the other students within the local

public school system that are promoted to the next grade or receive a high school diploma. The

only national study to date was conducted from 2000 to 2001, by the National Center for

Education Statistics, U. S. Department of Education (NCES, 2002). This is a study of alternative

programs for students at-risk of education failure but it does not include any data on success or

completer rates of individual students within the various programs across the country. I found

that the absence of valid and reliable data for completer rates of alternative programs across the

nation made assessing program success difficult.

Research conducted for completer rates of the two southeast Kansas area programs

included in this study revealed 697 students enrolled from in the high school alternative program

from 1992 to 2011. Four hundred and eighty-five students have completed that program yielding

a 70% completion rate. From 2002-2011 the middle school alternative program involved in this

study enrolled 41 students. Five students moved during their middle school term, and were therefore unable to complete the program. Thirty-seven of forty-one enrollees completed the middle school alternative program, realizing a 90% completion rate for that program. Once again, while some of the students from these two southeast Kansas alternative programs failed to successfully complete those programs, what made some successful?

Research Question

To better understand alternative education from a student perspective, this study explores what completers from two southeast Kansas alternative programs attribute their academic success. To understand this phenomenon from the students' perspective, the following research questions will guide the study:

How do instructors and staff members influence successful program completion?

What influence does family involvement play in successful program completion?

How does student self-efficacy impact successful program completion?

In what way does small student-to-teacher ratio influence successful program completion?

How does social/emotional support influence successful program completion?

What significance does the design and implementation of individually designed education plans play in successful program completion?

Purpose of the Study

The population involves students who were previously or are currently engaged in Type II or III alternative schools in the southeast Kansas area, staff members of those programs, and parents of students attending those alternative education programs. Field notes from student journals and observations during times of student engagement at the alternative centers rounds

out the data sources for this study. By tapping into the individual experiences, I hoped to gain critical details regarding what these young people reveal as the program elements that impacted their success in completing their high school degree or their specific alternative education program. In-depth interviews of alternative education teachers, alternative education administrators, and parents of students who have experienced alternative education programs will be used to support or dispute the data gathered from the interviews and journal writings of the actual alternative education students.

Significance of the Study

Currently, only about one-fourth of states employ a state-wide alternative education association. States who do not endorse a state affiliated alternative education association encompass alternative education programs within the state special education program domain, if it is even included at all. The state of Kansas falls into the latter category, with no alternative education guiding principles to drive program design and implementation. Kansas State Department of Education offers no set of basic standards or tenets for the creation of new alternative programs or for the evaluation of those programs. The lack of state or nationwide alternative program design models creates an inconsistency in effectiveness from program to program and state to state. Additionally, the wide variations in program design and curriculum make it impossible to gather valid and reliable quantitative data to measure what truly works for the at-risk student.

This study lends significance not only to the design and implementation of effective interventions for existing and future middle level and high school alternative education programs, but to the field of education in general. Education constructs perceived as beneficial to

alternative students and their completion of the alternative program could be adapted to benefit the student in the traditional education setting as well.

The participant pool originates from programs in towns with a population of 4,000 or less in southeast Kansas, therefore this study will be more likely to address the needs of students in small, rural, Midwestern school districts. This information will uncover academic and social/emotional strategies that may assist in the design and implementation of alternative schools that more consistently support students to successful completion of those programs. The data gathered to design and implement effective alternative education programs may also assist in the construction of an evaluation tool that assesses the effectiveness of such programs.

Theoretical Framework

The early alternative schools movement was primarily supported and developed from the basic tenets of the progressive education theory, generated from the progressive education movement in the United States between the 1890s to the 1930s. The dominant branches of this theory are: (1) developmental, child-centered instruction; (2) social reconstruction; (3) active citizen participation in all areas of life; and (4) the democratic organization of all public institutions (Schugurensky, & Agguire, 2002). John Dewey was the principal theoretical draftsman of progressive education. He laid the groundwork for the developmental, child-centered and social reconstruction branches of that theory (Neumann, 2003).

Dewey's work in the progressive development of education was influenced by several eighteenth-century educational philosophers. Jean Jacques Rousseau, a French political philosopher, posited that education should allow the child to progress naturally in an environment of individual discovery. Johann Pestalozzi, Swiss philosopher, and his student Friedrich Froebel, considered to be the father of kindergarten, both proposed an academic

structure based on the needs and interests of children, focusing on and supporting their spontaneity and inherent nature. Love should be the essence of education, according to Pestalozzi, encompassing a home-like environment where children are nurtured and feel valued. He encouraged the active engagement of the learner as opposed to teacher/text initiated instruction. In addition to Dewey, these scholars posed a significant impact on the late nineteenth century progressive educator Francis W. Parker, whom Dewey called the father of progressive education (Neumann, 2003). Colonel Parker was Dewey's friend and colleague. He shared similar ideas on progressive education and opened a progressive school in Chicago in 1901 (Schugurensky, & Agguire, 2002).

The progressive education theory, and the public alternative schools movement that ensued, laid the foundation of alternative school programs for the academically and socially disengaged student.

Developing an alternative program model to outline the needs and guarantee success of any such program is an impossible task. Then again, proponents have concurred on a few general features believed as essential to success of all programs (Butchart, 1986; Jacobs, 1994; Kadel, 1994; Kershaw, & Blank, 1993; Raywid, 1994a; Rogers, 1991).

The model guiding this study, regarding elements of a successful alternative education program, is based on the frequently named program features from the researchers listed above. Successful program elements have been compiled by Stacey Aronson (1995) in a journal article on alternative learning environments.

Aronson (1995) understands the need for participation choice by all stakeholders within the alternative program. Successful program completion is more likely to occur when students, along with their parents, and staff choose to participate in that setting. Choosing to attend, rather

than forced assignment, fosters ownership and commitment to the school. The whole student focus is necessary so that personal, social, emotional, and academic development may be addressed. Warm, caring relationships with teachers and staff members are a critical piece to the alternative school culture. Alternative programs foster expanded roles for teachers. Instructors not only function in the teacher role but as counselors, advisors, and mentors. A sense of community among teachers, students, and staff creates a connection between the student and the school, in addition to fostering the relationships described above. Alternative education teachers hold high expectations for all students while exhibiting flexibility and consideration of change according to student needs.

In addition to school culture, Aronson (1995) shares that organizational structure of the alternative school is central to success of the program. Personal attention and cultivating a sense of community is more easily accomplished when classes and schools are small. Most successful alternative schools possess some degree of autonomy. A measure of freedom from the customary district operating procedures is necessary given the very nature of the needs of at-risk students. Comprehensive programs linking vocational skills with experiential learning seem to better assist students in connecting their learning with future life and career. Extensive counseling services are necessary since the students landing in alternative programs experience a host of academic, social, emotional, and personal issues. The traditional school for students at-risk of failing has proven to be a hostile setting for most. Alternative programs must be structured in such a way as to generate feelings of comfort and safety. Clear, strict behavioral expectations with the administering of fair and consistent discipline assist in maintaining a comfortable and safe environment. Finally, the majority of the research reveals that programs that achieve a physical

separation from the traditional school building tend to more successfully impact their students than those who remain integrated within the traditional school.

Curriculum in alternative programs will vary. Some provide a stronger emphasis on personal development and behavior, some on basic skills, and some on core content academics, while others focus a great deal on vocational skills and preparing for the world of work. Regardless of the focus of the curriculum the alternative school must be flexible in designing a basic plan for each student, using multiple, specific strategies and methods to address the individual needs of the learner (Aronson, 1995).

System-wide features round out the most frequently named successful alternative program elements. The saying, "it takes a village to raise a child" has never been more appropriate in any other setting than the alternative school. Parental involvement, community involvement and support, and health and social services are key aspects to the success of most programs (Aronson, 1995).

Ultimately, the concepts that most appropriately address the needs of the at-risk student are the same concepts that would most appropriately address the needs of all learners. In this researcher's opinion the most evident, crucial component to any learning program, be it a traditional school culture, or an alternative school setting, is the personal relationship of the instructor and the learner. That connection, that bond, forms an alliance capable of accomplishing great feats, against all the odds. As Quinn and Poirier (2006) reveal in their investigations of effective alternative education programs, the nature of the relationship between adults and the adolescents in their care is absolutely critical to the realization of the positive outcomes all educators have dedicated their lives to achieving.

Research Paradigm

The nature of this qualitative study of what successful completers of alternative education programs perceived to have influenced their positive outcome will be situated in the phenomenological paradigm. The structuring of the study in the qualitative, phenomenological paradigm establishes the necessary framework to proceed in the quest of the perceptions of the young adults who completed an alternative education program.

Phenomenology is a method of inquiry based on the assertion that reality exists in the form of human perceptions of objects and events consciously experienced by the individual (Husserl, 1963). Edmund Husserl founded the phenomenological philosophy in 1931 in an attempt to alleviate presumptions of personal reality. The phenomenological method of inquiry studies the structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. Understanding the phenomenological philosophy and method of inquiry supports phenomenology as a fitting and valid paradigm to situate this study grounded in the perceptions of the experiences of alternative education students.

While this study is rooted in the phenomenological philosophy of structures of consciousness experienced from the first-person point of view of a particular group of alternative education completers, it is further embedded in the critical theory paradigm. The perceptions of students regarding their experiences in completing alternative education programs is important to this study not just for new knowledge but to advocate and facilitate academic and social change in the alternative school setting in southeast Kansas.

The critical inquirer is an advocate and activist for those participating in their investigation. Knowledge is shaped through interaction of the participants and the inquirer. The values of the inquirer will influence the inquiry and the inquiry will influence the values of the

inquirer (Guba, & Lincoln, 1994). The researcher and the participants work jointly throughout the investigative process. Involvement of the inquirer with the participants is such that the inquirer becomes instrumental in facilitating greater insight that leads to emancipator action on the part of the participants (Crotty, 1998; Guba, & Lincoln, 1994; Kincheloe, & McLaren, 1994).

The effective education elements shared by successful young adults who completed an alternative education program could support the construction of guiding principles for rural alternative education programs in southeast Kansas.

Personal Background

Ten years ago the middle school of which I am principal was awarded funding to create a middle level alternative school. During the program creation phase it became obvious that funding would prove to be least of our concerns. Virtually no alternative program frameworks existed, particularly for a middle level program. In designing our program we resorted to the modest research in the literature, observing high school and middle school alternative programs in the area, and identifying the specific needs of the students to be enrolled in our program.

As I observed middle school and high school alternative schools within my district, the southeast Kansas area, and those visited in other states I witnessed child-centered institutions, engaging the student in a developmentally appropriate curriculum. I detected environments of care and concern for the individual student with the student's active engagement in the design and implementation of the learning objectives. I noticed teachers assuming the role of facilitator rather than deliverer of instruction, with the instruction occurring through life experiences as opposed to text-driven lessons. Finally, I watched closely as students and their uniqueness as individuals were given value and support, for not only who they were, but for the potential of which they were to become. These observations support a strong resolve that the progressive

education theory and public alternative schools movement played a pivotal role in the design adopted by Type II and III alternative education programs across this country.

Theoretical Sensitivity

From the onset of my career in education I have been a strong advocate for the at-risk teen. Students with numerous factors impeding their academic success hold a special place in my heart. My student teaching experience was filled with troubled students and unique situations involving their issues and circumstances, reinforcing my enthusiasm of engaging and assisting the at-risk student.

As a middle school principal I had the rewarding opportunity to initiate and partner in the design of a middle level alternative school for our district. This middle school alternative program is in its tenth year of serving at-risk students. I never tire of observing these young people moving from situations of dismal failure in the traditional school to exemplary achievement in the alternative school.

I fondly relate to the students who appear to have the odds against their educational success. My passion is to discover the most effective ways to guide and instruct at-risk students to become successful in their education, training, and careers.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature studied in this review relates to alternative education programs within the United States. It examines the key components to current effective alternative education programs. The goal of the study is to be the voice that advocates for at-risk students and their educational needs, using the data to support the implementation development, and evaluation of effective alternative education programs. Structuring effective education components into new and existing alternative programs and creating guidelines for hiring practices within those programs will increase the probability that more at-risk students will complete those programs. Program completers face a greater opportunity to become successful, productive citizens.

The Problem

In 2004 to 2005 the U.S. Census Bureau reported more than 540,000 dropouts in that single school year. High school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, engage in criminal action, and find themselves dependent upon government support (Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002). High school dropouts cost the nation billions of dollars annually, through monies invested in crime prevention, welfare, unemployment costs, and the enormous loss in tax revenue (Wehlage, & Rutter, 1986).

America's public schools have been accused of failing our nation's youth. Schools understand that at-risk students experience tremendous obstacles in maintaining consistent academic progress. Educators are willing to address the needs of these students. Time, personnel, resources, and funding restraints limit the degree to which the complex issues facing today's you can be addressed.

Response to the Problem

The creation of alternative schools and alternative approaches to education were launched from the awareness of the dismal dropout rate statistics. As a nation we had to rethink this complicated academic issue. Once upon a time a high school teacher could be heard saying things like, "I taught it to you. It is up to you to learn it. You either get it or you do not. It is not my fault if you did not learn it. You are in charge of your own learning." Our system of education could no longer take the position that it was up to the student to be academically successful. To ensure a productive society the dropout issue is and should be everyone's problem.

Alternative education programs are steadily increasing across our country. Despite this growth limited empirical data exists to support the constructs that effectively assist extended education, training, and employability.

Historical Context

Considering the cost of academically, ill-prepared youth to our society, legislation has attempted to address the issue as far back as the mid 1800s, but it was not until more than 100 years later that the federal government moved beyond just requiring all 6 to 18 year olds to attend school regularly, to guaranteeing the equal opportunity of success for every child. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, was the first time the federal government designated federal funds for the design of programs to serve the needs of economically disadvantaged, educationally disadvantaged, and non English speaking students (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Nearly 40 years later, the federal government intervened in public school legislation, yet again. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (National Education Association, 2003), sent a

straight forward message from the federal government and society that no longer would the nation allow students to fall through the cracks of the education system. A clear accountability system was set forth to ensure continuous improvement in student performance. Additionally, local school districts were to initiate innovative programs to address the needs of all low performing students (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The ESEA of 1965 held the position that all students can learn, while the NCLB legislation of 2001 affirmed that all students will learn and achieve to high standards.

There is no panacea or blanket approach that yields success for all students in all settings. The book, Whatever It Takes, (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004), emphasizes this point repeatedly, as it addresses how a school is to respond when students do not learn. When one program, setting, intervention, or strategy failed to work for a particular student or student group at Adlai Stevenson High School something new was initiated, until each student was positioned in an environment where the opportunity to achieve to a high standard could be realized.

The University of Minnesota's Alternative Schools Project (2004) discloses that the state of Minnesota has historically embraced the alternative school concept. They are one of the few states to have an established state supported alternative education association. Minnesota has proven to be most proactive in the implementation and study of alternative programs, serving over 100,000 students in alternative programs across the state during 2000 to 2001 while funding and supporting numerous research projects in pursuit of the most effective program design.

In an endeavor to set forth the criteria recognized as effective to increasing student achievement and program completion in an alternative education setting, it is particularly important to delve into reliable literature and research of alternative education. Education reform,

in the construct of alternative education programs, should not be reactive exercises. Intense research, strategic planning, and intelligent design should be the foundation for all educational reform. Continuous research, prior planning, and practical experience, assist the reform to grow to meet the ever-changing needs of our youth.

<div align="center">Methods for Reviewing the Literature</div>

The literature review included studies that were found to be significant in addressing the statement of the problem and the scholarly nature of the study itself. The significance of the studies revealed in this review was assessed using several criteria. First, only studies of alternative education programs within the United States were considered. Application of the research is more relevant if similar cultures are examined. Second, the primary scope of the research extends from approximately 1980 to the present. Even though the concept of alternative school education originated in the 1960s, the more intelligent design of alternative education did not occur until about 10 to 20 years after. Third, due to the limited scope of investigations into alternative education students' perceptions of effective education components critical to program completion, the majority of the research derives from professional opinion. Lastly, the literature explored covers only those alternative schools dealing with socially and academically disengaged students within the traditional system and the last chance programs. The intense, unique programs of choice, also known as alternative schools, will be of little use in providing relevant information for the academically and socially disengaged learner.

To assure some degree of validity, only research endeavors of a scholarly nature were included. Books of reputable authors in the field of education and alternative education, doctoral dissertations, and peer-reviewed journals were the primary sources of the research included in this review of the literature.

Search Strategy

Upon consultation with the education research librarian at the university library, key search terms were generated in an endeavor to yield pertinent research that would become the framework of the literature review for this study. Examples of key words in the original search follows:

- Types of alternative education programs

- History of alternative education

- Alternative education program evaluations

- Alternative education organizations

- Alternative education studies

- Alternative education teacher hiring practices and evaluations

- Effective alternative education programs

- Effective alternative program elements

- Successful alternative education programs

- Student, parent, and staff perceptions of effective alternative program components

- Student, staff, parent, and staff perceptions of alternative program components that lead to program completion

- Program elements most likely to lead to alternative education program completion

After witnessing the repetition of several effective alternative program elements within the initial searches I began to use search terms like:

- Student-to-teacher ratio in alternative education programs

- Family involvement in alternative education programs

- Alternative education teacher attributes

- Instruction and individual instruction plans within alternative education programs

- Social and emotional support within alternative education programs

- Self-efficacy and alternative education completion

Once establishing key search terms, I performed electronic data base searches of Education Abstracts, ERIC, EBSCO HOST, Pro Quest, Google, and table of contents searches of widely recognized education journals. I researched publication indexes of education institutions such as the U.S. Department of Education and Kansas State Department of Education.

Effective Program Elements

Student-to-Teacher Ratio

The alternative education strategy employed and supported by the majority of the research in this review is that of smaller overall student enrollment and smaller student-to-teacher ratios. A descriptive study of public alternative schools in South Carolina collected data from 34 public alternative school programs. District alternative program coordinators completed a 13-item multiple response survey that included information regarding the actual programs, while the alternative school administrators and directors were given a 36-item multiple-response questionnaire that surveyed their perceptions of the alternative programs within their state. The only data from this study relevant to the problem statement of this literature review is that a pupil-to-teacher ratio of 15:1 exists in 50% of the schools and that student-teacher ratio is perceived as the most important factor that distinguishes alternative programs from traditional school settings (Young, 2007).

Universally, effective alternative programs are typified as student-supported environments, with fewer students per class and an emphasis on individual attention that provides opportunities for one-on-one interactions between staff and students (Lehr, & Lange,

2003). Numerous authors and researchers have praised the effectiveness of alternative school programs and have identified effective characteristics that all alternative programs should embrace (Knutson, 1996). Small student population is the one characteristic shared by all alternative schools and few conventional public schools (Duke, & Muzio, 1978). The majority of alternative schools enroll less than 200 students. The lower number of students enrolled in the alternative schools is considered to be a foundation for a supportive school environment (Ascher, 1982; Dollar, 1983; Duke, & Muzio, 1978; Franklin, McNeil, & Wright, 1990; Garbarino, & Elliott, 1981; Hahn, Danzberger, & Lefkowitz, 1987; Hamilton, 1981; Hess, Wells, Prindle, Liffman, & Kaplan, 1987; Silvestri, 1986). Lange and Sletten (2002), also recognize that effective alternative school programs share common features. A low pupil-to-teacher ratio encompassed within a small overall program size, allows the opportunity for one-on-one relationships between staff and students for the foundation of a viable program.

Don Iglesias, President of the Association of California School Administrators, understands that schools must work for all students. Margaret Hill, principal of a San Bernardino County alternative school, tells Mr. Iglesias that at their alternative school they employ a small student-to-teacher ratio. The staff at the alternative school knows all their students by name and the backgrounds of each individual student as well (Iglesias, 2002). The opportunity to know the names and the backgrounds assures the likelihood of the development of personal, caring relationships between student and staff and the personalization of the instructional program which the literature reveals as two additional, effective alternative program constructs. Support of these constructs is stated further on in this chapter.

Utilizing qualified instructional para-professionals in the alternative program is one of the key criteria that separate effective programs from ineffective ones. Licensed instructors provide

the aides with the necessary guidance and structure to offer an economical way to achieve a low student-to-staff ratio. The integration of skillful instructional aides is one of many ways low budget programs can offer the individualized support the at-risk teen needs so desperately (Mottaz, 2002).

About 10 years prior to the initiation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 the Wisconsin State Department of Education recognized the need to intervene for students at-risk of not graduating. The department mandated that school districts identify and implement programs to address the needs of students in jeopardy of not completing high school. The programs that were initiated were much smaller than the traditional high schools. The schools were designed to accommodate no more than 100 students; anonymity was not an option for the teen landing in these alternative programs. Class sizes were structured with a student-to-teacher ratio of 15:1or less. This allowed the at-risk student to receive what they most needed: attention (Howard, 2003).

Social and Emotional Support

Deprivation of appropriate social and emotional support is one of the key factors that lead many youth to academic and social disengagement. Personal, extended relationships, which are typical in an alternative school setting, are believed to provide social support, a sense of belonging, and bonding that goes beyond the experiences found in the majority of conventional schools (Dollar, 1983; Foley, 1982, 1983, 1984; Hahn et al., 1987; Hamilton, 1981; Trickett, et al., 1985).

Alternative programs are expected to address a myriad of antisocial behaviors. Although small school size, low student-to-teacher ratio, one-on-one relationships with staff members, a caring environment, and instilling student self-efficacy are all valid and effective constructs for

at-risk teens, many require interventions that target a particular nature of antisocial behaviors. Intervention strategies that have been empirically validated reveal the greatest impact in modifying the more exceptional antisocial behaviors. Comprehensive, strategically planned, school-wide designs have fostered positive results, while those programs that have attempted to pull pieces together to meet the behavioral needs as they arise have failed to produce good, consistent results. Proactive, thoughtful program structure addresses the needs of these struggling teens much more appropriately and effectively than the deal-with-it-when-it-happens reactive method (U. S. Department of Justice, 2001). Specialists in the area of at-risk youth understand that antisocial behaviors are most effectively addressed concurrently and rigorously over prolonged periods of time (Van Acker, 2007).

The Safe Schools Framework developed by The NEA (2003) was designed to assist schools and communities in attending to problems relevant to youth antisocial behavior. The structure recommends the engagement of schools, community, and families. As the most prevalent problems are recognized and connected to specific at-risk factors a strategic prevention, intervention, and suppression plan can then be designed.

A number of interventions have received empirical attention and documentation as displaying positive outcomes in attending to individual antisocial behaviors. Psychotherapy is a strategy implemented with many teens demonstrating antisocial behaviors. This type of therapy assists the student in gaining insight into bothersome issues, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Tolan, & Guerra, 1994).

Scores of troubled teens respond well to applied behavior analysis. Teachers and counselors witness marked changes in behavior when students are engaged in contracting,

positive and negative reinforcement, token economies, and response cost modeling (Kazdin, 1997; Tolan, & Guerra, 1994).

Cognitive-behavioral methods seem to be an effective method when addressing antisocial behavior in teens. Cognitive behavior methods are based on the principle that inner speech governs behavior. When using language to revise beliefs, cognitions, and attitudes behavioral transformations occur (Tolan, & Guerra, 1994).

Interventions of a socially developmental nature lead to effective outcomes with most youth, especially those who feel unaccepted by school society. Development of personal relationships between staff members and the at-risk youth form social bonds that lead the student to a belief in the value of the system and a commitment to the program (Elliott, Hamburg, & Williams, 2000; Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998). Youth engagement and opportunity initiatives promote academic and social success through active involvement. These experiences include, but are not limited to, service learning, mentoring, academic enrichment, cultural enrichment, job training, and employment (Guerra, & Williams, 2006).

Social casework intervention involves the appointment of a case manager for the troubled teen. The case manager keeps abreast of the student's academic and social progress, initiates onsite visits with the student and family, and conducts regular conference sessions within the clinic setting (Tolan, & Guerra, 1994).

Social and emotional support is crucial to program completion and success of the at-risk teen. Without the instillation of resilient and vigorous social and mental health neither personal nor academic success is to be expected.

Caring and Committed Staff

Ruby Payne is a leading consultant to educational practitioners on the mindsets of poverty in the United States. Taking into account that a notable number of students landing in alternative schools have lived in a low socioeconomic environment most, if not all, of their lives, it is wise to pay heed to her work regarding appropriate approaches to educating them. Dr. Payne (2005) reveals that the crucial aspect to achievement for students from poverty is to fashion relationships with them. According to her work, the way of thinking of those in poverty revolves around entertainment and relationships but the most important stimulation for learning is the relationship the student shares with his or her instructor.

The design of the New Directions program in El Paso is accomplished by the alternative school staff. Teachers of this school choose to teach in the alternative setting. The strength of the staff and the program lies in the dedication and caring nature of the staff members. Students and families choose and support the program. The classroom teacher works one-on-one with the student to set and meet individual goals and to form positive relationships. Administrators support the goals of the students and the program, allowing flexibility, free from much of the central office bureaucracy. Through collaboration of administration and teachers a commitment to effectively serving the needs of at-risk students is achieved (Gilson, 2006).

One of the many factors leading to academic and social disengagement of students is the gradual decline of the personal teacher/student relationship. Expelled students in Colorado were asked if they could name any loving, caring teachers during their years in elementary school. All students could identify at least one elementary teacher whom they felt was caring and nurturing, but all were hard-pressed to remember a caring adult during their junior high experience. Not one

of the expelled students could name or recall a teacher that exhibited care and concern for them

during their middle level years (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 1995).

The alternative school establishes an intimate environment that allows teachers who care

deeply to bond and form relationships with their students. When at-risk students are involved

with teachers who care about them, teachers that require quality work, and teachers that

challenge students to achieve to the highest standards, substantial learning occurs (Barr, &

Parrett, 1997).

Alternative schools with merit for impacting student success and program completion are

designed to meet the needs of a specific at-risk population; consequently the adults that work

with these students must exhibit specific attributes in order to address their needs. Every teacher

employed in an alternative setting must choose to be there and possess a passion to support the

at-risk youth in their personal and educational endeavor (Mottaz, 2002).

In most cases, the students enrolled in alternative programs have experienced negative

interaction with school personnel for many years. The very issue they should not encounter is the

reassignment into yet another hostile educational environment. Alternative schools in the infant

stages are susceptible to self destruction when employing staff that are indifferent and detached

from the young people relocated in these types of programs (Mottaz, 2002).

An aspect of alternative education that is frequently overlooked is the placement of staff

with the appropriate mindset to engage with at-risk students. Bringing together teachers who

share a common passion to assist and educate these youngsters increases the potential for student

and school success. Most teachers value the prospect of teaching in a setting where colleagues

share their educational philosophy. A teacher choosing to work with the at-risk teen is one of the

major factors of increased student performance in the alternative setting as opposed to the traditional public school setting (Barr, & Parrett, 1997).

As previously noted, the state of Wisconsin has established itself ahead of the curve in alternative education. All alternative schools in this state make it normal practice to hire exceptionally dedicated personnel who are committed to the unique needs of the at-risk student. Scores of these teachers earn a lesser salary than they would if they were employed in the traditional school setting. They consider much of their compensation to be the successes of the students they assist (Howard, 2003).

An instructional environment of a caring and nurturing nature is idyllic but not necessary for learning to occur for every student. For students who previously experienced a hostile world in their personal and academic lives a caring, nurturing, learning environment must be the norm (Lange, & Sletten, 2002).

Haim Ginott (1972) believed that teachers own an exceptional power to inflict misery or impart joy and comfort. No teacher is inherently bad, but many become frustrated and exasperated when dealing with the intense needs of the at-risk student, which is all the more reason that the alternative education instructor must possess an internal passion for the student who faces a myriad of factors impeding their educational achievement (Lloyd, 2001).

Family Involvement

The breakdown of the family structure, lack of family support, and absence of family involvement substantiate a decline in academic progress and deterioration in social behaviors. Family and community participation is an integral component to the effective alternative program. Parents, siblings, spouses, or partners must be involved in self-help groups, school

conferences, and school activities if improved performance is to occur (Ascher, 1982; Franklin et al., 1990, Franklin, & Streeter, 1991, 1992: Orr, 1987; Trickett et al., 1985).

El Paso's New Directions Academy requires the active involvement of the student's families from the preliminary enrollment conference throughout the remainder of the alternative school experience. Making the academic experience a family affair broadens the support network for the at-risk teen (Cox, 1999).

The NAEA (2006) is in persistent pursuit to enhance the quality of alternative education. Since the founding of the organization volunteers have engaged in the design of a set of guiding principles for alternative education programs. The NAEA Guiding Principles hope to provide guidelines for standards development, implementation, and continuous improvement of alternative education programs.

Guiding principle number five states that active parent involvement is encouraged in explicit ways beyond just parent/teacher meetings. The alternative program must include a solution-focused approach between all stakeholders, relating to parents as equal partners in all aspects of an individual educational plan for their child. Parental involvement, decision-making, communication, and program evaluation are crucial to the success of each child within the alternative education program (NAEA, 2006).

Mottaz (2002) states that parental/guardian input into the ongoing student learning plan is a significant indicator of quality in an alternative program and critical to the student's progress and success. Family involvement is not only crucial in support of the student's academic success but in attending to social disengagement, as well. The Safe Schools Framework (NEA, 2003) recommends the engagement of schools, community, and families to attend to problems relevant to youth antisocial behavior.

Individually Designed Education Plan

Students enrolled in alternative schools are typically provided individual education plans. Every alternative student possesses unique academic and social needs. As noted previously, the challenge found in attempting to define alternative school programs is the no one-size-fits-all approach to the academic and social structure. Alternative schools frequently provide self-paced, mastery-based curricula, and the school schedule itself can be adjusted to meet the need of the individual student. Students may attend school a few hours a day with options of mornings or afternoons and days of the week (Franklin, et al., 1990; Hamilton, 1981; Trickett et al., 1985).

The success of any alternative school is the ability to design a program that meets the social and academic needs of the individual student (Gilson, 2006). The more the education plan can be patterned to address the individual needs of the at-risk student the greater the chance of increased achievement.

The staff at San Bernardino County alternative school in California knows all their students areas of strength and concerns. They use an arsenal of resources to make the program fit the needs of each student personally and academically. Appropriately designed and supported alternative programs can compel the struggling student to prosper and the potential dropout to thrive (Iglesias, 2002).

Further accommodations to the specific educational needs of the student are believed to contribute to positive staff and student morale and a sense of student ownership in the pursuit of their educational goals. Multiple options and choices provide an attractive benefit to the student in danger of dropping out of high school (Dollar, 1983; Franklin et al., 1990, Hamilton, 1981).

Alternative schools employ an autonomous and democratic structure. Students and teachers work in partnership to identify the individual learning objectives and the pathway to

achieving those goals. Decision-making is participatory, with teachers and students involved in the school governance a great deal of the time (Ascher, 1982; Dollar, 1983; Franklin et al., 1990; Hahn et al., 1987; Trickett et al., 1985).

At-risk teens must have an environment that supports learning and provides opportunities for applicable experiences consistent with their future goals. Programs serve the student well if they provide opportunities for the student to develop and exercise self-control and flexibility in the structure of the program so that the individual academic and social/emotional needs are accommodated (Lange, & Sletten, 2002). Additionally, effective alternative schools offer a flexible and imaginative curriculum that allows hands-on, task-oriented learning prospects (Lehr, & Lange, 2003).

Quinn and Rutherford (1998) distinguish six unique concepts that comprise a quality alternative school program. One of the key concepts is the inclusion of methods for conducting the functional assessment of the students' academic and nonacademic needs. Understanding the academic and socio-emotional level of the student at the onset of enrollment allows for the design of a specific and effective individual instructional plan for each student. The curriculum must maintain a great degree of flexibility and require an emphasis on academic, social, and everyday living skills.

A separate study in 2006 identified characteristics that differentiated alternative school programs from the traditional school design. This study agrees that one critical characteristic to at-risk student success is the implementation of comprehensive evaluations for all students upon entering the program. The design of the educational program must be patterned from the needs revealed from the comprehensive evaluations. Each individual student education plan should

involve real-world experiences and provide flexible options within the parameters of instruction and learning (Fitzsimmons-Hughes, Baker, Criste, Huffty, Link, & Roberts, 2006).

Wraparound programs, programs that revolve around the student's needs, propose an effective means of dealing with the unique challenges of at-risk youth. Students are not forced to fit into the existing educational mold but the instructional plan is designed specifically to the needs of each student (Eber, & Nelson, 1997).

A 2007 qualitative study performed by Christina Occhiogrossi explored the social and academic perceptions of 51 students voluntarily enrolled in a Progressive Alternative Education Program (PAEP). Data sources included a survey of the participants' perceptions of school and learning, extensive field notes during components of the PAEP, individual interviews, and focus groups. The analysis of the data was to uncover patterns in perceptions of learning and to note changes in perceptions by the end of the school calendar year. Four focal patterns embedded within the individualized instruction spectrum were generated from this study: (1) perceiving academic courses as pertinent to goals instills the likelihood to persist in the achievement of those goals; (2) students connecting classroom experiences with "real world" experiences increase their motivation to learn and their understanding of the material. Academic disengagement can occur when these connections are unclear or not attended to; (3) academically disengaged students may re-connect when the academic community is seen as a group of active and engaged learners; and (4) students setting their own goals and directing their own path will be more likely to develop self-efficacy and an internal locus of control. At-risk students are sending a pointed message that instruction must be adapted to be specific to their current and future needs.

Self-efficacy

The concept of student self-efficacy and its essential capacity to impact program completion was reiterated by all three participant groups, in many of the journal writings, and witnessed in some of the observations. Self-efficacy and its importance to alternative education program completion were not apparent through the original review of the literature. Upon completion of all data collection it was evident in this study that self-efficacy was a critical component to program completion and that further research in that area must be included in the literature review. Throughout many of the interviews it appeared that not only did self-efficacy impact program completion but was a result of program completion as well. Completing the program led to feelings of self-confidence, self-worth, and the mind-set that they possessed the abilities necessary to be successful.

According to Albert Bandura (1994), self-efficacy is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations." A person's belief in their ability to succeed in a certain situation is self-efficacy. Self efficacy can play a role in a person's psychological state, their behavior, and their motivation (Bandura, 1977).

Bandura's (1992), work reveals stark contrasts of people with a strong perception of their abilities and those who lack self-efficacy.

Individuals with a strong sense of self-efficacy:

- Frame challenging circumstances as tasks to be mastered

- Seek in-depth interest in activities

- Are strongly committed to their interests or activities

- Recover faster when disappointed or encountering obstacles

Individuals with a weak sense of self-efficacy:

- Avoid tasks that appear challenging

- Focus on their inabilities when demanding tasks and situations arise

- Concentrate on failures and negative outcomes

- Lack an overall confidence in their abilities

Self-efficacy can be developed. Teachers can implement certain strategies to build self-efficacy in their students. Mastery experiences yields the most effective way to boost self-efficacy. Anxiety, confusion, becoming overwhelmed, and failing erode and possibly destroy self-confidence. Lessons, instructional activities, and pacing designed specifically for the academic level of the student create mastery experiences. Increased self-efficacy is evident when school work is mastered over time. Vicarious experiences can lead to and strengthen self-efficacy as students observe peers succeeding in school. Credible communication and feedback increase self-efficacy by guiding students through the task or motivating then to put forth their best effort. A students' emotional state is a key aspect to self-efficacy. Teachers cognizant of students' anxiety levels will minimize stressful situations whenever possible. A positive mood can have a positive impact on one's belief in their abilities, while anxiety may weaken it (Bandura, 1992, Margolis, & McCabe, 2006).

Self-efficacy was examined in a study of 123 high school students in a metropolitan high school in the southeast United States. Data revealed that better grades and increased levels of engagement in varied aspects of school resulted when teens were more confident in their general level of competence (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003).

A study of 102 ninth and tenth grade students in an eastern U. S. city explored the causal relationship between perceived self-efficacy and attainment of academic goals. The results

suggested that academic performance was impacted by personal goals. Additionally, students with a higher degree of self-efficacy set higher goals. Perceived self-efficacy in the area of achievement promoted goal setting and in turn motivated increased academic progress (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992).

The feeling of adequacy and the ability to deal with one's life is crucial to successful learning. The sense of self-efficacy is developed as a belief that we have some level of control of what happens to us. How we think and feel about ourselves, and what we are able to achieve in a learning environment, influences how we focus our attention and how we think strategically. As educators, the responsibility to foster student self-efficacy is tremendous. Children are not good at assessing their abilities accurately. They tend to believe what others tell them or their own perceptions of what others believe about them. As students attempt to gain control over their world, teachers and other adults can help them acquire self-confidence, or reduce their belief in their abilities (Bandura, 1997).

Gaps in the Literature

The literature reveals only limited empirical research for designating the components necessary to create and sustain an effective alternative education program and a limited scope of investigations of alternative education students' perceptions of effective education aspects essential to program completion. Educators and others involved in meeting the needs of at-risk youth must depend on a blend of expert opinions, practical experiences, and research conducted on comparable populations of students to replicate the designs revealing the most promise for student success and program completion.

Methodologies of the Literature Reviewed

The research included in this study of the features that lead to a more effectively designed alternative education program and greater opportunity for program completion for the academically and socially disengaged at-risk teen was predominantly qualitative in design. Several were phenomenological studies that included surveys of the students within, or students that experienced alternative education programs. Many were small group case studies that initiated questionnaires and surveys to students currently enrolled in alternative programs, their families, alternative school instructors, and administrators. These questionnaires and surveys probed the perceptions of the program constructs from these specific populations. Other studies included individual interviews and focus groups. Most of the literature reviewed was limited in its scope of inquiry and not intended to produce universal findings. As the literature for this review was compiled it became apparent that it is plausible to draw some broad generalizations of the components necessary to program completion and an alternative education model design.

Summary of the Findings

Although empirical research is limited as to what comprises the most effective alternative education system, there is literature that speaks to existing alternative programs and the concepts found to be most successful to improving academic and social performance of at-risk individuals within these environments.

The research conducted for this review consistently indicates similar concepts employed by innumerable alternative systems addressing the needs of academically and socially disengaged young people. Through practical experience and minimal empirical research an overall emergent design of the approaches that encompass an effective alternative education program is conceivable. As revealed by the literature in this review, the alternative education

components most likely to positively affect academic and social performance and program completion of the at-risk youth are as follows: (1) small school size/low student-to-teacher ratio/separate facility setting/structure and consistency; (2) staff that choose to work in the alternative setting/staff involvement in the design (and continuous redesign) of the alternative system/caring and nurturing environment/personal relationships; (3) utilization of outside organizations and agencies/intense counseling/appropriate social functional assessments at onset/individualized social development plan that includes: appropriate interventions and strategies to address anti social behaviors; (4) individualized academic plan/flexible scheduling/academic graduation options/ structured transition procedures with appropriate support features built in/appropriate academic functional assessments at onset/ individual student-directed goal setting/ flexible curriculum; (5) family involvement/parents, siblings, partners involved in all aspects of the student's educational process; and (6) instilling self-efficacy.

In Powell's (2003) research of alternative education and what comprises an effective program, a self-study rubric was developed to guide the creation of new programs and assist in the evaluation of current programs. The components outlined in this rubric include, but are not limited to, low pupil-to-teacher ratio, small program size, individualized education goals, social and emotional strategies, and qualified staff that promote an atmosphere of mutual respect between teacher and student. Powell's self-study rubric reinforces what the literature consistently revealed as the most valid elements in effecting a positive academic and social outcome for at-risk teens.

Ultimately, the concepts that appropriately address the needs of the at-risk student are similar to the concepts that would appropriately address the needs of all learners. In my opinion

the most evident, crucial component to any learning program, be it a traditional school culture or an alternative school setting, is the personal relationship of the instructor and the learner. That connection and bond forms an alliance capable of accomplishing great feats, against all of the odds. As Quinn and Rutherford report (1998), the nature of the relationship between adults and the adolescents in their care is absolutely critical to the realization of the positive outcomes all educators have dedicated their lives to achieving.

Future Research

Limited data-driven research is available regarding the effectiveness of alternative educational programs. Therefore, a precise model of the best approach, or what specific needs are best served with which model eludes the educational system. More studies of alternative education programs, empirical in nature, must occur in order to compile actual data in evaluating the varied constructs of the multitude of programs. This empirical data could lead to the model designs of alternative programs capable of addressing specific student needs. Extensive data, gleaned from large, diverse populations, would assist in painting a more accurate picture of what meets the academic and social needs of the at-risk youth in society today.

Michael Schmoker (2006) confirms the need for verifying or supporting the research through the use of valid data. In his work to restructure education, he tells us that war cannot be waged on what is invisible. Data creates the visibility necessary to point us to action. When data are omitted, all that is left is an opinion. While we proceed to implement what we simply think might work best for educating the at-risk student, many teens are giving up on a system that has failed them all too often. When they lose, we all lose.

Conclusion

The research of effective alternative education programs repeats many themes responsible for the success of the alternative education student. Small student-to-teacher ratio, a caring and committed staff, family involvement, and individually designed education plans were the elements consistently repeated in the literature review as significant to the success of the alternative education student and in overcoming at-risk barriers.

For children or youth landing in alternative environments time is unforgiving as their opportunities for positive life alterations decline daily (Sugai, 1998). If educators are to address the needs of the population of at-risk youth, we must critically examine current successful programs and successful students from those programs, and then replicate those practices and interventions into other programs across the country. Alternative education programs are capable of meeting the needs of our youth by providing comprehensive services focused on the individual needs of the at-risk student. Alternative schools provide a viable option for at-risk students if the programs are consistently linked to academic standards; if the programs are academically, socially, and developmentally appropriate; and if the program adheres to the best-practices in the field. Adults must hold the belief that the students possess the capacity for change. Administration and staff should feel an obligation to sustain high expectations for each and every student and create opportunities for student success within the education program (Powell, 2003).

CHAPTER III: METHODS

Introduction

While some students fail to successfully complete alternative education programs and given the intricacies of random alternative education design and implementation across our nation, what are the program elements that lead to successful completion of those programs? What aspects of those programs allow the at-risk student to be successful completers of those programs? Because few studies truly probe the perceptions of alternative education students regarding the educational elements critical to successful completion of those programs, a phenomenological study exploring what successful completers of alternative education programs perceive to have influenced their positive outcome best lent itself to examining this question.

Additionally, there is very little research regarding successful program components in small rural alternative education programs. There is even less research regarding student-completer perceptions of the program elements that led to their graduation from those programs. Effective tracking systems for previous alternative education students are virtually nonexistent. The absence of such systems limits the ability to seek and attain student information and input.

This study focused on two small, rural alternative education programs in Southeast Kansas, exploring what successful completers of those alternative education programs perceived to have influenced their positive outcome. To understand this phenomenon from the student's perspective, the following research questions guided this study:

How do instructors and staff members influence successful program completion?

What influence does family involvement play in successful program completion?

How does student self-efficacy impact successful program completion?

In what way does small student-to-teacher ratio influence successful program

completion?

How does social/emotional support influence successful program completion?

What significance does the design and implementation of individually designed education

plans play in successful program completion?

Research Design

The nature of this qualitative study of the elements alternative education students

believed were significant to the successful completion of their alternative education programs,

situates well into the phenomenological paradigm. Phenomenology is the study of phenomenon

involving the nature of the phenomenon itself and the meanings attached. Phenomenological

studies elaborate existential and interpretive dimensions to ascertain the real, lived experiences

of the participants in the study. Additionally, this study employs the phenomenological variant of

the exploratory approach. The focus was to explore the experiences of students completing an

alternative program while gaining their perceptions of the effective approaches aiding them to

successful completion of that program. The structuring of the study in the phenomenological,

exploratory paradigm establishes the necessary framework to proceed in the quest of the

elements alternative education students believed were significant to the completion of their

alternative education program (Giorgi, & Giorgi, 2003).

Phenomenology is a method of inquiry based on the assertion that reality exists in the

form of human perceptions of objects and events consciously experienced by the individual

(Husserl, 1963). A phenomenological study explains the meaning of experiences lived for

individuals about a particular concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Phenomenology has

been used in studies of psychology (Polkinghorne, 1989, 1994), social and human sciences

(Swingewood, 1991), nursing and health science (Nieswiadomy, 1993), and in education studies as well (Tesch, 1988). The phenomenological method of inquiry studies the structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view, this includes the structure of various types of experiences like memory, thought, perception, emotion, and desire (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2008).

To date, five distinguishable methods of phenomenological practice exist. Classical phenomenologist's established the first three methods in the mid nineteen hundreds. They are as follows: (1) pure description of lived experience (Husserl, 1963); (2) interpretation of an experience by relating it to features of context relevant to the individual or to the study of theory and practice of interpretation (Heidegger, 1962); (3) individual analysis of the form of a type of experience. The two methods disclosed in most recent decades were: (1) logico-semantics, where one specifies the truth conditions for a type of thinking or satisfaction conditions for a type of intention; and (2) neurophenomenology, which mixes phenomenology with physical and biological science, assuming that conscious experience is established in neural activity in embodied action in fitting settings. After examination of all five methods, it appeared that the research question and the intent of the information to be gained in this study were more likely a fit within the first three phenomenological methods of practice.

At the onset of studying the various phenomenological methods, number one, describing a type of experience as we have lived it in the past, appeared to be a possible fit for the research question. Upon further examination, it was apparent that the study was searching to know and understand more than just the description of past, lived experiences. The intent of the research question and study was to gain the perceptions of past, lived experiences, personally analyzing the previous experiences as to what elements of the alternative education setting helped them to

successfully complete the program. Therefore, the phenomenological method most appropriate for this study is that of the personal perception and analysis of the previous, lived, alternative education experience.

The researcher pursuing a phenomenological study makes a decision from the beginning that the intent of the study is to examine the meaning of experiences for a particular phenomenon with a particular group of individuals (Creswell, 1998). Understanding the intent of this study, the phenomenological philosophy itself, and the method of inquiry it seems to be a fitting and valid paradigm to situate this study that is grounded in the perceptions of the alternative education students and their perceptions of their alternative education experience.

While this study is rooted in the phenomenological philosophy of structures of consciousness experienced from the first-person point of view of a particular group of alternative education completers, it is further embedded in the critical theory paradigm. The perceptions of students regarding their experiences in completing alternative education programs is important to this study not just for new knowledge, but to advocate and facilitate academic and social change in the alternative school setting in southeast Kansas.

The critical inquirer is an advocate and activist for those participating in their investigation. Knowledge is shaped through interaction of the participants and the inquirer. The values of the inquirer will influence the inquiry and the inquiry will influence the values of the inquirer (Guba, & Lincoln, 1994). The researcher and the participants work jointly throughout the investigative process. Involvement of the inquirer with the participants is such that the inquirer becomes instrumental in facilitating greater insight that leads to emancipator action on the part of the participants (Crotty, 1998; Freire, 1972; Guba, & Lincoln, 1994; Kincheloe, & McLaren, 1994).

Since entering the education arena, my stance has been one of advocacy for the most effective education of all students, especially for the at-risk student. My guiding charge is to advocate the enhancement of educational opportunities for youth who are in danger of failing to complete a high school degree. Alternative programs and schools must not become dropout mills or simply places to remove struggling students from the traditional setting in order to maintain a more appropriate learning environment for those in the traditional setting. Instead, alternative schools should be bright and shining examples of high quality educational programming. In order to advocate for any cause one must have a deep understanding of the cause and the issues involved. By truly listening to these program completers, who were once at high risk of failure in the traditional school, it is my hope that I may learn and understand what they perceive were the most effective educational strategies and designs. Armed with these effective educational strategies I plan to advocate for the operative design of the current programs and the addition of more effectively designed programs in southeast Kansas.

<div align="center">Site and Sampling</div>

Purposeful selection of participants is a critical determination in a qualitative study. In the design of the qualitative study, clear criteria for sampling and well-founded rationales for the decisions to sample selections are necessary to affecting a valid study (Creswell, 1998). Creswell recommends that qualitative researchers examine the typology of 16 approaches to purposeful sampling of participants enhanced by Miles and Huberman (1994). After examining the typology of those 16 approaches it was evident that criterion sampling was the type of sampling that best fit this phenomenological study. In phenomenological studies it is vital that all those in the study experience the phenomenon being studied. Criterion sampling proposes that all cases meet specific criteria in order to be included in the sampling group. The pool of participants selected

for this study had to be students who had completed one of the alternative education programs in the southeast Kansas area, the parents of those completers, and administrators, and staff members of those two alternative programs. Miles and Huberman affirm that criterion sampling in phenomenological studies is valuable for quality assurance in the pursuit of that study.

Parents of the student interview group and staff members employed in the two programs were added to the sampling to provide perspectives from varied sources of involvement within the alternative programs. The decision to include parents and staff members in the interview process was to gain a broad picture from all stakeholders regarding the perceptions of what worked and didn't work for students in the alternative education experience. The perspectives from parents and staff members assist in comparisons to student perspectives and afford deeper, richer data results. The alternative education constructs perceived to be most important to successful completion of the programs by all three participant groups would be defendable as underpinning constructs in the effective design and implementation of alternative education programs.

Participant Contact

An information letter and informed consent was mailed to students who completed one of the alternative education programs in southeast Kansas. Alternative education staff members and parents of the student group were contacted by phone, email, or in person. Parents and alternative education staff members received an information letter and informed consent at the time of their interview.

Permission was secured from the school districts involved in the study. Information letters and informed consent forms were mailed to the superintendents of each school district so that access to school premises, student subjects, and student records were permitted.

The letter of information and informed consent (see Appendix A-D) was designed with information gained from *Doing Qualitative Research in Education Settings* (Hatch, 2002, p. 64). The letter included information regarding: (1) the researcher; (2) the study; (3) approximate time and location of interviews; (4) confidentiality and anonymity of participants; (5) intended use of the responses; (6) risk factors; (7) any further ethical considerations; (8) reciprocity; (9) access to interview tapes, texts, observation field notes, and student journal documentation restricted to researcher and expert peer panel only, with all data destroyed at the end of the study; and (10) results of the study mailed to them upon completion of the project. The information letter also provided the researcher's personal contact information so that questions or concerns regarding the study and participation may be addressed.

In the fall of 2009, the requests to participate in this study were distributed by U.S. Mail to individuals described as the criterion sample in the site and sampling section of this chapter. The cover letter, informed consent page, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope were included in the mailing to all participants. A second mailing, phone, or email contact was made to non respondents in late October, and November 2009. Due to poor response a final contact was initiated in December 2009, this time offering monetary compensation for their participation in the study.

Confidentiality

Careful consideration and precaution were given to safeguarding participant confidentiality and anonymity. Both principles of personal privacy were addressed through the statement of informed consent, which all participants were required to sign prior to engagement in the research study. Participation in this study was voluntary. The participant had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefit.

Throughout the study, all data were stored in a locked file cabinet in my personal office and remained confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy. Participants were informed that the results of the study may be published. No names or any identifying descriptors will be included in any of the published material. The data are to be destroyed upon conclusion of the study.

Instrumentation

The qualitative study includes in-depth interviews, observations, and journal writings of young adults who were once at-risk of academic and personal failure. The population involves 12 students who previously completed a Type II or III alternative school in the southeast Kansas area, 10 staff members of those programs, and 8 parents of students attending those alternative education programs. Field notes from a total of six, 30-to-60 minute obtrusive and unobtrusive observations during times of student engagement at the alternative centers and memos from 32 middle school alternative education student journals round out the data sources for this study. By tapping into the individual experiences, I hope to gain critical details regarding what these young people reveal as the elements that impacted their success in completing their high school degree or their specific alternative program. In-depth interviews of alternative education teachers, alternative education administrators, and parents of students who have experienced alternative education programs will be used to support or dispute the data gathered from the interviews and journal writings of the actual alternative education students.

Interview Instrument Design

The qualitative interview is a unique dialogue between the researcher and the participant. The researcher uses this speech event to uncover the informant's experiences and, in the case of this study, the interpretations of those experiences. Interviews assist in revealing the defining

structures the participants use to organize and make sense of their experiences. Qualitative interview techniques propose a method to bringing the informant's meanings to light (Hatch, 2002). Spradley (1979) sums up the position qualitative researchers take in regard to their participants:

> I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you would explain them. (P. 34)

The interview secures its power through the unique insight of the participant perspectives (Hatch, 2002). Capturing participant perspectives was the goal of this phenomenological study. Interviewing at some level was imperative since phenomenological studies are dependent upon phenomenological interviews (Hatch, 2002).

The critical quality in the data sought in a phenomenological study is concreteness (Wertz, 2005). Details of the person's lived situation are sought in an attempt to access the person's lived experience. Abstract views or interpretations of the person's lived circumstances do not lend to the concreteness of the study. Rather the person's lived experience, going beyond simple conscious thought of the experience, provides the rich, textured data necessary to a solid phenomenological study. The interview questions in a phenomenological study should be designed to deeply explore the personal experiences of the participant, not just their conscious thought about the experience. Questions should be posed in a way that the participant describes their experiences concretely in illicit detail. "Could you explain a typical day at your alternative school?", "What would you describe that I might have seen in your classroom if I were to have observed from an unobtrusive position on any given day?", "What does education mean to you?", or "Does education mean anything different now that you have completed the alternative

program?", would be questions that would elicit concretely described experiences and lend to the critical quality of the study (Finlay, & Gough, 2003).

With the nature of the investigation and the objectives of the research established, protocol for the formal, semi-standardized, in-depth interviews was developed using *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences, 6th Edition* (Berg, 2007, pp. 89-166) and *Doing Qualitative Research in Educational Settings* (Hatch, 2002, pp. 91-116). Careful attention was given to conducting the interviews at a convenient location for the participant, establishing and maintaining a comfortable environment in the interview room, checking equipment for efficient function prior to the interview session, and utilizing non essential questions to establish rapport with the informant. All interviews were semi-structured, with predetermined questions, initiated in a systematic and consistent order. The questions were designed and worded in a vocabulary familiar to the participant, allowing for flexibility in wording of all questions. A good deal of freedom was taken to probe beyond the predetermined questions when and where the opportunity arose, in order to gain greater insight into the experiences and perceptions of the informants.

Gaining information sought in the research question was the focus of the design of the interview tool. Questions were designed to yield responses for the areas of interest regarding the research question. An outline listing the broad categories relevant to the study was established: (1) demographics or background information; (2) essential questions drawn from the effective alternative education constructs most consistently reported in the research of the literature review; (3) extra questions, roughly similar to certain essential questions but framed in a slightly different manner; (4) non-essential questions; and (5) probes. Questions were designed in such a

way as to elicit experience/behavior, opinion/values, knowledge/understanding, and sensory/information for each categorical theme.

Essential questions were open-ended questions using additional probes when necessary in expanding the meaning of the experiences. Each individual interview was audio taped and transcribed into text by the researcher. The questions initiated in the interviews, regarding the elements of the alternative program considered as beneficial to the successful completion of that program, assisted in gathering reliable data from previous alternative education students, their parents, and staff members.

The formal, in-depth interview questions were designed by the researcher and formatted in a structured and semi-structured nature. In-depth interviews were selected over casual interviews because it was necessary to go deeply into the understandings of the informants. The researcher was in charge of leading the interviews with a scheduled time established for each interview and all interviews recorded on tape. The semi-structured nature of the interview process set the stage with guiding questions open to following the leads of the informants and with probes from the researcher into areas arising from the interactions of the participant and the researcher. Flexibility was a focus throughout each interview. Open-ended questions allowed the opportunity for individual, detailed responses.

Interview questions were designed to span multiple categories or types of questions. Background and demographic questions launched all individual interviews. Experience and behavior questions were included to draw from the participant personal descriptions of specific events and happenings. "What do you think about that?", questions probed participant opinions and values. While, "What happened when….?" questions provided participant knowledge and understanding. Questions commencing with, "Tell me what I would see or hear when…"

provided sensory information from the participant, with standard feeling-type questions rounding out the questions in the interview tool (Hatch, 2002).

Interviews

In-depth interviews were scheduled for the fall 2009 and spring 2010. Once the participants responded to the request to participate, phone or personal contact was made to set the date, time, place, and details of the interview procedure.

Each interview began with a sincere thanks to the participant for consenting to be a part of my investigation, followed by a brief explanation and purpose of the study. Participants were afforded the opportunity to address any questions or concerns with the study or the interview process itself. They were also made aware of their right to pass on any questions or to end the interview entirely at any point during the interview process. Considerable time was dedicated at the onset, and throughout the interview, to establishing rapport and a positive, comfortable experience for each participant. "Tell me a little about yourself.", "Where did you grow up?", "What schools did you attend?", and "Would you care to share anything regarding your personal life, for example; spouse, children, job?", were all typical questions that initiated each interview (Creswell, 1998).

It was important, and I believe key to the study, that the participants realized that this was more than just a research study and requirement for the completion of a doctoral degree. I made every effort to emphasize that I was an advocate for them and others like them who encountered obstacles in completing their educations. They needed to understand that their experiences and perspectives were critical to this study. I wanted them to realize that their feelings and thoughts regarding their alternative education experiences and what helped them to complete their program would benefit others landing in alternative education programs in Midwest rural areas.

Each interview was conducted personally by the researcher. Some of the interviews took place in the researcher's home school district and some were conducted at a sight conveniently located to the participants.

Demographics and Background Information

Background information and non essential questions were dispersed throughout the interview. Demographics and background information not only contributed to a better understanding of the participant but allowed the opportunity to establish and maintain a sense of comfort and rapport so critical in gaining valid interview responses. Although demographics or certain background information are not necessarily vital to the central focus of the study, they can be invaluable in illustrating a complete story of the respondent (Berg, 2007). Interviews were initiated with typical personal history questions like; "Tell me a little about yourself.", "Where did you grow up?", "What schools did you attend?", and "Would you care to share anything regarding your personal life, for example; spouse, children, job?".

Essential Questions

The foundations of the qualitative interview are the essential questions. Essential questions are inquiries designed to elicit specific information central to the main focus of the study. Essential questions produce data that can be analyzed in effectively addressing and answering the research question (Creswell, 1998).

Essential queries for this study were drawn from the effective alternative education constructs most consistently reported in the research of the literature review. Student-to-teacher ratio, a caring and committed staff, social and emotional support, family involvement, and individually designed education plans were the five program elements repeated regularly in the

research as effective to impacting students' successful completion of the alternative programs (Ascher, 1982; Barr, & Parrett, 1997; Dollar, 1983; Gilson, 2006; Young, 2007).

Small student enrollments or small student-to teacher ratios were reiterated in the literature as a vital core to any successful alternative education program. Many at-risk students become lost in schools with large enrollments or considerable class size. Reducing the number of the students within the alternative program, creating classes with small numbers of students to one teacher, and the addition of more teachers' aides allowed for the opportunity for one-on-one instruction and attention. Students realized a greater sense of comfort and found they could learn easier in this type of setting (Young, 2007). "Describe the alternative program you attended.", "How many students attended your school?", "How many teachers and teachers' aides were employed at your school?", "In your opinion how did the size of your school and classes help you in your efforts at the alternative school?", were examples of some of the questions designed to gain insight into whether small student-to-teacher ratios helped the respondents in their completion of their specific programs.

One of the many factors leading to academic and social disengagement of students is the gradual decline of the personal teacher/student relationship. Student success is regularly supported in the literature as a result of a caring and committed staff. At-risk students seemed to realize more success in their alternative education experience when the teachers cared about them academically and personally, and when they failed to give up on them and their progress at school (Barr, & Parrett, 1997). Queries to probe this alternative program element included; "Share with me your thoughts on what makes a good teacher.", "Describe the qualities of a favorite teacher.", "How did you perceive your relationships with your teachers in the traditional

school setting?", "How did you perceive your relationships with your teachers in the alternative setting?"

Numerous students landing in an alternative education setting have many social and emotional issues. Their lack of social and emotional health is often times why they are unable to make adequate progress in the traditional setting (Dollar, 1983; Foley, 1982, 1983, 1984; Hahn et al., 1987; Hamilton, 1981; Trickett, et al., 1985). Respondents were asked to describe the support services along with character and social skills' education programs offered them while enrolled in their program. They were asked to compare those services and programs to those at their previous school. Inquiries were made as to what outside agencies were involved with their school, the number of full-time counselors on staff, and what opportunities they had to connect with either or both.

The breakdown of the family structure, lack of family support, and absence of family involvement substantiate a decline in academic progress and deterioration in social behaviors. Family and community participation is an integral component to the effective alternative program. Parents, siblings, spouses, or partners must be involved in self-help groups, school conferences, and school activities if improved performance is to occur (Ascher, 1982; Franklin et al., 1990; Franklin, & Streeter, 1991, 1992; Orr, 1987; Trickett et al., 1985). The literature was very clear and frequent regarding the vital role family involvement and support plays in the educational progress of a child or teen. Participants provided information regarding type and level of family involvement in the respective alternative programs by answering questions like: "What sort of orientation procedure did your alternative program provide for your parents?", " What role did your family play in the design or notification of your education plan?", "What was

your families' opinion of education before you entered the alternative program?", "What was their opinion of education upon your completion of the alternative program?".

Students enter the alternative placement at various ability and skill levels. A one-size-fits-all instruction plan is not an effective strategy to meet the various needs and ability levels of these students. Alternative schools implementing appropriate evaluation methods, and then designing an instructional plan geared to the information gained in the assessment process witness academic progress and growth with their students (Gilson, 2006; Fitzsimmons-Hughes, et al., 2006). To gather supporting information for the existence or importance of individual education plans I posed questions like; "What sort of academic evaluation methods were used upon entering the alternative program?", "Were you involved in the design of your education plan?", "How was the plan monitored and updated?", "What sort of goals and objectives were included in your plan?", "How important do you believe the individual education plan was in your completion of the alternative program?".

Extra Questions

Extra questions are remotely similar to specific essential questions but worded in a slightly different manner. Extra questions are incorporated into the interview tool to check the reliability of the responses through inspection of constancy in the reply collections or to assess the potential persuasion a change of wording might have (Berg, 2007). In this study the rewording of certain questions tended to reveal the expansion into deeper or different thoughts from the respondents. For example; participants were asked the essential question of, "Could you explain a typical day at your alternative school?". I might query at a later time in the interview with, "What would you describe that I might have seen in your classroom if I were to have observed from an unobtrusive position on any given day?". Another instance of exploring depth

from the responses was inquiring, "What sort of methods were used to evaluate academic skill sets and ability levels?". The extra question to garner further introspect into the design of the individual education plan was, "In what way did the evaluation methods assist with designing the individual instructional program?". When inquiring about family involvement in the alternative program participants were asked, "How often did your school attempt to involve the family in the activities or workings of the school?". To gather deeper thought an insight regarding family involvement the question was reworded and expanded as, "What methods did your alternative school use to involve your family in your education?".

Non-Essential Questions

Non-essential questions, sometimes called throw-away questions, are frequently at the beginning of the interview but can be interspersed throughout the interview in order to gain more demographic or personal information and to maintain rapport between the interviewer and the participant (Berg, 2007):

- Tell me something you have read lately.

- What do you like to do in your spare time?

- What do you think about when you are driving to work in the mornings?

 are illustrations of a few non essential questions included in the interview tool.

Non-essential questions do not necessarily provide information specific to the research question itself but may be used to elicit a comprehensive image of the respondent. In the event discomfort is encountered during the interview due to questions involving a personal sensitivity of the participant non essential questions may be used to calm or redirect the subject (Berg, 2007). An example of a redirection of one of the subjects in this study was:

- Oh, while I am thinking of it, where did you tell me you attended elementary school?

By taking a few moments to move the line of questioning in a new direction the respondent

regained composure and the interview continued.

Probes

Probing questions extract more information regarding answers already given in response

to a question. Interviewers use probes to gain deeper meaning to the essential questions central to

the focus of the study. It is important for the interviewer to pay close attention to what the

subject says and what they may not say. Probes will expand what has been revealed and explore

information that has not been mentioned (Berg, 2007). When I was interested in learning more

about a response I asked, "Could you tell me a little more about that?", "What happened next?",

"Why was that?". Probes should be framed in a way that the participant describes their

experiences concretely in illicit detail (Finlay, & Gough, 2003). "How did your teacher respond

when you told her?", "Why do you believe she responded in that manner?", "What was the

consequence when you did that?", "How did that make you feel?", are all additional examples of

probes to draw out concretely described experiences.

Observations

Observations, both obtrusive and unobtrusive, and artifacts like student journals, where

and when available, were included in the data collection and analysis. I gained permission from

the superintendents of each school district to view and utilize classroom observations and student

artifact data of the students involved in the study within their school district. I further conferred

with the Kansas Association of School Boards as to the legality of my access to the individual

student data and observations. The legal stance from the state statutes allows a public school

employee the right to review student records at the consent of the school district's

superintendent, considering there is no intent of the researcher to do harm and that appropriate

permission to conduct the study has been granted the researcher from the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board.

The obtrusive observations were scheduled in advance with the administrators and teachers of each school. Three obtrusive observations for periods of 30 to 60 minutes were scheduled at both schools. Administration and instructors agreed to allow random, unannounced, unobtrusive observations. In each school setting I was able to sit in an adjoining room and observe unnoticed for periods of 30-to-60 minutes for a total of three unobtrusive observations at each school.

Student Journals

Journals of past middle level alternative school students were secured from the instructor. In order to protect the identity of each student, the names of the students were removed from each journal. Since this particular middle school alternative school is a part of the district in which I am employed I was privy to all journals of previous alternative education students. I read and took field notes from 32 journals at my convenience over the course of one school year.

The teacher in this middle level alternative school researched other alternative programs, taking note that many utilized and sang the praises of the daily journaling activity. When speaking to staff members in other programs, this alternative education teacher was told that the journaling activity allowed the at-risk student to speak to very personal issues and situations in their lives, while providing the opportunity to unload burdens and express private, personal feelings in a safe setting. Many of the teens that struggle in the traditional school setting are not good at verbalizing what is really going on inside their head. Most shove their true feelings under the rug believing that no one actually wants to know what they have to say, what is going on in their lives, or why they might be acting in certain ways. With journaling, these students were not only able to, but encouraged to express what they were feeling on any given day.

Positive support for journaling is revealed in the literature as well as from the first-hand accounts of alternative education staff members and students. Journaling can have a therapeutic benefit to the individual. To some, journaling serves as their own personal therapist with definite healing benefits. Students recognize reductions in stress, clarification of their thoughts, the opportunity to safely express their feelings and aspirations, and the ability to better formulate their goals when engaging in journaling experiences. The motivation to achieve those goals seems to be inherent simply by the act of writing the words on paper (Tolan, & Guerra, 1994). It is further noted that students who regularly record their thoughts develop more effective communication, problem-solving, organizational, reasoning, and critical-thinking skills, memory enhancement, and emotional healing. Journaling creates an environment for brainstorming, more global thinking, and reflective practices. When goals or aspirations are recorded in journals students can better track these goals. Rereading previous entries to check progress and remain focused in the pursuit of the written objectives develops self-esteem so desperately needed in many at-risk students. Logging personal information assists the alternative student to better process their thoughts, expand concentration abilities, and pave a road to deeper self-discovery (Occhiogrossi, 2007).

With the support of the research and the personal experience accounts of other alternative programs, including the information from student journals is critical in triangulating the data in answering the research question of what elements of the alternative program assisted most in the successful completion of that program.

The students in this program begin each school day with the journaling activity. They had no prompts other than to write whatever they felt like writing. Some days they wrote of their goals, dreams, and aspirations. Some days they wrote of conflict in the home, at school, or

elsewhere. Many times it was what they would do that day, over the weekend, or special plans for a future event. The journals speak to abuse, neglect, disappointment, violence, anger, joy, comfort, friends, fitting-in, not fitting-in, embarrassment, hope, disappointment, loneliness, coping, and so forth. It was evident in the examination of the journals that most students over time seemed to welcome this activity. As the days of enrollment in the alternative program continued often times students recorded their own inappropriate behaviors, conversations, and conflicts. The journaling seemed to serve as an avenue for self-cleansing, confession, or self-reporting. Much of the time the entry would include a reflection of the incident and how they could have better handled the situation. Students wrote of the safety and comfort of the structure of their days. As their personal lives spun wildly out of control, they wrote that they could count on the school and staff members to be steady, reliable and constant. Future plans and goals were shared, along with fun times with family, friends and activities at school, many times revealing just how much the alternative placement was making a difference in their personal and academic lives.

<div align="center">Data Collection</div>

Effective and valuable research must involve methods and data that are valid and credible. Results gleaned in qualitative studies cannot be validated with hard facts drawn from statistical data as in quantitative studies. So what makes qualitative studies and the data resulting from the study more than just the opinion of the researcher? Reducing researcher bias issues and implementing prolonged and persistent engagement, triangulation, and reflexivity throughout the data collection and analysis of the data assures that the postulations are credible (Hatch, 2002).

Ethical Issues

Trustworthiness of the Study

Multiple methods of inquiry resulting in multiple data sources are the heart of a triangulated study. Data sources for this study included; individual in-depth interviews of current and former alternative education students, their parents, and alternative school staff members, alternative education student journals, obtrusive and unobtrusive alternative education classroom observations. Active and sustained reflection of these multiple data sources ensured extensive interrogation of the data, capturing the respondents' experience of the world. As a result, a rich, thick, and descriptive picture of the phenomenon studied was achieved. Assumptions and conclusions of the multiple data sources revealed an accurate image of the events studied. Precise assumptions drawn from the multiple data sources are more likely to result in a trustworthy study (Flick, 2002; Denzin, & Lincoln, 2005).

Prolonged engagement ensures that a consistent, systematic methodology has been executed throughout the data collection process (Hatch, 2002). Prolonged engagement for this study was accomplished through several different methods. The bulk of the data source resulted from two to three hour in-depth interviews of all participants. Obtrusive and unobtrusive classroom observations of 30 minutes to one hour were randomly scheduled throughout the school year. Some of the observations were announced to school staff in advance and some were not. Finally, over the course of one school year, 32 student journals of previous middle school alternative students were read with field notes recorded to glean any possible new information and to support or refute any information gathered from the respondents or the observations.

Persistent engagement requires the researcher to evaluate and analyze data that does not fit within the majority of the results collected. Attention to discrepant data and accurate

explanations of the discrepant data reinforces the trustworthiness of the study (Hatch, 2002).

Very little discrepant data was found throughout the data collection process.

Responses from the interview processes were repeated to the participants at the time of the interviews in order to gain clarification and agreement that the responses were recorded as the participant intended. Upon conclusion of each interview, notes were scanned from the conversations, paying close attention to responses that needed further clarification or confirmation of intended meaning. As the audio tapes were translated into text, phone calls were made to member check participants regarding any answers that still needed further explanation in order to ensure accurate translation of all responses. Member checks of the students and parents responses in question were attempted with approximately a 90% success rate in locating the respondents for clarification. Due to the availability of the alternative education staff, member checks of all responses necessary for clarification were conducted.

Researcher Bias

The researcher must be cognizant of his or her own perspectives and perceptions of the research study, the participants, and the data collected. Interpretations without preconceived notions and bias are the key to reflexivity. Peer auditors, peer debriefing, and member checks lead to a reflexive analysis of the data. A reflexive analysis of the data leads to a credible study (Hatch, 2002).

Validity and reliability of qualitative research findings are affected by bias. Truths can be distorted and data may be slanted or skewed if careful attention is not paid to moderator bias. Researchers wish to depict an accurate reflection of reality and assure meaningful results. Researcher bias is one factor that regularly attempts to compromise the integrity of the study. Bias in research is created through improper procedures or the allowance of personal beliefs to

affect the data results. It is nearly impossible to do away with all researcher bias considering there are multiple variables to take into account and control (Berg, 2007).

The moderator has a major impact on the quality of the data since the moderator is involved in the collection of all the data. Many influences within the data collection phase are unavoidable such as: moderator age, social status, race, or gender. The researcher can and should control: moderator opinion, dress, voice tone, body language, question delivery, and comfortable interview surroundings, all potential bias variables that can be easily controlled with deliberate attention to neutrality in these areas (Babbie, 1995).

Design and framing of questions are other areas to be aware of when making an effort to avoid bias during the collection of the research data. Several types of questions pose serious issues in obtaining valid responses. The ones most frequently noted are: leading or biased questions, misunderstood questions, unanswerable questions, two-dimensional questions, and double questions (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2005).

Leading or biased queries preface the questions with, "Wouldn't you agree?", or "Some people think?", thus creating a tendency to persuade the participant that their belief should match that of the researcher or others. In qualitative research the respondents will have different views. It is up to the researcher to help them feel that their answers are the only right answers. Framing the questions with, "What would you say?"or "What is your opinion?", is less likely to lead the respondent away from their personal view and more likely to result in an accurate response from the participant (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2005).

Understanding your audience, their backgrounds, and appropriate vocabulary specific to their backgrounds will reduce the misunderstanding of word contexts, cultural vocabulary, and the chance that questions will be interpreted differently than intended. Questions should be

scrutinized to ensure simplicity, clarity, the avoidance of acronyms, and jargon that is specific to certain areas of expertise (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2005).

Unanswerable questions are similar to misunderstood questions but are more specific to the consideration of actual experience in the subject of the study, not just unfamiliarity of certain vocabulary or word contexts. Responses will be skewed and incorrect when the subjects participating in the study have little or no experience in the area of interest (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2005).

Two-dimensional questions combine in one query, two words that may represent two concepts with very different meanings. This may lead to confusion and erroneous answers from the participant. If the interview question is, "How was the program useful and practical to you?", the respondent could easily interpret the two words differently. Useful and practical can be completely different concepts and should not be combined in one question. By including only one specific concept in each question, confusion is reduced and accurate data is collected (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2005).

Combining two questions into one produces a double-barreled effect. Essentially the researcher is seeking one answer from two questions framed as one. Researchers must be cognizant not to box respondents into a reply they only partially concur with (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2005).

Once the researcher has designed the questions for the interview tool, paying heed to avoid the bias issues of question design, the questions should be read by an independent reader and analyzed for the common phrasing and framing biases that are unrecognizable to the drafter of the questions (Berg, 2007). For this study, I used a licensed, regular education teacher, with no stake in the research, to read through all questions and provide feedback for questions that could

lead to some biased responses. Armed with that information, I reworked the questions of concern and had the reader to analyze a second time.

Data Analysis

Based on the review of the literature this study was to analyze the elements of the alternative education experience perceived by alternative education students to be significant to successfully completing their alternative education program. This information may assist in the advocating of precise designs in the educational plans for the at-risk student, a design framework for new alternative programs, an evaluation tool for existing programs, and an evaluation instrument for alternative education staff members.

Coding

The data analysis and representation process used in this phenomenological study pursued the modified system of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method developed by Moustakas (1994). Audio tapes of all the personal interviews were transcribed into text. Files were created and organized for the data. The texts were read with notations inserted in the margins for initial coding and recognition of themes and patterns, especially those that directly addressed the research questions. Statements of meaning were recorded for all responses that directly addressed the research question and lists were created for the each individual. The themes and patterns for each individual list were grouped into units of meaning, developing textural descriptions, "what happened". Structural descriptions, "how" the phenomenon was experienced by the researcher, were cultivated from the textural descriptions concluding with an overall description or essence of the experience.

Analysis of the data collected in the interviews, observations, and student journals revealed five key areas; instructional practices, highly-qualified staff, social/emotional support

services, caring and committed staff, and relationships. Chapter Four, Research and Analysis Results, reports the information collected from the in-depth interviews, obtrusive and unobtrusive observations, and student journal in narrative form with the assistance of tables to summarize the data at a glance.

In addition to the researcher, a long-time regular education teacher and an alternative education teacher read and coded the data following the Moustakas (1994) method stated above. These individuals also served as professional experts in peer debriefing sessions with the researcher. Debriefing sessions of all of the data allowed opportunity for consensus among the expert peer panel and discussion of any discrepant data.

This study, determining what students perceived as the critical elements leading to the successful completion of their alternative education programs, encompassed data collected from multiple data sources in an effort to support triangulation of the data and the trustworthiness of the study itself. Systematic, consistent methods of data collection were executed to the point of saturation with continued search for discrepant results throughout the study.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present and analyze the data that have been collected as a part of the investigation of what successful completers of alternative education programs perceive to have influenced their positive outcome. Data were collected from individual in-depth interviews of alternative education students, their instructors, and their parents, as well as, student journals, and obtrusive and unobtrusive observations.

As I assessed the research on major studies involving student perceptions of the effective components of rural alternative programs it became apparent that specific data in this area is limited. This may be due, in part, to similar difficulties I experienced in locating students and gaining response to participation in my study. Only a small number of alternative programs employ an effective system to follow students after they exit. In a 2010 survey of alternative schools across the nation conducted for the NCES, only one-third of the districts have databases to track students after they leave the alternative program (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010). Given the limitations of the research that lies within the parameters of this study, I had to cite smaller studies that relate and lend credence to the research question. All of the studies cited include student perceptions of the effective components of their alternative education programs, but all are not necessarily major studies.

In order to gain insight into successful practices and components of successful alternative schools Quinn and Poirier (2006) identified three programs as exemplary in terms of their effectiveness in working with students at-risk of failure in the traditional setting. Programs were studied in-depth with the core of the data gathered from interviews and focus groups of students, parents, teachers, and administrators involved in the three alternative schools. Various themes

arising from the dialogues of the selected population were: (1) positive student growth and improved performance; (2) administrative leadership; (3) unique teacher characteristics; (4) positive student-teacher relationships; (5) separating behavior from students; (6) student choice; (7) classroom management and discipline; (8) staff collaboration; (9) flexibility; (10) high expectations of students; (11) adult-student ratio; (12) teacher training; (13) transition support; (14) parental involvement; and (15) community support. In comparing results from my study to Quinn and Poirier's, 10 of the 15 themes of creating an effective alternative program were similar.

Alternative schools must address a variety of student issues within their programs. Given the disparity of those issues, nine different rural programs examined in a Texas study come to consensus on 11 elements effective to academic success and program completion: (1) flexible schedules; (2) smaller student-to-teacher ratio; (3) high expectations for all students, in terms of performance, attendance, and behavior; (4) personalized, self-paced academic programs; (5) committed instructors choosing to teach in the programs; (6) safe, comfortable learning environment; (7) meaningful, caring relationships between students and staff; (8) social and emotional support; (9) clear rules enforced fairly and consistently; (10) parent involvement; and (11) work readiness (Texas Comprehensive Center, 2010). Results from my investigations mirrored 9 of the 11 elements revealed in the programs examined by the Texas Comprehensive Center.

Lange and Sletten (2002), in an effort to better understand the scope of effective components of alternative programs across the country, conducted a synthesis of the research in this area for the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE). This study included research of student, parent, teacher, and administration perceptions and also

included quantitative data from surveys, questionnaires, academic progress, and other student records. Many similarities were noted when compared to the results gleaned in my study.

In addition to reiterating program components like small setting, individual education plans, and nurturing, dedicated teachers, students report an overall positivity when responding to their alternative education experience (Lange, & Sletten, 2002). Smaller school size, caring and concerned teachers, positive teacher relationships, and flexibility seem to be repeated as the reasons for the high levels of satisfaction among the alternative students in Griffin's study as well. (1993).

A study in 1998 by May and Copeland questioned students in three mid-western alternative programs. Results established that positive relationships within the program and academic achievement were the basis for their attendance and completion at the alternative school. Repeatedly these findings parallel the results from the in-depth interviews of students, staff, and parents reported in this study. Small class sizes, teachers that truly care about the student, good student-teacher relationships, and a flexible environment were the constructs making the alternative experience a positive one and perceived as impacting successful program completion of those involved in this investigation.

In the course of my investigation, improved self-esteem and a confidence in their academic ability was a component mentioned time and again as critical to program completion of those participating in this study. Similarly, Nichols and Steffy (1997), while completing short-term research of schools in the Midwest, used a self-report questionnaire to discover that students experienced a change in self-esteem during their alternative education experience. Findings of students completing those programs revealed a marked increase in self-regulation, peer self-esteem, and school self-esteem.

The studies mentioned above and those cited in the literature review include themes common to the responses of the participants in this study of what successful completers of alternative education programs perceive to have influenced their positive outcome. These comparisons will be expanded upon in the narrative section of this chapter.

Information collected is reported in narrative form with the assistance of tables to summarize the data at a glance. Data are compared to the results from the review of the literature to determine common themes and patterns. Interpretive approaches were used to analyze all of the qualitative data.

Audio tapes of all the personal interviews were transcribed into text. Files were created and organized for the data. Texts were read with notations inserted in the margins for initial coding and recognition of themes and patterns, especially those that directly addressed the research question. Statements of meaning were recorded for all responses that directly addressed the research question and lists were created for the each individual. The themes and patterns for each individual list were grouped into units of meaning that developed into textural descriptions, or "what happened." Structural descriptions, "how" the phenomenon was experienced by the researcher, were cultivated from the textural descriptions concluding with an overall description or essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

<center>Student Demographics</center>

The student population of this study involved 12 individuals, ranging in age from 18 to 35, who experienced either a middle school or high school alternative education program. The middle school program consisted of sixth through eighth grade, while the high school program enrolled grades 10 through 12.

Table 4.1

Student Demographics

Factors	Confirmed Responses	Total Responses
One/both parents with high school diploma	8	12
One/both parents with college diploma	0	12
Single parent home	11	12
Lived with someone other than parent	6	12
Parent/guardian lack of value toward education	6	12
Lived in poverty	8	12
Moved/attended many schools	7	12
Parent/s in prison	5	12
Drugs in home	6	12
Extra-curricular involvement	11	12
Attendance/truancy issues	7	12
Poor academics/credit deficient	10	12
Pursuing or completed extended education/ skills' training	9	12

Data Table 4.1 provides a quick, overall picture of the demographic dynamics of the student participant group involved in the study. Prior to analyzing the responses to the research questions it is important to note many consistencies in the backgrounds of these students and families. For example, 11 of the 12 lived in single parent homes and six lived with someone other than a parent. Eight of the 12 said that at least one parent had a high school diploma but none of the students report that any parents completed a college degree. Six students report that their parents held a lack of value for formal education, of the remaining six, four parents placed a high value on formal education and two were neutral as to its value.

When asked the number of schools attended throughout their education, seven of the 12 state that they attended four or more schools between kindergarten and high school. Six of the seven remark that the moves were difficult and that they had trouble adjusting to the curriculum and the pace at each new school.

Truancy was an issue for 7 of the 12 students, two-thirds lived in poverty (using Kansas Department of Education's free and reduced meal eligibility as the qualifier for poverty status) and 10 of 12 struggled academically in the regular school setting.

In my experience with at-risk students, I regularly witness many students exposed to adults in the home with alcohol and/or drug addiction. Six of the 12 report drug and/or alcohol addictions in the home they resided. Many of the students encountered one or both parents in prison during some time in their pre-teen or teenage years. Five of the 12 students in this study experienced parents serving prison terms while the student still resided in the home.

Eleven of the participants in the study report extra-curricular involvement in middle school and early high school. Of the 11, most lost interest in high school, had to work to provide

additional, personal support, or experienced poor academic performance or deficiency in credits that made them ineligible for extra-curricular activities.

It is understood that any of these at-risk factors in isolation, experienced in small combinations, or over a short period of time do not necessarily create a student at-risk of failing in the regular school setting. Actually, across this nation, a multitude of students face one or some of the at-risk factors above, yet these students are able to exhibit adequate progress and success in spite of the issues they face. For these 12 individuals the data reveals that it was not one or two, but a combination of many of the at-risk factors, over time, that led to their lack of success in traditional school.

Previous data reveals the demographics of those individuals involved in this study prior to and during their alternative education experience. It is important to note that 9 of the 12 program completers report to have fulfilled the requirements, are in the process, or are on target for extended education or skills training. One has completed a certified nursing program, is working in an obstetrics ward in a local hospital, and is pursuing a registered nursing degree. Another young woman is a teachers' aide at an elementary school and is taking night and online classes to complete a respiratory therapy licensure. A young man who went through middle school alternative instruction completed his high school degree in the traditional setting. He experienced various forms of support from the middle school program throughout high school and is currently enrolled in a police academy. At a nearby junior college a young woman is pursuing basic studies and is planning to transfer to a four-year college to pursue a teaching degree. A young man credits his former teacher with "dogging" him to enroll in Franklin Technical Institute where he completed a collision repair and car wiring course in nine months. Another gentleman completed on-the-job training at a community support services program

where he attends to the basic needs of several clients unable to handle daily tasks. A baseball scholarship has been offered to one young man. He plans to attend a junior college in the fall, playing baseball for that institution. While attending high school alternative classes, another young man works at a casino and is on target to enter a gaming, management, and developing authority program. Finally, a woman has completed certification for medical records and transcription and in medical office management as well. She is currently employed by a medical company and completes medical transcriptions from home.

<div align="center">Student Responses to Research Questions</div>

How do instructors and staff members influence successful program completion?

The students and former students interviewed in this study are definite as to what they consider to be the program constructs critical to the successful completion of their alternative education program. The first response from each participant is that of staff members who truly cared for them. Yet, they went a step further to relate to me that it is not just the act of caring in a sense of liking them but caring in the sense of a dogged pursuit to their personal and academic success. These are students who felt that everyone at some point or another in their life time had basically given up on them in some manner. Many of these young people were never fortunate enough to have parents or guardians that knew how to, or had the stamina to stay the course of seeing them through to educational success. To experience teachers, administrators, and para-professionals who refuse to allow them to fail and refuse to allow them to give up on themselves was a totally new occurrence for students previously destined to fall between the academic cracks. "Our teachers would tell us the word can't is not in my vocabulary and it cannot be in yours," replies one young man, when referring to his alternative education experience. Another student tells me, "I screwed up over and over again but my teachers would always set me straight

and continue to help me and teach me. I can't believe that they didn't get tired of me and my issues and tell me to get lost." A young high school boy who struggled with his reading skills shares, "I really had a hard time reading. I missed out on so much instruction in elementary school that I never learned to read that well. I remember my teacher and the aide at the alternative school being so patient to work with me constantly. I was always self-conscious to read out loud, but my teachers had worked with me so much that I began to feel alright with it. One day I was reading out loud in class; as I read the passage, I read the word 'quasar' without a hesitation. It surprised me so much I laughed and remarked to my teacher and the class, I just read the word 'quasar', I cannot believe it!"

All 12 of the participants feel that if it had not been for the relentless pursuit of the teachers and other staff members at the alternative school they attended they would not have made it through their schooling and would not currently be experiencing success in their lives. One young man says that one of his teachers was solely responsible for him enrolling and completing a technical program. This young man gives his former teacher credit by saying, "He stayed after me to enroll in a technical program. He would not let up. He even helped me with the enrollment process. He told me I could make it through this and that I would be very good at it. I do not think I would have pursued it on my own. My teacher stayed after me, believed in me, even going the extra mile to help me with all the enrollment stuff. I was very successful in the program, completing it in less than the recommended time."

Student participant remarks regarding how instructors impacted program completion:

1. Instructors were caring. They worked hard to help me succeed. All the teachers motivated me and believed in me. They cared about me personally as well.

2. The teachers at my school were patient. They would push me and challenge me. They never let me give up. My teachers at the regular school did not seem to care whether I got it done or not. There were no attempts to push or challenge me.

3. The teachers were helpful. They explained stuff where I could understand it. They worked hard to help me succeed. I could tell they wanted me to get my diploma. They cared.

4. My teacher was hardnosed, strict, structured. I see now why she had to be like that. She was trying to get the most out of me.

5. They did a good job of explaining. All the teachers were very helpful personally. They truly wanted to make a difference in all areas of the students' lives. They did not have to prod me to do the work like they did some of the kids. I was ready to get my degree.

6. The teachers were good and helpful. They were always there for me and would dog me until I got it done. They cared about me as an individual.

7. The para was more laid back and very helpful. The teacher was hard-driving. She stayed on us all the time.

8. I did not really like the teacher at first. She was pretty hard on us. I understood that some of the students needed that approach. I had a close personal relationship with the para. She helped me get through the program.

9. The teachers cared about me. There was a lot of one-on-one instruction. That made a big difference in me completing the program.

10. My teacher and the para were great. They made me feel like I could do the work. They made sure I got through.

11. The teachers worked with me until I got it. They made sure I mastered the work.

12. They were real big on discipline. They would tell us, if you cannot make it in school you will not make it in the real world. They worked hard to keep me focused on my studies. I got immediate feedback so I could understand the right way to do it.

How does student self-efficacy influence successful program completion?

Maslow's (1943) early work explored the necessity of self-esteem in human motivation. He theorizes that confidence, competence, achievement, and mastery are critical to self-respect and self-worth. Considering Maslow's work, it is no surprise that the second most important element mentioned by student participants as key to program completion is that staff members are able to instill in their students a sense of self-confidence never experienced previously. Participants realize that this area actually lies in the spectrum of a caring and passionate staff, but are adamant that believing in students, and helping them to believe in themselves, is more than simply caring about that person. The collective voices of these former students wanted me to understand just how crucial instilling self-confidence is to program completion. Many of the students interviewed were intellectually capable of being successful but never believed that they could do it. "I could not focus or keep up in regular school. I would always become overwhelmed, and then just give up. My teachers in alternative school broke the work up into smaller chunks. All of a sudden assignments and tests were doable, not overwhelming. I began to see that I could do this after all", remarked one student. One of the teachers commented, "I could see their frustration and would break the assignments into smaller parts so they could see that they could do it. Long, large assignments made them give up before they ever started."

A young woman who has successfully completed medical records management and transcription certification remarks, "When I got to the alternative school they gave me hope and made me feel as though I could make it, and I have." One young adult revealed, "There would be

times, especially in elementary, when I would try so very hard to do well on an assignment or test. Hope of at least an average score would be met with a big red 'F' and a disapproving look from my teacher, once again, disappointing myself and others. You try so many times and fail. Sooner or later you just give up. You really believe you are stupid and that you cannot do it."

Another gentleman remembers how much instruction he missed out on when moving from place to place and from living with an abusive alcoholic father. His dad would go into rampages when something set him off while he was drinking. Someone would wind up hurt. The participant, being the oldest male child in the family at the time, felt it his duty to stay home to care for the family member his dad had wielded his wrath upon. There were far too many of those types of school absences, far too much information and instruction lost, and far too much on his mind to concentrate on school work when he was in attendance. Hope is just another word in the dictionary to many of these previous alternative education students. Individuals with no hope will give little effort, succumbing to failure easily. Diminishing self-confidence is reinforced when failure is repeated.

Hope equates to a belief in something or someone. A belief in oneself equates to self-confidence. These at-risk students found it difficult to believe in others and even more difficult to believe in themselves. They lacked the tools and the support system to believe in their own abilities. When self-efficacy is instilled in an individual, self-motivation and internal drive begin to take shape.

Participants experienced teachers and other staff members at the alternative schools, believing in them and believing in their potential to achieve and be successful. One of the older participants in the study tells me that he had never had anyone tell him, you can do it, I believe in you, I know you can achieve, and I am going to help you to achieve.

Student participant comments regarding the importance of self-efficacy to program completion:

1. The teachers gave me hope. They made me feel as though I could make it. That kept me going to get it done.

2. I lacked self-confidence big time. The teachers at the school, the instruction, and pace helped me to see I could do it. I just needed something different from the traditional school.

3. The way the teachers taught helped me to feel I could be successful. When I came to the school I did not really think I could do the work. I was doing great with instruction from the teachers but the last year at the alternative school they moved me to an online learning program. I hated that. The teachers were not supposed to help. I did not feel I could do it on my own. Finally, they allowed the teachers to give support when needed. I felt more confident and did much better with the teacher support and encouragement. I was able to finish on time.

4. I am very smart. I just had lots of emotional issues from all the stuff that had gone on while I was growing up. I did not lack self-confidence in my ability to do the work. I just had a bunch of stuff that took my focus away from the work. Even though I knew I could do the work all along, it did make me feel better about myself and my abilities when I was successful and when I completed the program.

5. I did well in traditional school but I got pregnant at 17. Traditional school just did not seem to fit me. I had the self-confidence to do the work before I got pregnant, just was not sure I could get it done with a baby to take care of. The teachers were not judgmental. They were supportive and told me I could do anything I set my mind to and I did. I graduated on time.

6. My parents moved around a lot. I missed out on a bunch of stuff in grade school. I thought I was dumb. The teachers at the alternative school helped me to see that I was not dumb; I just missed out on a lot of the basics in grade school. The way they taught me and encouraged me helped me believe in myself and see that I could reach my goal, that I could get my degree, and I did.

7. I did not realize how much my behaviors had kept me from learning at the regular school. My grades were not very good at the regular school so I just thought I was not good at all that stuff. The teacher and para at my alternative school told me all the time how smart I was and stayed with me to get the work done right. It was not long before I began to believe in myself and that I knew I could do this. I could learn and be successful just like other kids.

8. School work always came easy for me, but in my eighth grade year my already, very dysfunctional family fell apart when my brother was sent to prison. We were very close and I became lost without him there. School just did not seem to matter anymore. I did not care. I did not believe in my ability be successful in school with all the other stuff going on in my life. The teacher and the para helped me to believe in myself and have the self-confidence to keep going. They helped me to avoid being a victim and look to what I could control about my life and my future.

9. My industrial tech teacher was always telling me that I had good skills in construction, wiring, auto mechanics, and collision repair. He made me feel really good about myself and my abilities. After I earned my high school degree at the alternative school he was on me all the time to enroll in a local technical school for collision repair and auto wiring. I

wasn't so sure I could do it but I enrolled anyway. I finished the two-year course in just nine months. His belief in me made me believe in myself.

10. While I was in the middle school alternative program my teachers encouraged me to get involved with the Special Olympics. I felt so good about myself because I was able to do something to help somebody. That gave me the confidence, along with lots of help from my teachers, to be able to get through the program and go on to high school. I work with mentally and physically handicapped people now. They really need me. I feel good that I can help them.

11. My ADD always caused me lots of struggles in school. I thought I was not smart because my grades were never good in regular school. I blew stuff off and clowned around a lot to cover up for my poor grades. When I got to the alternative school the teachers broke the work into smaller chunks so I didn't have to focus on a bunch of stuff at one time. Pretty soon I was able to complete assignments and do well on tests. Before I knew it I had completed that program and was on to high school.

12. When I was old enough to realize that my mom was doing meth I began to have a real negative attitude and not care about school. I got way behind at that school. Once I moved in with my grandma I was enrolled at the alternative middle school. My teacher gave me the self-confidence and self-worth I needed to complete that program and be successful in high school.

How does small student-to-teacher ratio influence successful program completion?

The third attribute of the alternative program reported as most beneficial to their success is that of the small setting. Small numbers of students in relationship to the number of instructors and aides is important and mentioned by all participants as making a difference in their success

or failure. Smaller numbers not only allow for more individualized instruction, immediate feedback, and closer student-teacher relationships, but also create a comfort level never before experienced by these students. Fewer distractions and less competition are additional bonuses given the smaller setting. All students remarked how much easier it was to focus on their work and to seek out the teacher when questions arose. In the regular classroom most participants mentioned that they often did not understand certain aspects of the lesson. They were either too shy or embarrassed to ask questions or felt the teacher was too busy to attend to their queries. Many of the students remarked that much of the time they simply felt too dumb to get it. In their minds asking questions was pointless and only proved to their classmates and the world that they were dumb. They lacked the self-worth to believe that they were worthy of the teacher's time to give them extra help. At the alternative school, it was just the reverse, the small numbers and other students with similar issues and circumstances made it easier to raise their hands, approach the teacher, and ask questions. Once they began to ask questions, they began to better understand the content and successfully complete assignments. Once they began to realize progress, they understood how important it was to seek help, ask questions, and be engaged in their own learning

Student participant responses regarding the impact of small student-to-teacher ratio to program completion:

1. School was finally a comfortable, caring place to come to. The small student-to-teacher ratio made it easier to learn than in the regular setting. Lots of one-on-one attention.

2. Small numbers were good. It allowed for more instruction and help from teachers, which helped me to understand better, and then made it more likely for me to complete the assignments.

3. Teachers to students were about 1-15 if everyone showed up. Most days it was about 1-10. I got lots more help when I needed it at the alternative school. I started passing all my courses there.

4. It was easier for the teachers to meet my individual needs at the alternative school because there were not very many students and we had two teachers. I seemed to learn better and faster.

5. Alternative school was a small, laid-back group setting. Teachers were hands-on and involved with us all the time. They just saw to it that we got the work done correctly and on time.

6. I attended public schools in another state during elementary and middle school. The schools were very large. The teachers just did not care. At the alternative school the numbers were small. The teachers knew my name, worked with me closely, helped me every step of the way to getting it all done.

7. At first the smaller numbers was sort of weird. It took me a little while to adjust. After awhile it was comfortable. The small numbers gave me the attention I needed from the teachers to stay focused, not clown around, and get my work done right.

8. I felt isolated in the beginning but grew to feel comfortable out there. The smaller setting kept me from falling through the cracks like I was at the regular school.

9. The small school size made it feel caring and comfortable. I got lots of one-on-one so I learned easier and faster.

10. At the regular school I was afraid to ask a question because of others thinking it would be a dumb question. At the alternative school I did not feel like that. There were not very

many of us so we got lots of help and it was much easier to ask a question when I had one.

11. The one-on-one just made it easier to approach teachers. I learned to take my studies more seriously. The smaller numbers made it easier for me to ask questions and ask for help.

12. I attended large schools in another state before coming to the alternative school. I kind of got lost in all those big classes. I was quiet, timid, and very shy. The large schools just made me more that way. The small numbers at the alternative school not only helped academically but really helped me with my confidence and interaction skills. I learned how to interact with people and was able to come out of much of my shyness.

What influence does family involvement play in successful program completion?

Both programs employ a structured enrollment/orientation process for family members and students. Conferences with staff members are conducted, current students introduced, a tour of the facilities, policies, procedures, and expectations are explained in detail with opportunities for questions and addressing concerns.

The middle school alternative program is embedded with multiple opportunities for parental communication and involvement. Detailed, daily behavior sheets go home with students each day. Parents are expected to read over the behavior sheets, talk with their child regarding the information recorded there, sign the sheet and return it with their child the next morning.

In-depth parent/teacher conferences are conducted each quarter at the middle school. Teachers provide dinner and a comfortable atmosphere for parents who have previously experienced a great deal of discomfort with parent/teacher conferences. Parenting classes are offered frequently with additional resources provided for reading and study at home. When a

severe or repeated issue arises the instructor is on the phone with the parent or making a house call. Strategies to manage, modify, monitor, or punish the negative behaviors are made available to parents.

Students experiencing the middle level alternative school, who had parents or guardians that supported the program, feel that family involvement is important to the completion of the program. Students with parents or guardians, who fought the practices implemented in their program, felt their progress was hampered as a result of the negative influence of the parents or guardians.

Students completing the high school program say that family involvement within their alternative education experience played a minor role in their successful completion the program. Many of the high school students were on their own or living with someone other than family. They had accepted the lack of family members' interest or involvement in their education long before they landed in the alternative school and realized that completion of their degree was ultimately up to them, with the help of the alternative school staff.

Student participant answers regarding how family involvement impacted program completion:

1. The school did not require family involvement. My mom was available and supported me but did not get involved with anything at my school. I realized it was up to me to get it done.

2. Family involvement was not necessarily encouraged but regular attendance was required. I lived with my aunt while attending the alternative program. She made sure I made it to and from school every day. Attendance had always been one of the issues that led to my lack of success in school. I might not have made it through the program if it had not been for my aunt and the school making sure I went every day.

3. The school did not require parent involvement. My parents made sure I went every morning and made sure I finished.

4. My teacher kept my mom aware and informed of progress every day. My teacher had lots of contact with my mom. Mom made sure I attended every day and was there to support and encourage me to the end.

5. The school held parent/teacher conferences. My mom came to those. As far as I can remember, that was about all the school provided as parental involvement. Mom was the reason I enrolled in the alternative program. She made sure I went every morning. Getting the work done was pretty much up to me and my teachers.

6. The school did not require or really offer any family involvement. It would not have made any difference if they had required or offered it. I was on my own with no family to be involved. It was all on me.

7. The teacher at my school sent a progress report home to my mom every day. Mom came to school for conferences. They even had some parenting classes. I remember the teacher calling my mom a lot just let her know stuff, good and bad. My mom being so involved and aware of everything that was going on made a big difference in me getting through.

8. The teacher worked hard to make opportunities for my dad and step mom to be involved. Dad was involved more than he ever had been in the past. He never cared before. My dad caring about my school helped me to care more.

9. My first alternative school was when I was incarcerated in another city. Families were not involved in that school at all. At the last school, families were allowed to be a little more involved. My grandma supported me there but it was still up to me to get through.

10. Dad and grandma were involved. Dad had some sort of contact with my teacher every day. He came to all the parenting meetings, parent/teacher conferences, activities. Everything we did, dad was there. That made all of it even more important to me.

11. The most important thing was that my mom backed up my teachers on everything. That's what makes the program work the best, when the teachers and parents support each other. That made a huge difference in my success there.

12. My teachers were highly involved with my grandma and vice versa. The teachers not only communicated my progress but also provided money for gas, taking me to appointments, school supplies, and lots of other stuff. All that stuff led to my success there.

How does social/ emotional support influence successful program completion?

Most of the students experienced difficulties throughout their childhood which generated anger, aggression, depression, loneliness, and confusion, just as many were never privy to any sort of social or emotional therapy.

Both alternative programs operate under the premise of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). The pyramid schematic of this need hierarchy discloses to educators certain basic needs as the foundation for learning. Learning will not occur if these basic human needs are not met. The most basic needs are physiological. Safety needs are the second level of physiological, basic needs. Social and emotional support for these two programs begins with the implementation of strategies to address security and safety with the at-risk teen. By attending to the basic needs of security and safety first, students are more open and ready to address the psychological needs. Helping students with belongingness issues, relationship skills, how to

integrate into their new surroundings, and how to understand their emotions and feelings are integral to molding the successful student and individual.

All students who enroll in the middle level program are involved in weekly, group counseling sessions. In addition, some attend regular personal therapy sessions, while some are even involved in family counseling with their parents and siblings. Participants experiencing the middle level alternative program feel the counseling helped them with emotional difficulties. Additionally, they feel that the daily journaling and sharing of private thoughts and feelings were therapeutic for their mental condition. Sharing aloud the emotional issues and struggles helped immensely with their sense of belonging and fitting-in. This single activity each morning allows the opportunity for students to realize that most everyone else in the classroom battles similar struggles. Not only did these previous students develop a sense of belonging and fitting-in with the group, they gained comfort in knowing that others understood what they dealt with and that they were not the only ones with these problems.

The middle school program spends a good deal of time addressing appropriate social conduct. Daily behavior lessons are incorporated into the curriculum, while the daily point's sheet addresses and rewards expected social behavior.

High school students receive counseling from the school counselor as-needed. Outside mental health agencies are employed through the school on an infrequent basis. When exceptionally serious emotional issues arise, certain students are recommended for external emotional support. It is ultimately up to the individual to seek their own therapy programs.

Middle and high school students welcome and appreciate the social and emotional assistance but reveal that the significant underpinning of their emotional well-being is the development of self-confidence and the belief that they are in control of their own destiny.

Student participant statements on how social/emotional support impacted program completion:

1. I think the staff at our school considered the whole package, not just the academics. They were aware that we needed help with the social and emotional issues so we could handle the academics. All staff was aware of and assisted us with our social and emotional needs. It made a positive difference in me getting through.

2. I did not experience any social/emotional support myself. I cannot speak for others. Just know I did not receive any.

3. Stuff like that was offered but I did not take advantage of any of it. I did not need that.

4. While in regular school I had lots of emotional issues. There were family problems. I did not know how to handle stuff. Depression was a problem and I thought about suicide. I went on meds and that just made me into a zombie. I could not do school work because of all of that. Once I got to the alternative school they got me hooked up with a mental health agency. I got a good therapist and they got me on meds that really worked. My mom and I even went to some family counseling together. All of that made a big difference in me getting through middle school.

5. I was not made aware of any social/emotional support. We had a counselor at the school but that was all I knew about.

6. The counselor offered help to students at our school. I did not have a lot of emotional issues but did have struggles in my life. He, the counselor, was always willing to listen. He even made some phone calls to my work to help with some problems there. That made a difference in me staying in school. I had to work. I was on my own.

7. I was kind of famous for bad choices. We had group therapy from a licensed therapist once a week at school. We shared stuff. The counselor helped us to work through our

problems and find better ways to handle things. These sessions helped me to think more before I reacted. Better behavior helped me to be more successful. I think those sessions helped me mature a little bit too.

8. Emotional issues were probably the reason I began to do poorly in regular school. Things in my life and family had always been big-time dysfunctional but I always had my brother to rely on. We sort of got through all the bad times together. When he was sent away everything in my world fell apart. At the alternative school we had group counseling two times a week and I had personal counseling two times a week also. The counseling did help me to get back on track. The support relieved much of my depression and many of my fears so I could focus on school and be successful.

9. There was not a lot of social/emotional help at our school. I mean the teachers were nice. They cared about all of us and listened when we had troubles but that was about it.

10. We had mental health counseling each week. It seemed to help a lot of the kids. I did not have as many emotional issues as some of the other kids.

11. A therapist from the local mental health agency came into our school once a week. We had group sessions. Those helped a lot. We talked through a bunch of stuff and learned ways to handle stuff and better ways to react to everything we had going on. The teachers were always there for us too. When we would journal each day we had the chance to share from our journals. Those conversations and advice from our teachers was a big help.

12. Social/emotional help was really what I needed the most. We had group counseling sessions each week and I even had personal and family sessions. I was pretty angry about

stuff in my life. The sessions helped me to talk and learn how to vent my anger. That

helped me to be able to be more focused on my studies.

What significance does the design and implementation of individually designed education plans

play in successful program completion?

Former alternative school students interviewed in this study reveal the anxiety and aching

in their stomachs or heads each morning upon entering the doors to their traditional school. They

tell of how they knew each day that they would encounter wrath from teachers or administrators

due to incomplete or incorrect homework assignments. They speak to a heightened frustration

level from the inability to understand the concepts and complete the work. Fear gripped them

when there was the opportunity to be called upon to answer questions or read in front of the

entire class.

At-risk students find it difficult to adapt and achieve within the framework of the

traditional methods of instruction. Teens landing in alternative education exhibit a variety of

academic struggles. The participants in this study share that traditional school overwhelmed

them. Most found their academic progress woefully behind by the time they reached middle and

high school. Once enrolled in the alternative school, teachers cared enough to evaluate their level

of ability and design instruction and activities to meet their needs and to challenge them as well.

Each program scrutinizes previous state and national-normed assessment results, verifies

classroom performance over time, reviews attendance and behavior reports, as well as personal

communication with the previous school's administration and guidance counselor. At the high

school program and in some instances at the middle school program, students also take a

national-normed assessment in reading and math upon enrollment. This assessment yields

academic and performance ability levels in these content areas. Additionally, students are

allowed the opportunity to share with staff what they feel are their strengths and areas of concern. Utilizing this mixture of data, the staff develops an individual education plan for the new student. Assessment data, classroom performance results, behavior, and attendance are monitored over time so that the plan may be amended to meet the current academic and emotional needs of the student.

Academic pace is a key issue involved in the individual education plan. Teachers must make professional judgments in keeping the pace at an appropriate level. Teachers remark that the academic pace is something they have to perceive individually with each student. They work closely with each one of the students, to determine the student's ability or inability to keep up with the current academic pace.

All students share that they suffered some anxiety upon arrival to their respective alternative schools. Small numbers, separate site for the program, caring and attentive staff, individualized instruction, and the revelation of others just like them in many aspects helped them to realize a comfort level never before experienced. Each day in their new placement found them relaxing and settling into a favorable environment

Student participant observations regarding the significance an individually designed education plan was to program completion:

1. My transcript was examined and a plan was designed for me to complete just the course work I needed to graduate. Due to attendance issues, I was woefully behind in credits coming from the regular high school. I felt relief and that I could handle the plan they designed for me to graduate.

2. I had to work while attending alternative school. Trying to manage work and school was tough, but I realized that my degree was within reach once I saw that the plan for each course included only the specific work I needed to graduate.

3. I was never a real big fan of school. It was always a little hard for me. When I got to the alternative school they geared everything to the level and amount of work I needed. It made me feel successful in school for the first time. It helped me to know I could get through.

4. Our assessments were looked at and our previous teachers gave input from our performance in their classrooms. Assignments and instruction were planned from there. It all seemed doable out there. I did not feel overwhelmed and want to give up anymore.

5. The teachers, counselor, and administrator looked at my high school transcript. That gave them the information they needed to create a plan for me. I did not need any special interventions. I just needed to be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. That helped me to know that I could do it.

6. People at the school looked at the credits I needed to graduate, so the instruction was streamlined to focus on just that. I was working 40 hours a week. When I saw that I just needed to complete the credits I was short on, I felt like I it was possible to get my degree and keep my job.

7. In my sixth grade year I do not remember doing too much academically. We worked a lot on manners, good behavior, making wise choices, and social skills. In my seventh grade year I do remember attending algebra and science classes in the regular building and the teacher creating lessons for me in social studies, language arts, and reading. The slower

pace and lack of large assignments helped me be more successful in completing work on time.

8. I never knew of a plan designed specifically for me. The work was not rigorous or challenging enough for me. I began at the alternative school in its first or second year. I think they were still working to make the program what they wanted it to be. I have been back to visit several times in recent years. They do a lot of things differently now. Many things are much better for the student now, in my opinion.

9. They looked at my records. I remember taking some tests. Then they decided what I should be learning. Everything was broken way down to a point I could understand and grasp it before moving to the next concept. The pace was slower and learning was based on mastery and comprehension. If it took me a little longer to get something I did not have to worry about being left behind. That made a big difference in my progress.

10. The pace at the regular school was too fast for me. I always felt like I could never keep up. Completing work and getting it turned in on time was a problem for me. At the alternative school they adjusted the pace and the amount of work I had to do. Even tests were shorter and over smaller amounts of material. For the first time completing school work was not a problem anymore. That helped me a lot.

11. My ADD caused me to be overwhelmed and frustrated with the pace at the regular school. At the alternative school the pace was different. We were challenged to work hard but we didn't all have to work at the same pace. We worked until we mastered something and then moved onto the next thing. I never felt lost or behind. I felt like I was making progress and that I could do this after all.

12. An individual plan was created for me. It included a good pace, the right amount of work, a good amount of hands-on work, and lots of real-life learning. I would not have made it at the regular school. The difference in the pace and the way things were taught made me be able to get through the eighth grade.

Table 4.2 below provides an examination of the student views confirming support of specific program elements in regard to program completion. For instance, only one former alternative education student felt that he would be following the same course regardless of the alternative education experience. He feels positive about his education experience at the alternative school, but his goal as a young adult was to work in the family business all along. In his mind, he believed he could effectively run the family business without a high school diploma. The rest of the participants are sure their futures would have been much different than they are now. Some feel that if they had not had the alternative education experience they could be in trouble with the law, involved with drugs, in jail, or any combination of the three. Some are sure that they would not have been pursuing continuing education in any form. The majority believe that their best accomplishment would have been the attainment of a General Education Degree (GED) and a job. For most, they feel as though they would not have considered any sort of goals or plans for their futures, much less pursued them.

Table 4.2

Student Confirmation Supporting Key Elements to Program Completion

Key Elements	Confirmed Support	Total Responses
Small student-to-teacher ratio	11	12
Individually designed academic program	10	12
Academic pace	9	12
Academic rigor	4	12
Setting goals/expectations	10	12
Caring teachers	12	12
Instilled a belief in me and my abilities	12	12
Positive rewards/incentives	6	12
Clear cut/consistent consequences and rewards	12	12
Relentless pursuit from teachers and other staff	12	12
Effective and supportive leadership/administration	10	12
Highly-qualified staff	3	12
Personal connection with staff	11	12
Personal accountability/responsibility	10	12
Independent study with online curricular software	2	12
Hands-on instruction/projects	12	12
Connecting instruction/curriculum to practical use	12	12
College/career information and exposure	10	12
Flexible schedule	8	12

Table 4.2 (continued)

Student Confirmation Supporting Key Elements to Program Completion

Key Elements	Confirmed Support	Total Responses
Mandatory attendance	6	12
Social and emotional support	6	12
Family involvement	6	12
Regular parental communication	4	12
Separation from traditional setting	5	12

Staff Responses to Research Questions

How do instructors and staff members influence successful program completion?

Every staff member interviewed agrees that the first and foremost element to the success of their students is a caring and committed staff, a staff that truly believes in the alternative education process and the students that fill their classrooms. Consistent student achievement is realized only when staff "own the sheep," assuming a vested interest in each child.

Teachers tell me it is essential that the caring and commitment extend beyond the classroom. It must propel the staff member to ongoing education and professional development in order to be highly effective in impacting learning. Caring and commitment drive the staff member in a determined pursuit of student achievement, doing whatever it takes for as long as it takes to lead the student to academic success. Caring and commitment leads to high expectations for every student, instilling in the student a confidence in their abilities and belief that they can achieve. Caring and commitment requires tough love. Tough love develops clear cut boundaries, rules, and expectations, consistently delivering rewards and consequences. Tough love develops a personal accountability in these students, helping them to realize that they are ultimately responsible for their success or failure. Personal accountability moves them beyond the role of the victim that allows their difficulties to be reasons for failure, and into accepting things they cannot change and controlling the things that are within their power.

Eight of the ten staff members believe that caring and commitment must involve the development of personal relationships to truly be effective in impacting student achievement. Two of the staff members believe they are able to care and impact students' progress without developing personal relationships. Actually these two feel that it is a dangerous to develop those relationships. "I care tremendously about the success of each of my students. I work tirelessly to

help them succeed. I worry a little about those who get too close to these kids. If something goes awry in the personal relationship the professional relationship can be damaged and cause harm to their academic progress," relates one of the high school staff members. Another teacher remarks, "I must be more professional and less personal with alternative students". Yet the same instructor tells me later in the interview that caring and developing relationships are important in making a difference in the lives of these students. He even shares that he feels that his greatest strength is caring and that he sees his students as individuals. The differences in opinion as to whether students and teachers should engage in personal relationships may simply come down to the actual definition one holds of personal relationships.

Staff members feel as though many of the elements critical to student success are encompassed within the umbrella of a caring and dedicated staff. Constructs most noted as crucial to success outside that umbrella are small student-to-teacher ratio, adequate funding, structure and consistency in the daily schedule, and effective, supportive leadership.

Staff members at both schools wanted to address the issue of school finances and how that impacts their ability to lead students through completion of their programs. Adequate funding is an issue that plagues all educational programs, whether they are traditional or alternative. Many successful alternative programs are dissolved due to lack of funds. One of the programs observed during the course of this study experienced just such a situation. Rather than dissolve, the program's budget was reduced by 60%. The cuts resulted in a reduction in staff and redesign of the program to an exclusive online prescriptive course program. This was one of the elements most mentioned by staff, students, and parents as the least desirable way to instruct and impact learning for alternative students. "A diploma factory is all we are now. This is the worst excuse for an alternative program for these kids. No learning is taking place, just earning credits.

I was able to do something meaningful with kids before. My classes were designed to prepare them for vocational training and with employment skills," replied one of the industrial arts instructors. Another teacher related that the human equation in teaching these students had been replaced with technology. "The kids are advancing through the program and earning the credits, but there is so much more these students need that cannot be taught through an online prescriptive learning program." Most of the teachers interviewed said that they were so dedicated to the learning of the at-risk student and so opposed to the online program that they would be willing to take a cut in salary in order to keep their programs running with teacher-driven instruction at the core.

Staff participant replies to how teachers and staff members impact program completion:

1. Teachers make a big difference in every classroom. Teachers have the power to motivate and enhance learning or to drive kids away from education in general. Alternative school teachers must know, understand, and be dedicated to teaching the at-risk student A teacher with those qualities will bring kids to program completion or graduation.

2. An alternative school teacher must know the subject matter first and foremost. But it is always so much more than that. We have to really care and be able to work with them on a personal basis. We have to take them where they are, where we get them. Sometimes learning does not come first. Teaching them, loving them, staying with them through the process gets them through the program.

3. Teachers at our school make the difference between a student passing the courses and completing the program or failing. If the students attend regularly, the teachers get them through successfully.

4. A personal connection and the one-on-one instruction helps at-risk students get through the program.

5. If the alternative school teacher is compassionate, caring, highly qualified, and willing to do whatever it takes, she will get her students through the program.

6. It has been my experience that to get at-risk kids to graduate it takes patience, good organizational skills, caring, understanding your clientele, determination to the point of never letting up on them, and passion for their learning and the student as a whole.

7. It's the opportunity and the ability to work one-on-one with these kids that gets them through their program. Teachers have to be willing to put in the extra time and effort to adapt and modify the work and work a long side of them to completion.

8. Effective teachers in alternative programs must demonstrate a firm grasp of the content knowledge, employ a balance of student accountability and caring, create ways to instill self-confidence in each student, communicate to home often, and provide support outside the school building and regular school day. That is the only way it works successfully.

9. I have had a great deal of success with getting my students through the program. I set clear expectations. I know my subject matter and am flexible in the delivery of it. I utilize teaching moments when they come up. I take time to address student needs as they arise. I try to incorporate as many hands-on projects and real-world opportunities as time will allow. We set many short-term goals with these kids. They must see successes in small intervals or they shut down.

10. Effective teachers are the critical component to student success in any program.

How does student self-efficacy influence successful program completion?

Most of the students that land in alternative programs are not academically successful at the time they enroll there. Some have never experienced success in the traditional setting. Thus, the chance that they believe they have the ability to complete quality work, on time, is slim at best. They interpret their failure in traditional school as their inability to learn, focus, care, engage, remain on task, and keep up with the pace. Most truly believe they are the problem. Why else would other students be able to succeed when they cannot?

Both sets of staff members at each alternative program express how much Maslow and the Hierarchy of Needs (1943) impacts their work with the at-risk teens that enter their respective programs. Obviously, each program is cognizant to attend to food, clothing, hygiene, and shelter needs. Both schools, as with all schools, make sure that the school is safe and secure, with a positive and comfortable learning environment. After entering the program, attention is given to any social and emotional needs that may be impeding progress in the academic or personal lives of the students. Helping students to feel as though they belong in the alternative program environment is necessary if staff members are to help the students achieve personal esteem and confidence. When students realize a sense of self-competence, by beginning to achieve in the alternative setting, many are able to move toward the peak of the Hierarchy of Needs pyramid, pursuant of self-actualization. The belief that they truly can be academically successful and the realization that they are academically successful unleashes what Maslow (1943) refers to as growth motivation. Many students find that they continuously desire to fulfill their potential, to do more, to be the best that they can be.

Staff members feel that instilling hope and the belief that these young people can complete quality work is critical to their success at school and in life. A student who believes

they cannot succeed will not. Many of these students give up so easily because they do not understand the hard work and continued perseverance it takes to achieve their goals. They seem to be under the impression if they try without succeeding the first time; they are just simply incapable of learning or understanding.

In addition to verbally reassuring their students that they can complete the work, they can understand, and they can achieve, the teachers use many strategies in assisting the students in their academic success. Instruction, assignments, and assessments are broken into smaller chunks. Students have only a small amount of information to understand in one setting. Assignments are structured to provide practice for the limited instructional information and limited to the amount necessary to realize the student understands the information. Tests contain few questions, with a variety of question forms. Hands-on and project learning consume a considerable amount of the instructional practices. Most of the students attending alternative programs realize greater academic success when the instruction involves more hands-on learning as opposed to worksheets, lecture, and text book assignments.

Attention to developing an appropriate, effective, individual learning plan lends well to establishing self-efficacy in the student. Students engaged in a learning plan established from the appropriate diagnosis of their current learning level assures that students can successfully complete their learning at the alternative program because the instruction level and the pace are specifically designed to meet the needs of that student at that point in their academic career.

The smaller numbers enrolled in both programs allows staff to invest a greater amount of time to planning, instruction, support, counseling, relationship building, and working to instill self-confidence in each student.

Teacher responses to how student self-efficacy impacts program completion:

1. Kids come to us pretty beat down. Building them up and making them believe in their own abilities is one of the hardest things we do but is absolutely necessary for program completion.

2. Lots of anger in all these kids. We have to try to cut through that so that they can focus on learning, not the anger and being overwhelmed. I break the lessons into smaller chunks of material and assignments. Students are better able to visualize completing smaller assignments. As they complete the smaller assignments they gain more and more confidence in their ability to get through the program. My students have made fabulous progress, become much better readers, and realized success.

3. If a student does not believe in their ability to do the work and complete the program, they will not get it done. It is our job to design the instruction so they can be successful one day at a time. Success each day builds self-confidence and gets them through.

4. The most significant factors leading to program completion is building self-esteem and self-confidence in each individual.

5. Self-efficacy is ultimately what it is all about. They have to believe they can do it. When we can instill that, they make it.

6. Hardly anyone has believed in these kids before they get to us. We believe in them and are willing to do what it takes to help them through. When they see that we believe in them and hang in there to help them along the way, they experience success. Daily success instills self-efficacy and leads to getting through the program.

7. Kids say they think the alternative school is easier than regular school. It is just that adapting the work to meet their needs creates self-confidence. The self-confidence to do

the work relieves the previous frustration and anxiety and that makes them feel like it is easier.

8. We not only provide the academic supports necessary to successful progress but we encourage every student to get involved in school activities, so they feel better about themselves and feel a real connection to school. The self-confidence gained through successful academic performance and through involvement in extra-curricular activities leads our kids to program completion.

9. A sense of pride and accomplishment is evident through the hands-on projects in my classes. When students work with their brain and their hands to create a product, self-confidence occurs. Self-confidence helps them get their degree and move on to employment or extended education.

10. A child who does not believe in his abilities is very difficult to motivate. We set high expectations for our students and provide time, resources, and encouragement so they can excel to those expectations. Once they begin to excel the fire is lit. They believe they can do the work so they are motivated to do the work.

How does small student-to-teacher ratio influence successful program completion?

Maintaining a small number of students to one teacher allows for more personal, individualized attention and instruction. Teachers are able to assess the student's aptitude, design an education plan unique to their learning needs, involving practical, concrete lesson plans and immediate feedback. Instructors remark that students tell them quite often how relaxed and comfortable they feel with the fewer number of students and with the lessons designed to their level of ability.

Smaller student-to-teacher ratio improves the chances that learning will occur and that it will occur more rapidly. One-on-one instruction, small group tutoring, schools within schools, classes within classes, and pull-out programs are all prime examples of strategies utilized to create smaller learning communities in the traditional setting in an attempt to improve student achievement (Institute for Research and Reform in Education, 2003). First Things First Reform (IRRE, 2003) says it is less likely that a student will slip through the cracks when the student-to-teacher ratio is small. In both programs, the staff recognizes and understands a great deal about each student. If a student begins to struggle, the small numbers make it possible for staff to intervene immediately. There is a greater chance that immediate intervention will prevent failure.

Given the small numbers, the programs involved in this study are able to function with a great deal of structure and consistency in the daily schedule. Teachers and administrators say that it is their experience that at-risk students enjoy knowing what to expect each day. Functioning under a regular routine and direct supervision alleviates issues with managing their behavior during transition and other unsupervised times. At-risk students seem more relaxed, comfortable, and ready to learn in an environment with few surprises and minimal freedom.
Teacher remarks to the impact small student-to-teacher ratios have on program completion:

1. Small numbers change the environment for these students, it feels safer, more comfortable. Many of the kids tell me it is much easier to get out of bed and come to school knowing there are only a few kids in their classes and that they will get a great deal of one-on-one instruction.

2. Smaller enrollment is better for everyone. As a teacher of students who are usually very far behind in their skills and credits, it is much less overwhelming for me to know that I only have a few students in each class. I can give them the time and attention they need to

catch up. It is a win-win. I am less overwhelmed. They get more individual assistance and are more likely to get done in a timely fashion.

3. Small student-to-teacher numbers is the only way an at-risk program should be designed. These students have too many needs and too great of deficits to be able to get the majority of them through the program successfully if we were to employ larger class sizes.

4. Our school was very small, two teachers to seven students, with that sort of ratio, unless they moved, the parents pulled them from the program, or some other thing out of our control, we could pretty much guarantee program completion.

5. Very small enrollment and two teachers. We really made a difference in the lives of those kids. The small numbers allowed the academic support they needed and also encouraged much closer student/teacher relationships.

6. I have been here since the beginning. We started with five faculty members. I think it was better then, much more one-on-one. We witnessed more consistent progress and more students completing the program. Staff is reduced now. We do more online instruction. We can get the kids through the program but we do not realize the same personal interaction as we did in the beginning.

7. Our alternative school is a small school with two full-time teachers. We were able to get every student through the program unless something happened that was beyond our control.

8. I helped to start this program. All the research I explored and the programs I contacted were insistent that the smaller the numbers the greater chance of saving the student and

getting them through the program. So that's what we did, seven students with two full-time teachers.

9. We are a small school. We had more staff members in the beginning but we still average about 15 to 1 student-to-teacher ratio. That's not bad but 1 to 10 or less helped us get more students through the program.

10. Smaller numbers allows us a much greater opportunity to improve student progress quickly and sustain that progress through completion.

What influence does family involvement play in successful program completion?

High school staff members state that lack of parental or family involvement and attendance impedes the success of some students. It is the faculty's experience that lack of family involvement is the key factor to poor student attendance. Although the staff has little control over the degree of parental involvement in the student's education, they are able to rely on state truancy laws and the county attorney to enforce regular attendance.

Middle school staff members claim lack of parental compliance and poor parenting skills as the major obstacles inhibiting adequate progress with their students. At the middle level, teachers experience difficulty with parents hindering their child's progress, many times with excessive involvement. Noncompliance and sabotaging the system prevent the family and school from forming a strong team to improving student behavior and performance. High school teachers have a different opinion. They claim lack of any parental involvement or support as obstacles impeding the progress of the older teens. The sheer nature of the younger age of middle school students promotes a greater chance of family involvement, whether those rearing them are the biological parents or other family members. A staff member tells me, "Parents don't wish to be told how to raise their child. It is difficult for most parents to initiate tough love." Another

long-time alternative educator says, "Most of what we try to do is to break old habits, instill new, positive habits, and train parents how to better parent their child. The problem is that most parents don't want to be trained to be better parents, they believe they already do a good enough job." Time and again staff members witness great progress with a student only to be left picking up the pieces of a shattered child when the parent fails them in some manner or another. "Parents continue to make the same mistakes with their children over and over again. That is why parental training and support is so very necessary in making a difference with their children at school," states a middle school administrator.

Instructors from both schools believe that positive, supportive family involvement is an integral piece to program success and completion. It is the experience of the staff members in the two programs that graduation from the program nearly always occurs for students with parents that form an alliance with the teachers and the educational program.

Teachers answers on how family involvement impacts program completion:

1. Family involvement is available but is rarely taken advantage of. Even if the parents help and support the student at home they are usually reluctant to get involved or even communicate with the school. Getting through school is pretty much up to the student to get it done.

2. We provide and encourage family involvement, open house and parent/teacher conferences, for example. Hardly any parents ever attend. Most parents I meet are very nice and want to help but just do not have a clue of how to be involved or help their child in school.

3. By the time the high school kids land in alternative school most do not even live with parents, let alone have them involved with the school and their education.

4. Daily communication was sent home through a point's sheet with information of behavior and performance for that day. The parents were expected to sign it and make any comments they desired. The student returned the sheet each morning. Daily communication kept parents involved and aware of what was happening with their child.

5. There were many opportunities and expectations for family involvement at our school. Daily point's sheets, frequent phone calls, home visits, parent/teacher conferences, parenting classes, and open house were just some of the ways we included parents. We were united as a team in support of the child's education. I think it made a big difference in the students getting through the program.

6. It has been my experience that high school students landing in our school lost real parental support long before they arrive here. If they were not involved before, chances are they will not be involved and supportive here. Most of our kids are on their own to get their degree.

7. At the middle school most kids are still living at home with their parents. Their parents have not totally given up on them. It is easier to gain parental support and get them involved at the middle level as opposed to high school level. Parental support makes a big difference in the successful progress of our students.

8. My belief is that it takes a village to raise a child. We do everything possible to not only involve our parents but to hold them accountable for their child's education as well. When we get the buy-in and support from the parents the students are successful. When we get resistance and failure to support what we are doing the student is generally not successful and does not complete the program.

9. Most of my students do not live with their parents. Many live with grandparents, other relatives, or friends. If they do still live at home, many parents have had such difficult experiences with their child, school, and school personnel that they have pretty much washed their hands of the whole thing. High school kids in an alternative program have to personally want to graduate and be willing to get it done on their own, with the help of the teachers at school.

10. Positive family support of the program and their child's participation in the program increases the chances that the student will be successful and get through our program. For those students whose parents do not align with us and what we are trying to accomplish for their child, chances of program completion are greatly reduced.

How does social/emotional support influence successful program completion?

Drugs, gangs, anger, violence, and aggression are very real obstacles in the lives of the young people who land in high school programs. Most of the students experience difficulty throughout their childhood which generates anger and aggression in some and leads several to drugs and gang involvement. Keeping peace during school hours and keeping the drugs out are ongoing issues that face every staff member. Often instruction is suspended so that order can be regained in the classroom. One staff member replies, "It is never just about instruction and curriculum; many class periods I find myself simply managing the tone or climate in order to keep them from escalating and harming each other." High school staff members express a sense of real frustration with drugs and aggression, directed more toward the juvenile justice system and their inability to prosecute and rehabilitate these students and those selling the drugs. "We know their doing drugs. They tell us about things that go on when they are away from school.

They give us names of people that sell the drugs to them. We report it to the county but nothing ever happens," remarks one long-time alternative education teacher.

Staff members at the high school alternative program witness how the limited counseling and support resources increase the probability of failure to complete program requirements for many of their students. "We can love them, counsel them, teach them, encourage them, and help them realize academic success but we cannot control what happens to them and how they react to what happens to them," states one teacher. She goes on to say, "Most of my students have experienced a great deal of bad in their young lives. Most never encounter any structured professional support. Coping, anger management, and relationship skills fail to be introduced and reinforced for these students. We work hard to do what we can for them emotionally. They simply need more than we have the experience and the time to offer them."

Middle school alternative staff members interviewed in this study experience some of the same concerns revealed by the high school staff members, but the issues with drugs and aggression are not as prevalent with the younger students in this rural area. Middle school students in this program are subject to random drug testing, which, in the opinion of the staff members, does seem to help students initiate greater consideration before engaging in drug activity. The middle school program requires that all students are involved in weekly group counseling sessions through a local mental health organization, while many parents of those in this program seek individual and family counseling on a regular basis. These sessions address the anger, aggression, and depression issues so common in the lives of the at-risk student.

Journal writing is another area used to address social and emotional support. Each day at the middle school begins with personal journal writings. Students may write whatever they choose. The entries vary from day to day and student to student. Whatever the content, the

journaling seemed to serve as an avenue for self-cleansing, confession, or self-reporting. Over time students' entries reveal a general sense of emotional well-being.

Teacher participant comments on how social/emotional support impacts program completion:

1. We employed a full-time counselor in the beginning. With budget cuts the counselor moved to part-time. The teachers now have to help counsel students even more. That takes more time away from the instruction process. Instead of being able to send a student out to see the counselor and continue on with instruction, the teacher has to stop in the middle of the lesson to try to resolve the social or emotional issues. The teachers are more than willing to handle these situations; it is just not as effective for the learning environment. Many of our students really need professional counseling. I believe we could have a better graduation rate if we were able to improve how we address the social/emotional issues.

2. We all counsel kids at our school, even the secretary. In fact, many of our students go to her with their struggles on a regular basis. Most all the students need more than what we can give. I see that we lose a few because we do not have the means to address their emotional problems.

3. The majority of the students I have worked with over the years have dealt with issues like; drugs, teen pregnancy/parenting, troubles with the legal system, depression, and attempts at suicide. That is some pretty heavy stuff. We love and care for them deeply but we are not equipped to address and be able to impact those sort of issues. I think that many of the students who fail to graduate from our program do so because they do not get the professional help they need with their social and emotional concerns.

4. Our kids were engaged in group counseling from an outside professional at least once each week. We helped many students and families to get individual and family therapy on a regular basis as well. Also, our students completed a journaling activity each morning. Many remarked how much writing things down and thinking things through made a big difference in dealing with stuff that was troubling them. I saw our students move onto high school with improved emotional health.

5. Our lead teacher was very big on addressing the social and emotional issues. She really felt that they had to be emotionally healthy before we could hope to impact them academically. We counseled kids on a regular basis and involved all students in weekly group sessions from an outside agency. We implemented lots of life-lesson and social/emotional activities. Some students had individual outside therapy. The counselor at the traditional school was always available to our students. We utilized her on many occasions.

6. One of the teachers and the secretary facilitated a great deal of social/emotional activities. They implemented projects, team building lessons, bonding activities, trust and relationship skills training, and parties. All teachers played a support in the counseling department. All of that helped and made some impact on some of the students. Those with heavier problems needed regular professional help. It was hard to keep those students through to graduation.

7. Group therapy was mandatory once a week during the school day. Individual and family therapy, along with an after-school program at the local mental health agency were strongly encouraged. Many of our families took advantage of those opportunities. Daily journaling activities provided therapy as well. Kids would write down things on their

mind or going on in their lives. We would talk about a lot of it afterwards. They were able to see that other students had some of the same problems. They were offered comfort and ways to cope with their issues. This helped them to get through each day and be more ready to focus on their studies.

8. We actually employ a great deal of social/emotional support. Our kids come to us with a great deal of baggage, way more than what we are trained to address effectively. If we do not address emotional issues first it is very difficult to impact the academic issues. Positive mental health makes a better student. It is more likely they will be successful in school, complete the program and be better prepared for high school.

9. Everyone counsels here. They reduced our counselor to part-time a few years back. We try to handle all the issues we are capable of, but these kids need more than a band-aid approach. They need regular, professional therapy to truly address their issues. They have experienced many years of serious struggles and poor choices. If we could offer more professional help I think we could get more of them to graduate.

10. We work on social skills every day. Our students are taught and expected to demonstrate good manners, positive relationship skills, respect, responsibility, moral character, and integrity on a regular basis. Emotional support is provided by the teachers at the alternative school, the counselor at the regular school and by an outside agency. The mental health interventions make a positive impact on student progress and program completion.

What significance does the design and implementation of individually designed education plans play in successful program completion?

Staff members in the high school programs hold that by the time students find their way to the alternative school many are poor readers and woefully behind academically. It is not just a situation of credit deficiency but failure to master certain basic skills in math and reading. Every student that enters their program is at an entirely different learning level. Instruction has to be tailored to meet the student at the academic point they enter the program, ensuring a great deal of remediation and repetition throughout their enrollment in the program.

Each program scrutinizes previous state and national-normed assessment results, verifies classroom performance over time, reviews attendance and behavior reports, as well as personal communication with the previous school's administration and guidance counselor. At the high school program, and in some instances at the middle school program, students also take a national-normed assessment in reading and math upon enrollment. This assessment yields academic and performance ability levels in these content areas. Additionally, students are allowed the opportunity to share with staff what they feel are their strengths and areas of concern. Utilizing this mixture of data, the staff develops an individual education plan for the new student. Assessment data, classroom performance results, behavior, and attendance are monitored over time so that the plan may be amended to meet the current academic and emotional needs of the student.

Teachers realize that academic pace is as critical to the design of the individual learning plan as the appropriate learning level itself. A high school alternative teacher tells me, "day after day I see these students coming to me so overwhelmed, so beaten down with their inability to keep up in the traditional classroom. One of the first things I do, in addition to designing the

instruction to the academic level of the new student, is to give specific attention to establishing the pace at a level the student can manage."

Implementing an individual learning plan plays a supporting role in other program elements key to program completion. An education plan, specifically designed to students' needs, yields feelings of safety, security, and self efficacy as students become successful within the classroom. Teachers who design and implement the individual plan work closely with the students. They instill hope and build a caring relationship with each student.

Summarizing the staff member responses reveals that an effective design for an alternative education program should first focus on hiring effective, caring individuals who support alternative learning, and are dedicated to the relentless pursuit of positively impacting the lives of at-risk students. Once the program employs these types of individuals, keeping the enrollment size and student-to-teacher ratio small, individualizing instruction, emphasizing hands-on learning, and maintaining a structured and consistent daily schedule should be the skeletal requirements of all alternative programs.

Staff members' answers to how an individual learning plan impacts program completion:

1. Upon enrollment the student transcript and cumulative records are viewed by the counselor. Our counselor contacts the counselor at the student's previous school to gain detailed information regarding areas of strengths and weaknesses. After noting any credit deficiencies and academic areas of particular concern, an instructional plan is created for that student. Students seem to be better able to stay with the program when the instruction and work is streamlined to just what they need to complete to graduate.

2. Transcripts and student records are looked over. Credit deficits are the major point of emphasis in designing the high school plan but we also look at classroom and state

assessment performances as well as gaining more information regarding the student's needs from the staff at the previous school. This really helps me to know the specific lesson plans I need to develop to get this student on track and keep him there. It helps the student feel like the work is doable, so they are less likely to give up.

3. We design individual learning plans for each of our students. If we can keep them in attendance each day and they do not experience a tremendous amount of outside issues to cause them to lose their focus, the individual plan works well in getting them through the program.

4. The regular school and our alternative school work closely to design a plan that meets the needs of our students. Most of our students found it very difficult to stay up with the classroom work and the homework at their previous school. Their personal issues provided major distractions, so they found it difficult to complete quality work on time. Much of the time there is little support at home to enforce or help with homework completion. In addition to designing the level and type of instruction, we try hard to modify and assist them with the work so they get it done during the school day. The more we can control during the hours we have them the more likely they will be successful in our program.

5. I see many ways an IEP works well to get students through our program, but I see the pace of the IEP being just as important. When we try to load too much on them at one time they shut down and are ready to give up on school once again.

6. One of the things students tell me time and again is how they felt they were just drowning in the regular school. How they hated to walk in the doors everyday because they knew what would happen. They knew they wouldn't have the work done, be unable to

understand the instruction, or both. They knew that the teacher would express disappointment and reprimand them. They still have struggles when they get to us but through a program designed for them with the appropriate pace, they see there is hope and that it is possible they can graduate from high school.

7. We listen to our students when they come to us. We look at records, assessments, and overall performance. We work hard to develop a plan that meets their needs. One of the biggest things with middle school students is the pace. We want to challenge them without overwhelming them. We find that when we slow the pace and reduce the amount of work they experience small, daily successes. Once they experience success they gain more confidence in their abilities, then we can increase the pace and rigor to get them through eighth grade and ready for high school.

8. When I started the alternative school I thought it was more important to address the social/emotional issues first. I knew good mental health was critical to academic success. I still believe that is true but we now work hard at both emotional and academic issues from the beginning. We address the academic challenges by designing instruction to the academic level of the student when we receive them. We modify the work and adapt the pace when necessary. With a good blend of emotional therapy and effective, appropriate instruction and pace we see positive results.

9. We develop individual plans for our kids but we still see some not motivated to do the work. Most do excel when the work is designed to meet their needs. It helps most of them to get through.

10. It is necessary to individualize with our students. They come to us with different levels of deficits and with deficits in different skill sets. We would see very little progress and diminished program completion if we did not individualize the instruction and the pace.

Interviewing teachers and other staff members participating in the two alternative education schools assisted in painting a detailed picture of what actually occurs in the trenches of these programs. Even though the two programs serve different age groups and variances in program structure the opinions as to the elements most likely to lead to program completion are similar. Data Table 4.3 reveals the number of staff members who confirmed specific program elements as important to successful program completion.

Table 4.3

Staff Confirmation Supporting Key Elements to Program Completion

Key Elements	Confirmed Support	Total Responses
Small student-to-teacher ratio	10	10
Caring teachers/staff	10	10
Personal connection with student	8	10
Personal accountability/responsibility (student)	10	10
Clear boundaries, rules, expectations	10	10
Positive rewards/incentives	5	10
Clear cut/consistent consequences and rewards	10	10
Relentless pursuit from teachers and other staff	10	10
Effective and supportive leadership/administration	10	10
Instill a belief in student and his/her abilities	10	10
Highly-qualified staff	10	10
Individually designed academic program	10	10
Academic pace	9	10
Academic rigor	6	10
Setting goals/expectations	10	10
One-on-one instruction/assistance	10	10
Independent study with online curricular software	2	10
Hands-on instruction/projects	10	10
Connecting instruction/curriculum to its use/necessity	10	10

Table 4.3 (continued)

Staff Confirmation Supporting Key Elements to Program Completion

Key Elements	Confirmed Support	Total Responses
College/career/skills information and exposure	10	10
Flexible schedule	8	10
Mandatory attendance	10	10
Social and emotional support	6	10
Family involvement	8	10
Regular parental communication	5	10
Separation from traditional setting	10	10

Parent Responses to the Research Questions

How do instructors and staff members influence successful program completion?

The most repeated and significant program element critical to their child completing the alternative education program was that of caring teachers. Just a few of the comments that surface regarding caring teachers were: (1) "They cared about my kid as a person;" (2) "The teachers were not just there to spit out information. They were there because they love kids and love seeing them succeed;" (3) "In the regular high school it's all about teaching. It is not about the student. The high school teachers don't want to get involved or show they care. They just want to get up in front of the class, teach, and go home;" (4) "Showing the student that you truly care about him as a person is the first step in learning. If the kid knows you really care about him he is going to bust his butt for you;"and (5) "When I was in high school my math teacher made fun of me, called me retarded. You think that made me want to come to school or feel like someone was going to care about me, work with me, and help me learn? My son's teachers at the alternative school were awesome, caring, loving, and nurturing."

Additionally, parents stress that not only did the staff members care, hold high expectations, and, in turn, develop self-confidence in their child; the instructors are all highly-qualified. The teachers have a firm grasp of the curriculum, but more importantly, they know how to instill learning, using a vast array of instructional methods to appeal to any learning style. One parent remarks, "My child was more successful in the alternative program because the teacher made learning fun, created hands-on lessons, and showed him how he would use the knowledge in everyday life."

Parents feel that excelling to level of a highly-qualified instructor is the direct result of the staff members' vested interest and personal connection with each student. "The teachers not

only care about the student personally but they care enough to pursue further education and training so they can be the very best teacher for all students," comments one mother. Another parent mentions, "teachers at my son's school not only know the core content, they know ways to teach it to him that makes sense to him, and they know the pace of the work he is able to accomplish without getting overwhelmed."

Considering that parents respond that teacher dedication and individual student concern is the critical element to program completion it is not a surprise when asked, their opinion of an online prescriptive learning system as the instructional backbone of an alternative education program, all parents reply that any sort of program that replaces the one-to-one teacher instruction and interaction will not be beneficial for the at-risk student. Some agree that students can learn in this manner but it is their belief that these children need the instruction, caring, and interaction of a highly-qualified instructor.

Parent participant observations to how instructors and staff members impact program completion:

1. I think many of the teachers at the regular school tried to help my child. I feel they cared, they were just spread too thin to be able to individualize for all the students and their special needs. The teachers at the alternative school really cared; better yet my child believed they really cared. Developing a relationship with my child, individualizing instruction, and staying the course with him proved to him they cared. That is what got him through it.

2. If it had not been for the teachers, their constant support and involvement both academically and personally my child would not have made it through the high school program.

3. Teachers at the alternative school were willing to take the time to sit down and work one-on-one with my child. That is what he needed to get through school. He lacked the confidence and sometimes the ability to do the work without help or support.

4. Teachers at the middle school program utilized tough love. They really cared but it wasn't always warm-fuzzy. They cared enough to make my child toe the line. Bad behaviors and poor choices caused the majority of his school issues. The caring approach the alternative school used for him helped him to mature, make wiser choices, get through middle school, and be better prepared for ninth grade.

5. My son had a great deal of emotional issues. He was very smart but was unable to be successful at the middle school. The regular setting was not equipped to deal with his issues. Once he arrived at the alternative school, he and I experienced a tremendous amount of caring, understanding, and willingness to work through his problems. Feeling that support and understanding made a difference in his progress and in my involvement in his schooling.

6. Academics were always a struggle for my child. We had him tested for special education services in elementary but he did not qualify. The teachers at the middle school tried to adapt the work but he needed more than that. The alternative school teachers realized his needs and cared enough to work one-on-one with him every day. They even cared enough to convince those involved at the high school to have him evaluated for special education services again. He qualified at that point and received para professional and resource room support so he could get his high school diploma.

7. I had a terrible experience in high school, struggled academically, no one would help, no one cared. When my son began to experience some of those same problems in middle

school I was very open to the alternative program. I am so thankful I was. They were amazing there. They loved my son. He was valued as an individual. He flourished there. He made it through with flying colors.

8. Teachers were caring, loving, nurturing. One of the teachers and my child developed a close bond. They were tough on him, stern but always concerned, and with his best interest at heart. His experience there not only helped him through middle school but high school as well.

How does student self-efficacy influence successful program completion?

Caring for the child as an individual encompasses the belief that every student possesses an untapped potential for achievement at an elevated standard. Holding high expectations for each child, especially the at-risk child, helps them to see that someone believes in them and their abilities. Self-esteem and self-confidence are instilled when someone else, especially the teacher, believes the student can do it. Thus, holding high expectations, believing in their children and their abilities, and instilling self-confidence are reiterated as critical pieces to continued student success. One mother states, "No one had ever believed in my kid before. No one thought he could do it. No one thought he would make it. After only a short time in the alternative program, he began scoring really high on those state tests they were required to take." Another stated, "My son hated school, after entering the alternative school he got up everyday ready to go with a smile on his face. He became excited about making plans to go into a criminal justice program after graduation." One father said, "I see a difference in my child these days. He holds his head a little higher, smiles a lot more, takes his studies seriously. He shares with me how much better he feels about himself and his ability to do well in school." One set of grandparents shared, "My grandson told his principal that he wanted to be an Air Force pilot some day. His principal told

him that he could be anything he wanted to be if he set his mind to it. She even arranged a trip for the whole class to see the Thunderbirds. You just cannot imagine what that did for his self-confidence."

Parent participant responses to how self-efficacy impacts program completion:

1. My grandson's academic issues were due to behavioral issues at the regular school. He is very smart. Due to the impact of all the things he endured in his parents' home, he did not care about school or his progress there. Once the alternative school's strategies were implemented he began to excel academically. He felt good about himself because he could do the work and make good grades. He gained even more self-confidence when he scored among the highest students on the state math and reading assessments.

2. To most of those who would meet my child, they would most likely believe that he was a self-confident young man. He was outgoing, very friendly, and never knew a stranger. In class he was forever the clown, always seeking attention. On the inside he was quite different. He seemed to seek external attention in an attempt to gain some sort of approval and self-confidence. That all changed after he enrolled in the alternative program. The successes there and the teachers continual belief in him and his abilities helped him begin to see a better way to gain self-confidence. That made the difference in him earning his degree.

3. Hands-on teaching and community service opportunities gave him a sense of pride and self-worth he did not have in the regular school. Feeling better about himself changed his attitude about school and helped him get done.

4. My child believed the teachers at his previous school did not really like him. He knew they disapproved of his behaviors so he naturally thought they disapproved of him as a

person. He went to the alternative school with a low self-worth. The teachers there encouraged him, believed in him, and never gave up on him. The daily expectation sheets and the natural consequences that ensued when he did not meet the expectations kept him on track with his behaviors. Once he learned to manage his behaviors he was better able to focus on his learning. He made it through that school, went on to high school, and is in college now.

5. My child was the ultimate class clown, the entertainer. He was smart, had many friends, was very popular, yet he was depressed and suicidal at times. Everything thing he did just seemed to be a way to hide what he was feeling inside and what he felt about himself. With the alternative school staff constantly caring about him and implementing a multitude of interventions he began to learn how to deal with what was going on inside and what had happened to him in the past. Clearing things up in his heart and head made him able to care about learning and completing the program.

6. The teachers and their individual tutoring got my child over the hump of being afraid of the work and believing he could not do it.

7. The program my child attended involved him with helping students with disabilities, Special Olympics, and reading to elementary kids. That gave him self-esteem and a purpose. He began to like school better. He wanted to attend. He felt needed by the disabled and elementary students. That is what led him to work with disabled adults since he graduated from high school.

8. There were multiple service oriented opportunities for the kids at the alternative school. Those experiences helped my child to feel that he had something to offer. He liked

helping others. He felt better about himself, that he had value. I am proud of him that he is pursuing the police academy and is choosing to work in a service oriented filed.

How does small student-to-teacher ratio influence successful program completion?

All of the parents involved in the study are happy that the programs are small and employ ample adult staff members to attend to their needs. Even though none of the students in the local area came from large schools, they still experience larger classrooms and building numbers than are the norm at the alternative programs they transferred to. The middle school alternative school boasts a student-to-teacher ratio of seven students to one licensed teacher and one para-professional, while the high school program operates with a student/teacher ratio of 15 to 1.

Students making their way to alternative programs have most likely struggled in school and within classroom of larger numbers. Parents share experiences of teacher conferences looking for help and direction from the teacher, only to hear that the teacher is assigned large numbers in her classroom with a wide disparity of learning levels. Upon understanding the details of the traditional setting, parents tend to realize that teachers may be as overwhelmed as their children. Parents feel helpless and hopeless when even the teachers cannot provide a plan to help their child.

Parent responses strongly supported the smaller setting for their children. Each participant agreed that the smaller numbers made a dramatic difference to his or her child's progress and ability to complete the program.

Parent remarks as to how a small student-to-teacher ratio impacted program completion:

1. Smaller numbers made school a more comfortable place than he knew before. Comfort allowed him to relax and focus better. More focus on his part and the teachers providing individual instruction was one of the foundations to his success there.

2. Distractions were a problem for my child in the regular school. The smaller numbers reduced many of the distractions. When his mind or his actions would wander, the teachers were able to quickly bring him back to the instruction or his work. Keeping him focused and on task helped him to accomplish what he needed to each day.

3. School size was comfortable, no stress, and made it much easier to get him to go. Once he was there he needed intense academic help. He had always struggled in school, so he was really behind. He received lots of one-on-one instruction and help. He would not have graduated if he had stayed at the regular high school.

4. My son needed someone standing over his shoulder all the time, both to manage his behavior and to keep him on task. The small school size made that possible. He made great progress in just a short period of time. The retraining of his behavior and study habits helped through high school too.

5. For my son, emotional issues were the biggest obstacles to success in school. The small setting allowed more time for teachers to listen, counsel, and support on a daily basis. They made all the difference for him.

6. Poor grades in school were all my child had ever known. He struggled to understand and really learn. The small number of students at his school made it easy for the teachers to spend time with just him. That is what he needed. That is what he had to have to get through the program and on to high school.

7. When my child first entered the alternative school I was a little worried, unsure just how it would all play out. The small numbers made both of us feel much better. Before long I could see that the teachers were able to stay on top of everything; teaching, counseling,

supervising, planning, and individualizing. No one was able to slip through the cracks at that school.

8. The smaller setting was a huge help to my son with ADD. He received the personalized attention he needed to stay on task and focused. With the intense support he learned how to stay focused more on his own. That was a huge help for him in high school.

What influence does family involvement play in successful program completion?

Just a little over half of the parents convey that family involvement in the program is necessary to successful program completion. Several parents confess that they were not highly involved with their children's education while in the traditional program. Most of the participants that feel that family involvement is important to program completion are parents of the middle school alternative students. Some believe it is the duty of the school to help students succeed. A few parents that held that opinion prior to the alternative education experience came to realize that an active role in their children's education is critical to their success in school.

The majority of the parents share that they do appreciate the frequent parental communication and family support and assistance. Although they say they appreciate the opportunities for involvement, there seem to be multiple reasons why they fail to do so. Some feel too overwhelmed, inferior, have had bad experiences with schools, do not see the importance of education, or believe it is only the educators' responsibility to help students. One parent remarked, "That is what I send them to school for. The teachers are supposed to help them learn."

I interviewed three sets of parents who could not support the alternative education concept for their child, even after witnessing that child's continued success. In two of the three instances, where negative attitudes toward alternative education prevailed, the parents were

actually grandparents, one set being great grandparents. The two pairs of grandparents expressed similar reasons for their dislike of an alternative plan for the child they were raising. They appreciated the small class size, personal academic plan, and individualized instruction and assistance but objected when they were reprimanded, as they put it, regarding decisions they made for their grandchildren and when the program expected certain things from them in their personal lives.

One of the constructs considered by alternative and regular education staff members to be important in the success of the at-risk student was regular daily attendance. Many students are considered at-risk of failure in the regular school setting due to the truancy factor alone. It is no surprise that for most students learning is impeded when instruction is missed on a regular basis. Regular daily attendance was not perceived by these two sets of grandparents as a key ingredient to their grandchildren's academic success. They feel as though they should be able to decide when to keep their grandchildren home and when they should send them. Most of the absences were claimed to be illness related and they maintained it was not the school's place to decide if the student was sick enough to stay home or well enough to go to school. The grandparents believed that the staff at the school were invading their privacy and making decisions that they should be making as the guardians of their grandchildren.

Other reasons stated for their displeasure of the alternative program are instances where the teacher made recommendations regarding things like earlier bedtimes, more adult supervision, a greater personal involvement with the child, consistent discipline, support of the program in the child's presence, awareness of the child's friends, and providing nutritious meals. The guardians objected to the program's involvement to this extent. One pair of grandparents removed their child from the program and enrolled him in a traditional school in a neighboring

town. The young man returned to the alternative program in his later teens to meet with the lead instructor of the program he attended so he could share with her how all of the elements of the program had helped him in his educational journey. The other student remained in the middle school alternative program through eighth grade. His grandparents refused the ongoing academic support the alternative program offered throughout the high school years.

The third set of parents express different reasons for their negative attitude toward the alternative program in which their son was enrolled. Their son entered a middle school alternative program in the fourth quarter of his sixth grade year after experiencing complete academic failure throughout the first three quarters. Adequate progress was achieved in the remaining nine weeks of the sixth grade at the alternative school. He was scheduled to begin the seventh grade in the alternative program. Over the course of the summer his parents decided that the alternative program was not for their son. They were in opposition to the separation and isolation from the regular student body, the strictness of the teachers and the program, and the harshness of the discipline. Additional concerns of a curriculum lacking rigor and authenticity was an issue as well. Parents met with the principal in August announcing their displeasure in the program and that they would not enroll their son in that program for his seventh grade year. Since the program is voluntary, unless the student has achieved suspension status and the hearing officer rules the alternative school as the educational placement, the parents had the right to withdraw their child from the program at any point. Once again, the young man failed miserably in the traditional setting. He found himself long term suspended as a result of accumulation of discipline demerits from failure to complete assignments and refusing to attend the educational support systems in place for failing students. In April, the struggling student was enrolled once

again in the alternative program as a direct result of the decision of the suspension hearing officer.

Throughout the eighth grade year, the student's mother embraced and supported the alternative program. She realized their way was obviously not working and that possibly their child did need alternative methods to be successful in school. She assumed a partnership with the staff and the school. The father was never able to embrace or support the program, but did make a conscious decision not to sabotage it. He simply remained neutral, resisting opportunities to oppose the constructs he did not favor. With his mother's support and his father's lack of hindrance to the program their son flourished. His success was phenomenal, accomplishing exemplary achievement, the highest category, on the state math and reading assessments. He entered the traditional high school as a freshman, taking advantage of the continued academic support offered by the alternative program. He is currently enjoying academic success and is on target to graduate from high school.

Six of eight parents summed up the importance of their children completing the alternative education program by stating that they not only believed their children would have failed to complete high school, but, most likely, would have wound up in trouble with the law and a possibility of incarceration.

Parent communication on what influence family involvement plays in program completion:

1. There were some opportunities for family involvement, pretty much what was offered at the traditional high school. I think the requirement of regular attendance was the most important tactic to involve parents and to increase the likelihood of program completion. Getting him there most every day was my biggest contribution to his success.

2. The school conducted the normal things like; parent/teacher conferences and open house. They would communicate when necessary. They were especially good to call if my son was absent. Sometimes I would not know he was not at school. Attendance is important for all students but high school students in a last chance program have to be there to finish.

3. I received communication by phone, mail and email. They sent home progress reports regularly. We supported our son and made sure he got there every day. I felt like that was the main part of the family involvement. He was the one who kept up with the work and got it done. We just made sure he attended.

4. Family meetings, parent classes, conferences, family meals, home visits, daily communication sheets, phone calls, and emails are just a few of the many ways the alternative school involved me in my child's education. All of that forced me to be more involved with my child and his education. That level of involvement made us closer and helped me support him and the school through completion of the program.

5. Teachers at the alternative school used every opportunity to form a strong alliance between family, student, and school. A united team is much more likely to achieve their goal. In our case it did just that.

6. We have always loved our children and supported them in school. Sometimes we just did not know what sort of support to provide. At the new school they led us through the sort of involvements and support necessary for our child to be successful. We were willing. We just needed direction.

7. I have raised my son without his mother since he was six. I have always been involved with him and his schooling. The alternative school just provided many more

opportunities for family involvement and I took advantage of all of them. There was better communication from the alternative school. The family involvement was just another piece to the puzzle of getting my son through the program and helping him to be successful in high school.

8. There were plenty of opportunities for parental involvement at the middle school program. I am a single mom and work many hours but I have always been involved with my son's education. I think the team approach established by the alternative school was very important to program completion. I knew a few of the parents who fought the teachers and the program. Those parents did not join forces with what the teachers were trying to do for their child. It slowed their progress. Some of them did not make it through.

How does social/emotional support influence successful program completion?

Six of the eight parent participants feel that social and emotional support is important to achieving program completion. Middle school parents support the weekly counseling sessions offered by the local mental health organization and required for all students within the program. Many parents of those in this program seek individual and family counseling on a regular basis. These sessions address the anger, aggression, and depression issues so common in the lives of the at-risk student.

Most of the parents do not fully understand why their children are experiencing difficulties in school. Most do not understand the social and emotional issues they begin to experience as they enter into puberty. Inability to understand the school and social/emotional difficulties leaves the parents frustrated and helpless. The counseling and social/emotional

assistance is a welcome relief as they witness their child effectively coping with school and personal life.

High school parents agree with staff members that mental health agencies, rehabilitation programs, and other outside resources should be integrated into the high school alternative program. Consensus among those interviewed is that by employing these agencies, programs, and resources, the education program completion rate would rise.

Parent participant responses to how social/emotional support helped their children to program completion:

1. My grandson needed more emotional support than the school was able to offer. The teachers and the counselor helped him as much as they could. I wish the school could have helped us with some connection to the mental health agencies. Some students just need professional mental health counseling. I think the teaming of the school and the mental health agencies would increase the likelihood of more students completing the program.

2. The teachers and counselor were great with my son. They really cared about him and his success. Considering the small numbers, they had the time to devote to him and his behaviors. Teaching him how to interact appropriately and stay focused on his studies helped him to be successful.

3. My son would tell me that the teachers, counselor, administrator, and secretary all counseled the students when they needed it. He was one of those who did not need counseling so he did not take advantage of any. It was available for those who needed it and some of them really needed it to be successful.

4. At the middle school program they worked very hard to partner with the local mental health agency to ensure group counseling each week for all students and individual and family counseling if necessary. When you are so close to the problems or the issues or when you as the parent have problems and issues of your own, it is sometimes hard to recognize the emotional needs of your children. With the help of school personnel to recognize certain problems and their ability to connect us with the right resources, good things happened for our child and our family.

5. I am so thankful for all the emotional support for my child. He needed everything they had to offer. We took of advantage of the group, individual, and family counseling. That made a huge difference in his success there.

6. My son was involved in the group counseling at school. Those sessions helped him to feel better about himself but what he really needed was the tutoring and individualized instruction from the teachers. For those with emotional struggles I see how the professional counseling made a difference in completing the program.

7. My son did have some emotional struggles with some of the things that happened before and after the divorce. The group counseling was helpful. The journaling helped him to express himself in ways he was not able to say out loud. When students would share some of their journal entries he would tell me that they have the same issues I have. Understanding that other people go through some of the same stuff made him feel a little better about his situation. The social/emotional support is just another program element that helps kids to be successful and better prepared for their futures.

8. Not only did the teachers arrange for professional mental health counseling but they focused on grooming, hygiene, behaviors, and multitude of things that help students to fit

in and relate socially. Some students were taken for haircuts, provided suitable and fitting clothing, and taught appropriate grooming practices. All those things help a student feel better about their self. Feeling good about yourself helps you to believe you can be successful.

What significance does the design and implementation of individually designed education plans play in successful program completion?

Design and implementation of an individually designed education plan is critical to program completion according to all parent participants. Instruction is geared to their learning level upon entrance to the program, allowing for academic success from the onset. It was much easier to get their kids out of bed and to the alternative school on time. Anxiety, fear of failure, and no longer feeling overwhelmed is replaced with comfort, relaxation, and a feeling that they can learn, keep up, and achieve.

"This is the sort of help we hoped for at the traditional school. Their intentions were good but my child's deficits were great, making it difficult to address his needs in a classroom of 28 students, and a school of 200," a parent explains. One more parent describes the dysfunctional family environment in which she and her child lived. Family matters, beyond her control, prevented her child from attending the traditional school regularly. Changing schools was not out of the ordinary. When the child was at school, he experienced anxiety over the safety of his mother and knowing he must return home to the same situations each evening. It was not long before she knew that her child was woefully behind academically. When the opportunity came to place him in the middle school alternative program with an individual learning plan designed and initiated specifically for him, it was a tremendous relief to that mother and that child.

Parent participants' answers to how an individually designed education plan impacted program completion:

1. My grandson was smart enough to do the work so he did not need a great deal of modifications. He just needed to be in an environment where he could get the work done. Designing his plan to include only the credits he needed to graduate cut through the fluff he felt he was required to do in the previous school. He was able to remain focused and believe he could complete this plan.

2. My son is pretty smart but his behaviors over the years left him behind in many areas. Creating and maintaining a plan that addressed his needs throughout the program helped him to be successful at the alternative school.

3. Our son experienced difficulties in learning and success in school from the beginning. He did not have learning disabilities, it just did not come easy for him and he was not motivated to put a great deal of effort into it. As time passed he wound up further and further behind and increasingly less motivated to try. In fact, he pretty much hated school and wanted to drop out. The streamlined plan, addressing just the credits he needed to graduate, modifications of the work, and the one-on-one instruction from the teacher helped him to complete the program.

4. My son did not need a lot of modification to his work. What he did need was one-on-one instruction to keep him on task and an instructional pace that helped him see he could complete the work on time. That type of an individual learning plan worked for him.

5. At the middle school alternative program I felt they really did evaluate the students upon arrival and create a plan for each student. My child was intelligent but his clowning around, seeking attention, and lack of focus put him behind academically. He did not

need a lot of academic modifications. Once they began to truly address the emotional issues he was able to catch up academically. The individual plans there were both academic and social/emotional.

6. It seemed like our son was always a grade level behind from the beginning. We requested testing for special education when he was in elementary. He did not qualify. The teachers tried to help him but it was never enough. After arriving at the alternative school they started teaching him at a level he could understand and at a pace he could handle. He needed the individual tutoring they were able to provide. He learned a lot in the time he was in that program. High school would have probably been a disaster for him if he had not had the help from the middle school program.

7. I had trouble in school. I was in special education classes in elementary but for some reason they did not put me in those classes in middle school and high school. I remember one teacher asked me if I was retarded. I was so thankful to know that the middle school alternative program made an individual plan to fit the needs of each student. My son needed extra help like I did. I wanted him to get that help, so he could get through middle school and high school. I dropped out as a result of no one helping me. Thankfully, this new alternative program was there for my son.

8. I do not believe my child lacked intelligence. I believe his inability to focus over the years left him behind. The alternative teachers provided instruction at his ability level and broke the work into small chunks so he could focus long enough to learn that amount of information. They even gave tests more often over smaller amounts of material. He could handle that. Those changes in instruction made him successful and helped him to really learn.

In summarizing the parent perspectives of alternative education and what worked for their children, I find that after parents experience their child in an alternative program, the majority tend to be much more positive and supportive of such a program. Table 4.4 below, provides a summary of parents' confirmation of key elements that aided program completion. Each parent makes it clear that none of the elements mentioned as necessary to successful program completion would be significant without staff dedication and individual concern for each student. Parents tend to believe that dedication and concern for student success create byproducts of some of the other key elements stated as necessary to successful program completion. For instance, without the dedication to alternative education and the students who enroll there, staff members might not be as likely to be highly-qualified instructors in these programs. It is their dedication and concern that move them to seek more schooling and training in order to teach and reach all students, no matter what the learning difficulty or obstacle that prevents them from success in the regular setting. Additional schooling and training help teachers to employ extensive methods in assessing students' competency levels, allowing for the design of appropriate individual learning plans for each student. Individual learning plans ensure that students experience academic success from the onset of enrollment. Increasing academic achievement leads to boosts in self-confidence and self-esteem. Once the student realizes some degree of academic success they begin to believe in their ability as well, many times personally raising the bar for what they expect of themselves. Parents feel that these instructors believe all students can learn and achieve to a high standard. There is no doubt, especially in the minds of these alternative education parents, that the exemplary instruction practices and high expectations promote increased student academic achievement. Additionally, the dedicated and caring teacher works to address personal issues as well. The teachers at both schools are

conscious of students' social and emotional needs. In addition to their own, staff members pursue the resources necessary and available to aid the student with needs that fall outside the realm of academics. One parent summed it up quite nicely: "She (the teacher) and the para-professional cared enough to do whatever it took to help my child succeed and complete the program. They literally pulled out all the stops and never gave up, even when he was struggling terribly. Their caring enough to do the very best for my child made all the difference in the world. He believes that he can make it through anything now. He even has plans for college."

Parent participants provide an interesting and deeper perspective to this study. The majority admit to having a negative attitude toward alternative programs prior to a child participating in one. They speak to lack of understanding of the actual workings of the alternative education program. They remark that they once considered alternative schools as "retard schools", places where schools send kids to get rid of their problems, and "juvie" (juvenile delinquent) schools. When placed in a position to consider their own child for such a program all those previous thoughts regarding alternative programs ran through their minds, along with the feeling of failure as a parent. In their perspective, at the time, enrolling their child in an alternative program was an admission of failure in their child's education.

For most, once involved in the program, their previous beliefs of alternative programs were redirected in a more positive light. They began to understand that alternative education is just that, an alternative way to learn. The epiphany came when they began to see their child succeed in school. They realized that there was nothing wrong with their child's mind or intellect all along. It was that traditional education was not designed to complement their child's learning style, there were too many obstacles interfering with their learning, or a combination of both.

Table 4.4

Parent Confirmation Supporting Key Elements to Program Completion

Key Elements	Confirmed Support	Total Responses
Small student-to-teacher ratio	8	8
Caring teachers/staff	8	8
Instill a belief in student and his/her abilities	8	8
Personal connection with student	8	8
Personal accountability/responsibility	6	8
Clear boundaries, rules, expectations	8	8
Positive rewards/incentives	5	8
Clear cut/consistent consequences and rewards	8	8
Relentless pursuit from teachers and other staff	6	8
Effective and supportive leadership/administration	6	8
Highly-qualified staff	8	8
Individually designed academic program	8	8
Academic pace	8	8
Academic rigor	4	8
Setting goals/expectations	6	8
Independent study with online curricular software	0	8
One-on one instruction/assistance	8	8
Hands-on instruction/projects	8	8
Connecting instruction/curriculum to its use/necessity	8	8

Table 4.4 (continued)

Parent Confirmation Supporting Key Elements to Program Completion

Key Elements	Confirmed Support	Total Responses
College/career/skills information and exposure	6	8
Flexible schedule	5	8
Mandatory attendance	6	8
Social and emotional support	6	8
Family involvement	5	8
Regular parental communication	7	8
Family support and assistance	7	8
Separation from traditional setting	5	8

Summary

Response Comparison of the Three Participant Groups

Parents, students, and staff strongly agree that small numbers of students in the program and a caring staff are key elements to impacting program completion. Staff members and parents view teachers with a strong grasp of the curriculum and effective instructional practices as significantly important to program completion, whereas, students credit teachers that truly care about the students as most important to successful completion of the alternative program. All three groups conclude that the academic pace was more appropriate at the alternative school. According to the students, parents, and staff, the direct, intentional pace and the individual learning plan are, in part, responsible to instilling self-confidence in the student. Slowing the academic pace and designing instruction to the individual help students realize that they are capable of achieving and succeeding academically. All three groups remark that the work is reduced to smaller, more manageable segments, once again, providing the student the confidence to undertake the tasks to completion.

The high school program involved in this study has met with budget cuts as many educational institutions across the country have experienced. Those cuts have resulted in the reduction of teaching staff, thus moving to an on-line, prescriptive learning program for all instruction and evaluation. All but one staff member, all students, and parents interviewed were strongly against this type of program as an effective method to teach at-risk students. A program such as this totally removes the human element from the equation and creates what several teachers referred to as a diploma factory, not alternative education.

A teacher that cares is the overwhelming number one response from all participant groups as the most important element to successful program completion. The teachers employed at the two

alternative programs care enough to do whatever it takes to ensure continual academic progress. These same teachers remain dedicated in their efforts to encourage and bring every student to their academic potential. Students reveal that a few teachers cared about them and their progress in the traditional school but not to the level of the alternative education instructor. Participants did acknowledge that the larger student numbers in the regular setting have an impact on the amount of attention the teacher is able to invest in each individual student. Respondents believe the teachers in these alternative programs possess unique, caring qualities nonexistent in many of the teachers encountered in the regular setting.

Responses of all three participant groups not only reveal that caring, dedicated teachers are the most important element to impacting student success, but that caring, dedicated teachers are the foundation for achieving four of the five remaining program elements stated as necessary for program completion. Respondents share that the caring teacher observes and realizes when there are social and emotional issues. They respond with counseling, comfort, seeking resources, and continued support for the student. The caring teacher understands the importance of family involvement and design opportunities for parents and family members to get involved. Caring, alternative education teachers know that at-risk students struggle with the instructional program and pace while attending the traditional school. Alternative education teachers care enough to evaluate each student's academic level so that an individual instruction plan may be designed and implemented at a pace manageable for the student. By caring enough to invest the time in the individual learning plan and by issuing daily reassurance and specific praise, teachers help students establish degrees of academic success. Academic success leads to hope and a sense of accomplishment. Hope and beginning to believe in their ability to succeed develops self-efficacy. Self-confidence is fundamental to program completion.

The remaining program element, small student-to-teacher ratio, is established by school district regulations, making it the only program element stated in this study as important for alternative education program completion that is not directly under the control of the caring teacher. Small student-to-teacher ratio allows the caring teacher the ability to accomplish many of the program elements stated as critical to program completion, but the teacher does not have authority over the numbers of students or staff members within the program.

Student Journals

Daily journals expose candid writings of inner-most feelings, personal experiences, and in-depth thoughts of the adolescents enrolled in the alternative middle school. The students seem to welcome this activity as an opportunity to unload uncomfortable issues at home; speak to their moods, likes and dislikes; and describe their feelings of anger, hurt, resentment, abandonment, and abuse. Often times, students record their own inappropriate behaviors, conversations, and conflicts. The journaling seems to serve as an avenue for self-cleansing, confession, or self-reporting. Much of the time the entry includes a reflection of the incident and how they can better handle the situation. Students write of the safety and comfort of the structure of their days. As their personal lives spin wildly out of control, they write that they can count on the school and staff members to be steady, reliable and constant. Future plans and goals are shared, along with fun times with family, friends and activities at school, many times revealing just how much the alternative placement is making a difference in their personal and academic lives.

Examination of the available student journals of previous alternative education middle school students divulges numerous themes mirroring the participant responses from the interview conversations. Students seem to thrive in the classroom setting with smaller numbers of students. A relaxed atmosphere, individual learning plan and moderate academic pace initiate a sense of

relief from the demands that weighed so heavily upon them in the traditional school. Students remark that there are fewer surprises given the regularity of the schedule and the clear-cut guidelines and expectations.

Middle level students enjoy a daily reward system and immediate feedback, both for behaviors and academics. Earning points that turn into cash seems to be a motivator to all students in this program. Statements in their journals disclose how they are making themselves more aware of the bad behaviors or impulsivity that might cause them to lose points, thus lose money to apply to their account. Many of the students have a particular item they are saving for, so they work hard to avoid behaviors that would cause them to lose daily points. Immediate feedback to academic performance is divulged as one of the several reasons they are able to perform better in their studies.

One of the backbones of the middle school alternative program is that of natural, life consequences for misbehaviors and discipline issues. The writings speak to particular incidents of misconduct, the consequences for misconduct, their displeasure with the consequence, and how the particular consequence impacts them to think prior to future impulsivity for any inappropriate actions. One student wrote,

I was very angry at Billy (not the real name of the student) for cheating at the board game we were playing together, so I punched him. Along with a written and face-to-face apology to Billy, Billy's parents, my teacher, and my principal, I lost daily points and had to clean out school busses all day while the other students went to camp and rode horses. I really did not like losing points, the hard work, and missing out on horseback riding at camp. I know that in the future I will think about cleaning those buses and missing out on

all the fun. I know I will not allow my anger to cause me to punch someone to solve my problems.

Another student reveals how the traditional school consequences did not impact him to make a change in his behavior. The loss of daily points, money, and fun, not to mention the manual labor while attending the alternative school, had an enormous influence on the way he approached new situations and circumstances.

Over time the students' entries expose a general sense of emotional well-being. Journal entries reflect self-efficacy and a confidence in their abilities to be successful in school. Realizations are reported as to the absence of being overwhelmed with the academic pace and that other students, teachers, and their parents are beginning to enjoy them and like them as individuals.

Table 4.5

Evidence from Student Journals Confirming Support of Key Elements for Program Completion

Program Elements	Confirmed Support	Total Journals
Caring and committed teachers	32	32
Highly-qualified staff	6	32
Teachers relentless in pursuit of student progress	30	32
Personal connection with staff	32	32
Family involvement	21	32
Instilled a belief in me and my abilities	32	32
Setting goals/ high expectations	26	32
Small student-to-teacher ratio	32	32
Social and emotional support	27	32
Individual academic plan	30	32
Connecting instruction/curriculum to practical use	26	32
Hands-on instruction/projects	17	32
College/career information and exposure	14	32

Observations

Obtrusive and unobtrusive observations were conducted over the 2009 to 2010 school year. The in-depth interviews tell a story of students who try to fit their square lives into the round hole of traditional schooling, how they struggle and fail miserably in an environment they cannot adapt to, much less be successful in. The field notes from the observations of these students in attendance at the alternative programs paint a different picture entirely. Students flourish in the small, safe, comfortable setting. First and foremost, it is evident that the staff is there for one reason: they care about children. I saw teachers delay instruction of all students in order to move to one-on-one instruction with a struggling student. Teachers know the students so well that they seem to possess a sixth-sense in regard to their moods and behaviors on any particular day. I regularly witnessed teachers taking students aside for a brief counseling session and quiet time so they might get control enough to get back on task.

Each morning at the middle level alternative school the students spend time writing in their journals as the first order of the day. Upon conclusion of the journal entries the teachers allow time for sharing. Students have the opportunity to share from their current journal entry if they so desire. It was surprising to witness students willing to share intimate details of their personal lives in this small group setting. Students' voluntary participation in this activity supports their remarks from the interviews as to how comfortable they are in their new environment. Not only did this endeavor appear to be comfortable, it almost seems therapeutic for those who elect to contribute.

When new students are enrolled staff members evaluate their transcripts and initiate appropriate assessments in order to design an academic plan for each student. Teachers teach the mandated curriculum but continually modify assignments, initiate a variety of instructional aides,

and re-teach concepts when the assessment reveals a lack of understanding. I observe students comfortable in the academic climate, attending to the instruction, asking questions, and remaining on task. A young man raises his hand and asks a question. He shares with his teacher that he cannot believe he is asking a question in class. He would never have asked questions in the regular school setting for fear of looking dumb.

Teachers in each program are highly-qualified instructors and exceptionally competent in their abilities to work with the at-risk teen. Instructors make it clear to the students that they choose to work in the alternative setting. Not a single staff member at either alternative school was placed or reassigned there. All applied for the positions, with some sharing that it had been a long-time goal to work in such a setting.

Students enrolled in the high school alternative program live a difficult life. Some are out on their own making, their own ways without any assistance from family or other adults. Some who live at home are in actuality on their own. They work to provide their basic needs with the exception of a roof over their heads. They manage to get to and from school and work, provide their own meals, and do their own laundry. The responsibilities assumed by the students make it difficult for them to get to school on time, be well rested, and to complete any homework assignments. A few observations find students falling asleep, unable to keep their eyes open or their brains on task. Their current lives and their pasts instill a moodiness and anger on certain days. Those days, if they do attend, are difficult for the students and the staff. More counseling occurs than instruction. One teacher says, "Some days instruction and learning are not the priority, I take them where they are that day and show them that I care. Much of the time they just want an adult to care about them and understand how hard they have it."

Table 4.6 reveals evidence of actual observations confirming the implementation of the elements students, teachers, and parents stated that were key to successful program completion at both programs.

Table 4.6

Evidence from Observations Confirming Support of Key Elements for Program Completion

Key Elements	Confirmed Support	Total Observations
Caring and committed teachers	6	6
Highly-qualified staff	6	6
Teachers relentless in pursuit of student progress	6	6
Personal connection with staff	6	6
Family involvement	3	6
Instilled a belief in me and my abilities	6	6
Setting goals/ high expectations	4	6
Small student-to-teacher ratio	6	6
Social and emotional support	6	6
Individual academic plan	6	6
Connecting instruction/curriculum to practical use	4	6
Hands-on instruction/projects	4	6
College/career information and exposure	2	6

Summary

Student Journals and Observations

Journal writings and observations parallel the student responses from the interviews. Writings and classroom behaviors reveal students relaxed in a small school setting where they feel comfortable in their environment, with a manageable pace of the academic assignments, and with caring staff members. The dogged pursuit of students from staff members is evident upon each observation. Teachers and paraprofessionals consistently expect and receive the very best the student has to give. Many times their very best is evident only after multiple attempts of the assignment at hand. Average or just "good enough" are not acceptable from the teachers in the two alternative schools observed. As time progresses and the students rise to the high expectations of their teachers, they begin to exude a self-confidence that is apparent from their journal entries and the classroom observations.

Most of the students still experience struggles in their personal lives but their journals and classroom behaviors disclose a sense of peace and safety at school. They write and speak to ways the staff and other students help them to cope with issues at home. They tell of how happy they are to go to school because they can count on school to be a place where they can excel, where they can be comfortable with students who share similar backgrounds, where the teachers understand what they are going through and where counsel and support are consistently available.

It is clear that the students whose journals were examined and those who were observed in the alternative setting are not what some would refer to as "model students". Alternative education does not claim to be the panacea for all that ails the at-risk youth. It does promote a sound plan to assist at-risk students to academic success and strategies to cope with

social/emotional issues. Writings and observations disclose just that. Students involved in these programs are still at-risk of struggles and obstacles in their lives but alternative education did assist them to thrive in an environment that previously proved so disastrous. Throughout the examination of student journals and the personal observations I find repeated evidence to support the participant interview responses of the six program elements stated as most likely to impact program completion.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

Major Themes that Support Program Completion

Several key aspects support program completion throughout the data gathered in this study. These aspects align under one or more of three significant program components; the student, the staff member, and the program itself.

Parents, staff members, and students felt that safety, comfort, and a sense of belonging were critical at the onset and throughout the enrollment of the program. Without a sense of safety, comfort and belonging, the students would have found it difficult if not impossible to remain in the program, let alone complete it.

Once basic human needs were met the students were able to relax and pursue the scholastic endeavors. As they felt safe and comfortable, the students were able to trust their teachers and pursue the work expected of them. Since the work was broken into smaller chunks and teachers offered one-on-one tutoring, the students gained self-confidence and a belief that they could meet the expectations of the curriculum. Pride in their achievements grew, along with the hope that program completion was a real possibility.

Program design accounts for a major area responsible for successful program completion. Parents, staff members, and students repeated numerous elements in the design of their respective programs that proved critical to success within the program.

Small enrollment numbers and highly-qualified staff members topped the list from all three participant groups. The smaller numbers allowed for the meeting of the basic human needs of safety, comfort, and a sense of belonging, while allowing extended opportunities for one-on-one instruction. When probed as to the importance of a highly-qualified staff for program completion, parents and staff members valued that much more highly than did the students. As the interviews progressed, many of the aspects the students revealed as important to their success were attributes of a highly-qualified instructor. Students said that an appropriate assessment of their academic aptitude at the onset of the program was helpful in the development of a learning plan that focused on an academic structure and pace that fit their academic capabilities. Individualized learning plans allow opportunity for successful completion of assignments and positive achievement on exams. Students stated that teachers designing lessons with a hands-on approach made learning and retention easier. Several students may not have replied that the highly-qualified instructor was critical to their completion of the program but when stating teacher attributes crucial to their success they were, in essence, describing a highly-qualified instructor.

Social and emotional support was rated important to program completion by all participants. Students, parents, and staff members understand the multitude of social and emotional issues that plague at-risk teens. The middle school program engaged outside sources to create a solid program of social and emotional support. It was viewed as key element to that program. The high school program did not involve outside agencies for therapy or counseling.

Those participating in that program felt that pursuing additional mental health programs would be beneficial to program completion.

Once again, the middle school program involved more in-depth family buy-in & support than did the high school program. Positive family buy-in and support of the program and the students in the program were viewed as important to program completion at the middle level, with the high school participants believing that pursuit of a larger degree of family involvement within their program could have led to a greater number of program completers.

The most repeated and significant program element critical to completing the alternative education program was that of caring teachers and how they were able to instill self-confidence in their students. They are educators who choose to work in alternative programs, involving their selves personally with each student. The staff member most likely to impact program completion is one who pursues extended education and training in order to be better equipped at modifying and adapting instruction, while relating the instruction to real-life necessity and use. Teachers who remain patient, encouraging, celebrating, instilling a belief in the students' abilities, and continually in relentless pursuit of academic success are the foundation to program completion for the at-risk teen.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The goal of this study was to examine the perceptions of alternative education course completers, parents, and alternative education staff members regarding the elements that contributed to students' successful completion of the program in two rural southeast Kansas alternative education schools. Specifically, I interviewed 12 previous alternative education students, eight parents of those students, and 10 alternative education staff members. During the 2009-2010 school year, I conducted and completed field notes from three obtrusive and three unobtrusive observations at each school. All observations lasted 30 to 60 minutes. During the same school year, I examined and completed memos of 32 middle school alternative education student journals. Using information gained from the review of the literature, I hypothesized that the participants' perceptions as to the critical elements leading to program completion would be; caring and committed teachers, instilling student self-efficacy, a small student-to-teacher ratio, family involvement, social and emotional support, and an individually designed learning plan.

Six research questions guided the study: (1) How do instructors and staff members influence successful program completion?; (2) How does student self-efficacy influence successful program completion?; (3) How does small student-to-teacher ratio influence successful program completion?; (4) What influence does family involvement play in successful program completion?; (5) How does social/emotional support influence successful program completion?; and (6) What significance does the design and implementation of individually designed education plans play in successful program completion?

The study revealed the following findings for the six research questions:

Findings for research question 1: How do instructors and staff members influence successful program completion?

1. Caring and committed staff members are the key element shared by all participant groups as critical to successful program completion.

2. The student participant group stated that it was not just the act of staff members caring for them in the sense that they liked them but caring in the sense of a willingness to stay the course to see them through to program completion.

3. Staff members all agree that the first and foremost element to successful program completion is to believe in the alternative education process and the students that fill their classrooms.

4. Caring and committed staff members develop positive relationships with students and family.

5. Caring and committed staff members are tireless and relentless in pursuit of student achievement and program completion.

6. Highly-qualified staff members develop effective individual learning plans, designing the pace and the instruction to the individual ability and learning style.

7. Holding high expectations for all students promotes program completion.

8. Parents considered highly-qualified staff members as more likely to impact program completion than the students did.

Findings for research question 2: How does student self-efficacy influence successful program completion?

1. The belief that you are incapable of learning or effectively completing the curriculum is the biggest obstacle to program completion.

2. Implementation of an appropriately designed individual learning plan develops self-efficacy and leads to program completion.

3. Adjusting the academic pace to the appropriate level for each student assists the student to successful assignment completion. Completing assignments correctly and on time helps students to believe in their academic ability. Realizing daily success develops self-confidence.

4. Alternative education teachers believe in the students and their ability to successfully complete the program.

5. Alternative education teachers instill hope in their students. Hope helps students to stay the course through completion of the program.

Findings for research question 3: How does small student-to-teacher ratio influence successful program completion?

1. The smaller setting is more comfortable, safe, and orderly. Comfort and safety are two of the basic physiological needs that must be met in order for learning to occur.

2. Smaller numbers of students allows teachers more opportunity for one-on-one attention and instruction. Individualized attention and instruction are more likely to assist students to program completion.

3. Smaller numbers creates a less intimidating environment and makes it easier to ask and answer questions in class. Once students begin to ask questions, they receive more individual feedback. Understanding, progress, and the likelihood of program completion increases.

4. Smaller numbers allow a greater opportunity for student and teacher relationships to develop. A positive student-to-teacher relationship increases student self-efficacy and the likelihood of program completion.

Findings for research question 4: What influence does family involvement play in successful program completion?

1. At the middle level, appropriate, supportive family involvement is critical to program completion.

2. At the high school level, family involvement is very limited. Students and teachers understand that the responsibility for program completion lies with them.

3. Non-supportive or antagonistic family involvement inhibits progress and/or reduces the likelihood of program completion.

Findings for research question 5: How does social/emotional support influence successful program completion?

1. Social/emotional support addresses Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). Certain basic needs must be met prior to the occurrence of learning. Needs of safety and security are found in the physiological tier of basic needs. Both alternative programs attended to the students' safety and security needs from the onset of enrollment.

2. Students stated that daily journaling at the middle school program was a therapeutic experience for them, allowing them to unload their minds of troubling thoughts or circumstances, while mindfully processing the issues to develop a sense of peace and comfort in preparation for the academic day.

3. Social interaction and appropriate conduct are stressed at the middle school program with rewards for positive social behavior. All participants groups involved in the middle level

program believe this practice trains and reinforces appropriate conduct in real life situations.

4. Middle school program teachers, students, and parents feel that regular internal and external social/emotional support produces a more balanced individual and increases the likelihood of program completion.

Students, parents, and especially teachers at the high school program, believe that utilization of more outside resources for social/emotional support would increase greater chances of program completion. High school teachers in the alternative program are expected to address the academic instructions as well as the social/emotional issues.

Findings for research question 6: What significance does the design and implementations of an individually-designed education plan play in successful program completion?

1. An individual learning plan ensures effective assessment of academic level and ability at the onset of the program.

2. Students do not become overwhelmed when instruction and pace are geared to their ability levels. Experiencing daily success is critical to successful program completion.

3. An individual learning plan designed with appropriate academic pace is key to avoiding overwhelmed feelings and critical to successful completion of assignments and the program.

In answering the research questions, the study revealed three major themes related to the positive influence on alternative education program completion in two rural southeast Kansas alternative schools. In this chapter, I will discuss the findings according to the major themes and make recommendations for alternative program design and alternative education staff characteristics to consider when hiring and formally evaluating.

Summary of the Findings into Major Themes

Initially, I thought this study would be primarily descriptive, explaining what program elements students, parents, and teachers involved in the two alternative education programs perceived to be critical to successful program completion. I was not surprised by the specific program elements mentioned as important to program completion and quickly realized how the program elements aligned with those stated in the literature. The degree of importance all participants placed on teacher/student relationships and how those relationships worked to move students to successful program completion was an added finding.

After examining the interviews, field notes of the observations from the two rural alternative schools in southeast Kansas, and the journal writings from the alternative middle school, I divided the findings into three major themes: caring and committed teachers are the most important reason for successful program completion, instilling hope is critical to successful program completion, and teachers' relentless pursuit promotes successful program completion. Staff members are the focus of the major themes. Responses from all three participant groups repeatedly concluded that program completion was all about the staff member and the characteristics that lie within that individual.

Caring and committed teachers promote successful program completion

Teaching, in general, requires more than the ability to instill knowledge. Caring and commitment are regularly echoed in the teaching field as critical qualities of the effective teacher (Payne, 2005). Caring and commitment of the alternative school teachers revealed a deeper, broader foundation than simply liking the students and enjoying helping them succeed. Countless demonstrations of caring and commitment were revealed in the conversations with the participants.

Teachers at the alternative programs pursued extended schooling and training, making them better equipped to instruct at varied learning levels, modify instruction, and gain a deeper grasp of the core content. Their assistance transcended beyond the classroom. Much of the time they would provide, counseling, resources, consolation, guidance, and sometimes just an ear to listen. Instructors and staff members truly believed that all students could learn, understanding that they do not all learn in the same way or within the same time frame. Teachers assume a large role in the student learning process, taking ownership of their students' learning, and understanding that merely teaching does not equate to learning. Staff members were a constant source of encouragement, recognizing and celebrating achievement as it occurred. Program completion was realized by these students because teachers were willing to do whatever it took and tackle any obstacle, while never giving up or giving in. These are the actions and behaviors the students and parents used to define and embody the caring and committed teacher.

John C. Maxwell, author of *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (1998) has echoed the trait of caring throughout his writings and workshops on leading people and organizations to the successful achievement of their goals. His quote and leadership mantra, "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." sums up the responses related to the first major theme of the findings. Maxwell understands, as do the participants in this study, it is all about relationships; whether you are leading adults in an organization or teaching an at-risk student in an alternative school, "Leadership is not about titles, positions, or flowcharts. It is about one life influencing another" (Maxwell, 1998).

Instilling hope promotes successful program completion

Many of the students and parents interviewed felt utterly hopeless about education prior to the alternative program. They were convinced of an inability to be successful in school. Without

hope they felt lost and that there was no need to try. It seemed to them that failure in school was the expectation and ultimately their outcome.

Teachers at the alternative programs believed in the students as individuals. They believed every student could learn and successfully complete the program. Encouragement was conveyed constantly, reminding the students that their academic career became broken over time and that it would take time to repair it. Teachers helped students to see that they were beside them for the long haul. The students simply needed to exhibit the critical components of hope; patience, a positive attitude, belief in their own abilities, and perseverance.

Utilizing specific instructional methods and practices and believing in their students' abilities instilled hope. Work was broken into smaller chunks to avoid the student becoming overwhelmed, at the same time, allowing opportunity for successful completion of assignments. As the small successes occurred, students began to believe that they could complete the work. Students gained confidence to tackle larger assignments once they realized they could accomplish the smaller tasks.

Students landing in the two alternative programs stopped believing in their ability to be successful in school sometime prior to entering the alternative program, all the while believing that their parents, teachers, and classmates felt the same way. Hope was lost. They had difficulty understanding the meaning of hope, let alone how it could be gained. Alternative program teachers were able to lead them on the journey to hope and beyond.

Parents were also vocal as to the vast differences between the alternative education teacher and their ability to teach, reach, and instill hope in their children, as opposed to their experiences with the teachers in the traditional setting. Many of the parents became emotional when they spoke to how miserable their children were in their previous school and how they witnessed

them become confident, successful students with the love and support of their teachers in the alternative program.

Staff members' relentless pursuit of student progress promotes program completion

Most at-risk students, specifically the individuals interviewed in this study, have experienced family and educators who have given up on them and their ability to be successful in school. Repeated interventions and repeated failures have led family and educators to a sense of frustration and exhaustion, not knowing what to do, or where to turn to for help. Most of the students interviewed did not feel they were capable of completing the program on their own, especially when they first arrived at the alternative school. Teachers' relentless pursuit of student progress was new and necessary. The students had never experienced the dedication and determination of the staff members within these programs. The at-risk teachers working in the two alternative programs understood and were willing to stay the course to program completion with each student, working in the trenches every day, helping the student to understand that they would never give up helping them to achieve their goal.

Strengths of the Findings

The strengths of the findings of this study of alternative education completers lie in the words, observations, and successes of former students in two southeast Kansas alternative schools. Interviews, observations, and journals of actual student completers yield information that support program practices and staff characteristics that are likely to assist students in successful completion of an alternative education program. Additionally, information shared from seasoned, alternative education teachers and the parents of these students replicated and supported the responses of the students.

The findings also allow the reader a degree of transferability in that the alternative school elements revealed as primarily responsible for program completion were all sound educational practices, program structures, and teacher characteristics for any type of academic system. Educators could easily model and implement the practices, structures, and characteristics in their own schools, especially with struggling and at-risk students enrolled in the classrooms of the traditional school setting.

Since the study is grounded in the phenomenological philosophy of structures of consciousness experienced from the first-person point of view of a particular group of alternative education completers and further embedded in the critical theory paradigm the findings are not simply important for new knowledge. The findings may also advocate and facilitate academic and social change in the alternative school setting. The effective education elements shared by successful young adults who completed an alternative education program could support the construction of guiding principles for rural alternative education programs in southeast Kansas.

Results Consistent with Literature in Literature Review

The review of the literature for this study revealed five major components as critical to student achievement and alternative education program completion: a caring and committed staff, small student-to-teacher ratio, social and emotional support, family involvement, and individually designed education plans.

Results from this study mirrored the components found in the research as most likely to impact student achievement and program completion. Research in the literature review and the results from this study establish the hiring and retaining of caring and committed staff members as a critical element to successful student achievement and alternative education program completion.

In line with the results of this study, Barr and Parrett (1997), sum up the research by revealing that the alternative school setting establishes an intimate environment that allows teachers who care deeply to bond and form relationships with their students. When at-risk students are involved with teachers who care about them, teachers that require quality work, and teachers that challenge students to achieve to the highest standards, substantial learning occurs. Students who experience substantial learning are more likely to complete their program.

<div align="center">Limitations of the Findings</div>

The study encompassed only two, small alternative education schools, with limited participant numbers of 12 student completers, eight parents, and 10 alternative education staff members. As reported in Chapter III, several attempts were made to secure more participants. The at-risk population proved to be difficult for tracking current residences. Once located, response was poor. As also mentioned in Chapter III, several participants failed to respond to the inquiries to participate until a monetary offering was made available.

Generalizability of the findings is limited, at best. The qualitative versus quantitative findings, small numbers of participants, and the involvement of only two alternative schools would not support the generalizing of the findings to broad educational arenas. In contrast, as related in the strengths of the study section, the findings in the areas of educational practices, program elements, and teacher characteristics are valid foundations for any sound and successful academic organization.

<div align="center">Recommendations for Future Research</div>

Mending Wall (1914), a poem written by Robert Frost at the turn of the 20th century, speaks to the custom of neighbors meeting each spring to walk the fence line that divide their properties. The neighbors discuss the damages incurred to the fence from the previous winter.

From that communication, neighbors reach consensus on an action plan to repair the damages and restore the fence to good condition. Walking the fence line with alternative education completers could provide the extended research necessary to identifying the key elements to academic success and program completion. Seeking input from alternative education students, their parents, and teachers as to the central components leading to program completion may repair and restore at-risk teens. That input could support the design and implementation of effective alternative programs and establish staff hiring requirements. Greater opportunity of more students successfully completing alternative education programs could be realized.

Research

More studies, especially case studies and interviews of students completing programs, could provide the communication necessary to educators for design and development of new alternative education programs. National input from students completing alternative programs is needed to provide extensive data in all areas of alternative programs, including, but not limited to: (1) facilities; (2) enrollment size; (3) support systems; (4) staff hiring requirements; (5) program policies and procedures; (6) curriculum; (7) instructional practices; (8) academic assessment; (9) individual educational plans; and (10) funding.

A better means of tracking students completing alternative programs must be implemented in order to gather extensive data needed to support effective change. Locating students once they have concluded an alternative program is difficult. These students hold the keys to better program design. It is the inability to locate and get them involved in a study once they have completed their program and moved onto job, college, or skills training that prove to be the obstacle to gathering accurate data. So much can be learned from these individuals as we strive to create and implement effective alternative education systems.

Research in the area of teacher/student learning as opposed to online learning would be insightful to the future of either type of program. Participants from this study strongly opposed online learning for the vast majority of at-risk teens. Only 2 of 12 students favored online learning instead of teacher-to-student instruction, with all 8 parents feeling that online learning was a negative substitute. Staff members were equally opposed to online learning, only two of ten staff members felt that online learning was as beneficial, or better than, teacher instruction.

Practice

The current trend in alternative education is online learning programs. All participants reiterate that learning is more than the delivery of information. Learning is about relationships, involvement, and engagement between the teacher and the student. Teacher driven classrooms are critical to learning and program completion. The comfort level of interaction and involvement with a live person is more likely to impact learning, especially program completion. Online learning programs require a great deal of self-motivation and self-direction, placing the student in charge of their own learning. Most at-risk teens struggle to motivate themselves and lack the self-confidence needed to be in charge of their own learning. Technology has created a shift within the parameters of the learning opportunities available to students, but can a shift away from the classroom teacher and their relationships with students be supported, especially in the case of the at-risk teen?

Policy

The most important task in any organization is the hiring and retention of highly-qualified, talented, and skilled personnel. Successful organizations employ job-specific interview procedures in order to select the most knowledgeable, skilled, and talented individual for each position opening. Considering the results of this study and the magnitude to which caring and

committed teachers impacted academic success and program completion, policies and procedures for hiring highly-qualified, specifically skilled, and talented staff members should be the priority for alternative education programs. Numerous hiring programs are available to organizations and education systems. Many include interview content and procedures specific to the hiring of highly-qualified teachers. Since the 1950s, The Gallup Organization (1996) has been gathering knowledge, skill, and talent-specific attributes to match compatibilities to particular employment positions. Information from the polls has been used to formulate job-specific interview questions in the areas of: belief, pride, responsibility, team, empathy, gestalt, kinesthetic, and mastery. The Gallup organization believes that these eight themes are critical to establishing knowledge, skills, and talents specific to the position in question. Using the responses of alternative education program completers, better interview criteria and tools can be constructed in order to hire teachers who are qualified and willing to work with the at-risk teen.

Academic progress is limited when teachers are placed or reassigned to alternative education positions without their consent or desire. In contrast, teachers choosing and applying for positions in the area of alternative education realize positive academic gains with students. An aspect of alternative education that is frequently overlooked is the placement of staff with the appropriate mindset to engage with at-risk students. Bringing together teachers who share a common passion to assist and educate these youngsters increases the potential for student and school success. Most teachers value the prospect of teaching in a setting where colleagues share their educational philosophy. A teacher choosing to work with the at-risk teen is one of the major factors of increased student performance in the alternative setting as opposed to the traditional public school setting (Barr, & Parrett, 1997).

Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions of alternative education course completers, parents, and alternative education staff members as to the overall instructional elements critical to successful completion of the program in two rural southeast Kansas alternative education schools. Perceptions were gleaned through in-depth interviews, observations, and student journal records.
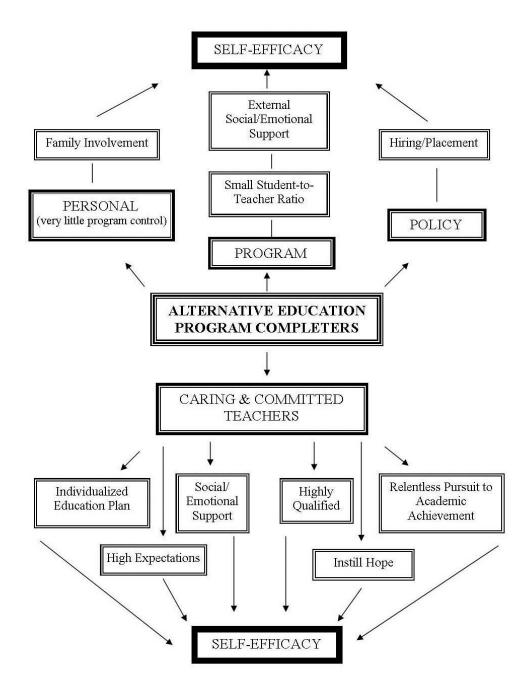
Staff members are the heart of the major themes. Responses from all three participant groups repeatedly concluded that program completion was all about the staff member and the characteristics that lie within that individual. Participant responses pertaining to the caring and committed teacher encompassed numerous attributes responsible for student success. Educators who choose to work in alternative programs and are willing to be involved personally with each student are caring and committed. Staff members, who pursue extended education, appropriately adapting and modifying instruction, while relating the instruction to practical use, are caring and committed. Teachers that are patient, while encouraging and instilling hope and a belief in the students' abilities, are caring and committed. Those who remain constant in the relentless pursuit of academic success, while maintaining a passion for learning and even greater passion for the student as an individual, are caring and committed teachers. Utilizing program completers' responses regarding teacher attributes effective to program completion, appropriate interview tools and hiring procedures may be employed to hire teachers with the knowledge, skill, and talents that lead to the hope and self-confidence needed to lead the at-risk teen to program completion.

Administrators and boards of education concerned with addressing the needs of at-risk teens may benefit from this study. In the teacher selection process, this study's findings may be

used to formulate or select interview instruments that reveal specific personal and instructional qualities necessary to impact program completion. Further, the findings may be of value for the creation of guiding principles for the effective design of alternative education programs and the implementation of effective educational strategies. Finally, the results may be used to simply raise awareness among the entire education community to the needs of the at-risk youth. When we take the opportunity to listen to young folks speak from their hearts and experiences we find they offer a perspective that truly resonates.

Below is a graphic representation of the overall findings from the study. The lower half of the graphic depicts the program elements found to be critical to program completion, with all roads leading to self-efficacy. As the study unfolded the attributes of caring and committed teachers resounded as the crucial component to program completion. One significant by-product of the attributes of the caring and committed staff members was the development of student self-efficacy. Results of the study reveal that student self-efficacy is the primary basis for program completion and in-turn is a result of program completion.

The upper portion of the graphic reveals the three areas the study discloses that necessitate attention for the design, implementation, and evaluation of an effective alternative education program. If designed appropriately, program, policy, and personal components of the school lead to the development of student self-efficacy as well. Students confident in their abilities are more likely to complete the program.

Figure 4.1 Representation of the Overall Findings

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APPENDIX A: Letter of Information

Date

Name of prospective participant

Street Address

City, State, Zip

Name of prospective participant:

I am a student at the University of Arkansas working on my Doctorate in Educational Leadership. I am conducting a research study entitled Alternative Education Completers: A Phenomenological Study. The purpose of the qualitative study will be to advocate for the educational and social/emotional needs of at-risk students and to develop a model design for alternative programs and program evaluation within the southeast Kansas area. Former alternative education students will be interviewed in order to determine their perception of the critical elements contributing to program completion.

I am interested in what you have to say. Very little research exists regarding actual input from alternative education students. I feel confident that by acquiring your input regarding your alternative education experiences that we may co-construct education programs that better serve and prepare students for program completion.

Your involvement in the study will require consent to participate in in-depth individual interviews. Your participation in this study is voluntary, if you choose not to participate or withdraw from the study at any time you may do so without penalty or loss of benefit to yourself. The results of the study may be published. No names or any identifying descriptors will be included in any of the published material. All data will be kept confidential to the extent allowed

by law and University policy. The data will be destroyed upon conclusion of the study. You will also receive copies of the data compilation and analysis.

This study poses no foreseeable risks to any of the participants. The creation of an effective alternative program model and evaluation instrument based on the experiences of alternative education students will be the probable benefits. The program design may be more likely to assist a greater number of future at-risk students to program completion in the southeast Kansas area.

In-depth individual interview sessions will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes with refreshments or meals provided during the sessions. I will personally conduct all interviews. I plan to employ audio recording in order to more accurately transcribe and interpret the dialog from each session.

Should you agree to participate in this study you will be contacted within the next few weeks regarding dates, times, and sites of interview sessions.

If you have questions or concerns about this study, you may contact Becky Murray, researcher, at (###) ###-####, or by email at _____or Dr. Carleton Holt, faculty advisor, at (479) 575-2492, or by email at cholt@uark.edu. For questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact Ro Windwalker, the University's Compliance Coordinator, at (479) 575-2208 or by email at irb@uark.edu.

Respectfully,

Becky L. Murray
Doctoral Student
Educational Administration
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, Arkansas

APPENDIX B: Informed Consent, Participant

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

INFORMED CONSENT: PERMISSION TO PARTICPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

I have read and understand the information and my role as participant in the research study to be

conducted by <u>Becky L. Murray</u> as a part of the requirements of the doctoral degree in

Educational Leadership at the University of Arkansas.

I hereby consent to participate in the study entitled Alternative Education Completers: A

Phenomenological Study.

Participant Signature

Date

Becky L. Murray
Doctoral Student
Educational Administration
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, Arkansas

APPENDIX C: Informed Consent, USD ###

INFORMED CONSENT: PERMISSION TO USE PREMISES, NAME, STUDENT

GENERATED DOCUMENTS, AND STUDENT RECORDS

<u>USD ### School District</u>

I hereby authorize <u>Becky L. Murray,</u> student at the University of Arkansas, to use the premises,

name, student generated documents, and student records to conduct a study entitled Alternative

Education Completers: A Phenomenological Study.

Signature:

Date:

Title: <u>Superintendent of Schools</u>

Facility: <u>USD ### Middle School</u>

APPENDIX D: Informed Consent USD ###

INFORMED CONSENT: PERMISSION TO USE PREMISES, NAME, STUDENT

GENERATED DOCUMENTS, AND STUDENT RECORDS

USD ### School District

I hereby authorize Becky L. Murray, student at the University of Arkansas, to use the premises,

name, student generated documents, and student records to conduct a study entitled Alternative

Education Completers: A Phenomenological Study.

Signature:

Date:

Title: Superintendent of Schools

Facility: USD ### High School Alternative School

APPENDIX E: Interview Guide, Student

To establish and maintain rapport and a sense of comfort with all participants the following questions were used at the onset and throughout each in-depth interview.

<u>Developing Rapport and Comfort Level</u>

Tell me a little about yourself.

Where did you grow up?

What schools did you attend prior to your alternative education experience?

What activities, involvements, jobs, etc. were you involved in while attending school?

What are some of your hobbies? What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

At what age or grade level did you enter the alternative program?

Would you care to share anything regarding your personal life? For example, spouse, significant other, children, etc.

Share with me what you feel to be your biggest strength. Has this always been a strength? If not, how would say that you developed this strength?

Share with me an area you feel you need to pursue for growth or improvement. What is your current plan in pursuit of this growth or improvement?

Tell me of a particular experience in the traditional school setting that you would like me know.

Tell me of a particular experience in the alternative school setting that you would like me to know.

Tell me of a particular personal experience that you would like me to know.

Share with me a time you tried and failed. How did you respond to the failure? How did that experience impact you?

What is something that very few people know about you?

Share with me something you have read lately? What did you gain from that reading?

What accomplishments in your life are you most proud of?

Share a brief overview of the events that led you to alternative education.

The next set of the interview questions were designed to gain information to support or disprove

the alternative education elements most frequently cited in the literature and stated in the

literature review of this study as effective alternative program elements.

Student-to-Teacher Ratio

Talk to me about the size of your school, students, teachers, facility, space, etc.

What did you like about the size of your school?

What did you dislike about the size of your school?

What degree of one-on-one instruction did you receive?

How did you feel when you were engaged in one-on-one instruction with your teachers?

How did the one-on-one instruction impact your learning?

Describe the alternative program you attended.

Social and Emotional Support

Describe the environment and culture in the alternative program you attended.

What were some of your conflicts or obstacles in traditional school?

What were some of your conflicts or obstacles in alternative school?

What sort of bullying or harassment did you endure in the traditional school setting?

What sort of bullying or harassment did you endure in the alternative school setting?

What sort of protocol was established for handling bullying/harassment issues in the alternative

setting?

What have been some things you found difficult to do in your personal life?

What support systems were in place to assist you with those difficulties?

How were your social or emotional needs addressed at the alternative program?

Talk to me about extended services at the alternative school?

What extended services did you take advantage of while at the alternative school? What impact or help, if any, did these services afford you as a student and as an individual?

What would you say was the single greatest obstacle for you to overcome in your personal life?

In what ways did alternative education assist you in overcoming personal obstacles?

Describe a challenging personal issue and how you dealt with it.

Were you able to use any strategies you learned in the alternative program to assist you with this challenging personal issue?

Describe a challenging work issue and how you dealt with it.

Were you able to use any strategies you learned in the alternative program to assist you with this challenging work issue?

Caring and Committed Staff

Talk to me about the instructors, counselors, administrators, etc. at the alternative school you attended. What would you like me to know about them?

What were some things you found difficult to do in the traditional and/or the alternative school?

How did your instructors assist you in those difficulties in either school setting?

How did you perceive your relationships with your teachers in the traditional school setting? In the alternative school setting?

If you did experience a difference in your relationships with your teachers in the traditional school versus the alternative school what, in your opinion, were the distinguishing differences?

How did you perceive your relationships with your administrators in the traditional school setting? In the alternative school setting?

If you did experience a difference in your relationships with the administrators in the traditional school versus the alternative school what, in your opinion, were the distinguishing differences?

What are your beliefs regarding student/teacher relationships?

What characteristics or traits make an effective teacher?

What characteristics or traits make an effective school?

Share with me what you feel about formal education.

State your feelings regarding formal education since you attended the alternative school?

<u>Family Involvement</u>

Talk to me about the amount and level of family involvement in the alternative program you attended.

Share with me the family members involved and the level to which they were involved in your alternative education?

How did the staff members work to involve your family your education?

Share with me how staff members strived to make family members feel welcome and comfortable at your alternative school and its functions.

Tell me about your parents' formal education.

How did your family impact your success, or lack of, while in the traditional school setting?

How did your family impact your success, or lack of, while in the alternative school setting?

What was your parent's attitude toward alternative education prior to your enrollment in such a program?

What is their current attitude toward alternative education?

<u>Individually Designed Education Plan</u>

Paint me a picture of a typical day in the alternative school?

Talk to me about the curriculum, daily schedule, technology, etc. at the alternative program you attended.

Was an individual education plan designed specifically for you and your needs? If so, describe the process of assessment and creating the plan. If not, how was instruction designed to meet your needs?

What personal goals set during alternative school have you achieved to date?

What were your thoughts or feelings regarding setting personal goals at that time in alternative school?

What are some short or long term goals you have set currently? What is your action plan to achieve those goals?

What would you say was the single greatest obstacle for you to overcome in the education setting?

In what ways did alternative education and your individual education plan assist you in completing your alternative education program?

If your alternative school would have been equipped with a one-way mirror and I would have been able to observe you in action at your school describe what I would have seen you doing and what might have been going on in the classroom.

Where do you wish to be and what do you wish to be doing 5 years from now?

What part do you believe goal setting and/or your individual education plan have played in your ability to complete your alternative program?

The final portion of the interview process was used to gain knowledge of the current status and/or future plans of each participant as well as general questions regarding the former students' perceptions of their alternative education experience and the impact of that experience to this point in their life.

<u>Wrap-up Questions</u>

Did you attend college or skills training? If yes to either, Where? How long? What degree, licensure, certification, qualification, etc?

Are you currently employed?

Are you employed in the field of your training or education?

If you pursued extended education, college, or skills training what were some of your conflicts or obstacles in that setting?

Since you completed the alternative education program could you share with me any educational elements that would have assisted you to completing your program more efficiently or effectively but were absent in the program you attended?

If you were asked to consider the three most significant elements in your alternative education experience most responsible for the successful completion of your alternative education program what would you tell me?

How would you picture your life now if you had not had the alternative education experience?

In your opinion, what are the key factors that led to successful completion of the alternative program?

APPENDIX F: Interview Guide, Parent

<u>Developing Rapport and Comfort Level</u>

Tell me a little about yourself:

- Where did you grow up?

- Where did you go to school?

- Explain your education experience?

Share with me what you feel is your child's greatest strength.

Has that always been a strength? If not, when did you begin to see this strength develop?

Share with me an area you feel your child could pursue growth or improvement.

Have you had a conversation with your child regarding pursuit of this area or growth?

If your child agrees that this is an area to pursue growth or improvement, what are some of the

things that are consciously being employed in their life in order to grow in this area?

Tell me of a particular experience involving your child in the traditional school setting.

In your opinion, what do you feel the traditional school/s your child attended could have done to

assist your child to better academic and personal success?

Tell me of a particular experience involving your child in the alternative school setting.

Tell me of a particular personal experience involving your child that you would like me to know.

If you had the opportunity to change some things you as a parent were responsible for during

your child's traditional school experience what would you tell me? In the alternative school

experience?

Share a brief overview of the events that you feel led your child into alternative education.

Student-to-Teacher Ratio

Talk to me about the size of the alternative school your child attended; students, teachers,

facility, space, etc.

What did you like about the size of the school?

What did you dislike about the size of the school?

What degree of one-on-one instruction did your child receive?

How did the one-on-one instruction impact your child's learning?

What did your child share with you regarding the one-on-one instruction experience?

Describe the alternative program your child attended:

- Instructors

- Administration

- Counselors

- Facility

Social and Emotional Support

Describe the environment and culture in your child's alternative program:

- Counselors

- Support Services

What were some of the conflicts or obstacles in your child's traditional school experience?

What were some of the conflicts or obstacles in your child's alternative school experience?

What sort of bullying or harassment did your child endure in the traditional school setting?

What sort of bullying or harassment did your child endure in the alternative school setting?

What sort of protocol was established for handling bullying/harassment issues in the alternative

setting?

What have been some things your child has found difficult to do in their personal life?

What support systems were in place to assist with those difficulties?

How were your child's social or emotional needs addressed?

Talk to me about extended services at the alternative school?

What extended services did your child take advantage of while at the alternative school?

What impact or help, if any, did these services afford your child as a student and as an individual?

What would you say was the single greatest obstacle for your child to overcome in their personal life?

In what ways did alternative education assist your child in overcoming personal obstacles?

Describe a challenging personal issue and how your child dealt with it.

Was your child able to use any strategies learned in the alternative program to assist with handling this challenging personal issue?

Describe a challenging work issue and how your child dealt with it.

Was your able to use any strategies learned in the alternative program to assist them with handling this challenging work issue?

Caring and Committed Staff

Talk to me about the instructors, counselors, administrators, etc. at the alternative school your child attended. What would you like me to know?

What were some things your child found difficult to do in school?

How did the instructors assist your child in those difficulties in school?

How did you perceive the relationships between the teachers and your child in the traditional school setting? In the alternative school setting?

If you did see a difference in those relationships in the traditional versus the alternative school what, in your opinion, were the distinguishing differences?

How did you perceive the relationships between the administrator and your child in the traditional school setting? In the alternative school setting?

If you did see a difference in those relationships in the traditional versus the alternative school what, in your opinion, were the distinguishing differences?

What are your beliefs regarding student/teacher relationships?

What characteristics or traits make an effective teacher?

What characteristics or traits make an effective school?

Share with me what you feel about formal education.

State your feelings regarding formal education since your child attended the alternative school?

Family Involvement

Talk to me about the amount and level of family involvement in the alternative program your child attended.

How did the alternative school seek to involve you in the alternative education program with your child?

How were you made to feel included and welcome in the involvement in your child's alternative education experience?

What family members were involved in the alternative program your child attended?

Describe the level of involvement in that alternative program?

In your opinion, what ways could the program your child attended involved you more or more effectively?

How did you and/or your family impact the success, or lack of, your child while in the traditional school setting?

How did you and/or your family impact the success, or lack of, your child while in the alternative school setting?

Tell me about your parents' formal education.

What was your attitude toward alternative education prior to your child's enrollment in such a program?

What is your current attitude toward alternative education?

Individually Designed Education Plan

Describe the alternative program your child attended:

- Curriculum

- Instructional Set-up

- Instructors

- Administration

- Counselors

- Facility

- Schedule

- Technology

Talk to me about the curriculum, daily schedule, technology, etc. at the alternative program you attended.

Was an individual education plan designed specifically for your child and their needs? If so, describe the process of assessment and creating the plan. If not, how was instruction designed to meet their needs?

What personal goals set during alternative school has your child achieved to date?

What were your thoughts or feelings regarding your child setting personal goals at that time in alternative school?

What are some short or long term goals your child has set currently? What is the action plan to achieve those goals?

What would you say was the single greatest obstacle for your child to overcome in the education setting?

In what ways did alternative education and the individual education plan assist your child in overcoming educational obstacles?

What do you see your child doing 5 years from now?

What part do you believe goal setting and/or the individual education plan have played in your child's ability to complete the alternative education program?

<u>Wrap-up Questions</u>

Did you attend college or skills training? If yes to either, Where? How long? What degree, licensure, certification, qualification, etc?

Are you currently employed?

Are you employed in the field of your training or education?

Since your child completed the alternative education program have you recognized any educational elements that you believe might have been more effective to assisting your child in the successful completion of the alternative program but were nonexistent in that program? If so, do you mind to share those with me?

If you were asked to consider the three most significant elements in your child's alternative education experience most responsible for their completion of the program and, in your opinion, success as a young adult, what would you tell me?

How would you picture your child's life now if they had not had the alternative education experience?

In your opinion, what are the key factors that led to your child's successful completion of the alternative education program?

Think of your child's accomplishments, of those that come to mind what specific ones are you most proud of?

APPENDIX G: Interview Guide, Alternative Education Staff

Developing Rapport and Comfort Level

Tell me a little about yourself.

- Where did you grow up?

- Where did you attend school?

- At what age did you begin your post secondary education?

- What college or university did you attend?

- What was your major for your Bachelor's degree? Minor?

- What other degrees do you possess? When?

- What led you to pursue teaching as a career?

- Who were your mentors?

- How long have you been teaching?

- Where and what did you teach prior to employment in alternative education?

- How long have you been teaching in alternative education?

What are some of your hobbies? What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

Would you care to share anything regarding your personal life? For example, spouse, significant other, children, etc.

Share with me what you feel to be your biggest strength. Has this always been a strength? If not, how would say that you developed this strength?

Share with me an area you feel you need to pursue for growth or improvement. What is your current plan in pursuit of this growth or improvement?

Tell me of a particular experience in the traditional school setting that you would like me know.

Tell me of a particular experience in the alternative school setting that you would like me to know.

Tell me of a particular personal experience that you would like me to know.

Share with me a time you tried and failed. How did you respond to the failure? How did that experience assist you with working with at-risk teens?

What is something that very few people know about you?

Share with me something you have read lately? What did you gain from that reading?

What accomplishments in your life are you most proud of?

Share a brief overview of the events that led you to alternative education.

Student-to-Teacher Ratio

Talk to me about the size of your school, students, teachers, facility, space, etc.

What do you like about the size of your school?

What do you dislike about the size of your school?

To what degree does the program you were involved with engage in one-on-one instruction?

What is your opinion of how the one-on-one instruction impacts the learning of the youth that landed in your program?

How do you feel your students respond to one-on-one instruction?

Give me a general overview of the alternative program where you teach.

Social and Emotional Support

Describe the environment and culture in the alternative program you work.

What do you witness as some of the most common conflicts or obstacles for your students in traditional school?

What do you find to be the most common conflicts for your students in the alternative school?

What sort of bullying or harassment are you aware of for your students in the traditional school setting?

What sort of bullying or harassment do you witness in the alternative school setting?

What sort of protocol is established for handling bullying/harassment issues in the alternative setting?

What staff members are involved in that protocol?

Describe the level of involvement of the counselor and administrator in harassment and emotional issues.

Describe the protocol initiated at your school for students with social and/or emotional issues.

What are some of the main issues that your students find difficult to do in their personal lives?

What support systems are in place to assist your students with those difficulties?

How are the social and/or emotional needs of your students addressed at your school?

Talk to me about extended services at your alternative school?

What extended services do most students take advantage of while at the alternative school you where you teach? What impact or help, if any, do you witness that these services affording the students at your school?

What would you say is the single greatest obstacle for most of your students to overcome in their personal lives?

In what ways do you believe alternative education assists them in overcoming personal obstacles?

How do you witness the strategies learned in the alternative program assisting students with challenging personal issues?

<u>Caring and Committed Staff</u>

Talk to me about the instructors, counselors, administrators, etc. at the alternative school you work. What would you like me to know about them?

What are some things you find difficult to do or deal with in your alternative school?

Share with me some examples of how you assist your students with their difficulties in school?

If you taught in the traditional school at some point in your career, how did you perceive your relationships with your students in that setting?

How do you perceive your relationships with your students in the alternative school setting?

If you do feel there was a difference in your relationships with your students in the traditional school versus the alternative school what, in your opinion, are the distinguishing differences?

How did you perceive your relationships with your administrators in the traditional school setting?

How do you perceive your relationships with your administrators in the alternative school setting?

If you do feel there was a difference in your relationships with the administrators in the traditional school versus the alternative school what, in your opinion, are the distinguishing differences?

What are your beliefs regarding student/teacher relationships?

What characteristics or traits make an effective teacher?

What characteristics or traits make an effective school?

Share with me what you feel about formal education.

Family Involvement

Talk to me about the amount and level of family involvement in the alternative program you work.

How do you personally, as a teacher in an alternative school, work to involve parents in their child's education?

Share with me the specific ways your alternative school attempts to involve family members in the education of their student.

Share with me how you and your school works to make family members feel welcome and comfortable at your alternative school and its functions.

Tell me about your parents' formal education.

In your opinion, how do you witness family members impacting their student's success, or lack of, while in the traditional school setting? In the alternative school setting?

What was the general parent attitude toward alternative education prior to their child's enrollment in such a program?

What general parent attitude do you witness toward alternative education once their child is enrolled and/or completed the program?

Individually Designed Education Plan

Paint me a picture of a typical day in the alternative school?

Talk to me about the curriculum, daily schedule, technology, etc. at the alternative program you work.

Is an individual education plan designed specifically for your students and their needs? If so, describe the process of assessment and creating the plan. If not, how is instruction designed to meet the needs of your students?

Describe the process for personal goal setting for students in your alternative school.

What staff members are involved with the students' personal goal setting?

In your opinion how do the students feel about setting personal goals while in the alternative school?

Do most students set short and long term goals? What is your involvement in helping them to develop an action plan to achieve those goals?

What would you say is the single greatest obstacle for most of your students to overcome in the education setting?

In what ways do you feel alternative education and the individual education plan assists your students in completing their alternative program?

If your alternative school was equipped with a one-way mirror and I was able to observe you in action at your school describe what I would observe you doing and what might be going on in the classroom.

What part do you believe goal setting and/or an individual education plan plays in students completing the alternative program?

What part do you believe goal setting and/or an individual education plan has played in the aspirations of your students for the future?

Where do you wish to be and what do you wish to be doing 5 years from now?

<u>Wrap-up Questions</u>

What do you feel are educational elements that might enhance or aid your students in the completion of their alternative program but are nonexistent in your program?

If you, as an alternative education teacher, were asked to consider the three most significant elements in your alternative education program most responsible for assisting your students in completing the program what would you tell me?

What changes, if any, has working in the alternative program made a difference in you as a teacher? As a person?

 In your opinion, what are the key factors that lead your students to completion of the alternative education program?

APPENDIX H: Internal Review Board Approval

June 3, 2011

MEMORANDUM

TO: Becky Murray
                             Carleton Holt

FROM: Ro Windwalker
                             IRB Coordinator

RE: PROJECT CONTINUATION & MODIFICATION

IRB Protocol #:   09-06-637

Protocol Title: *Alternative Education Completers: A Phenomenological Study*

Review Type: ☐ EXEMPT ☒ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB

Previous Approval Period: Start Date: 07/01/2009   Expiration Date: 06/30/2011

New Expiration Date: 06/30/2012

Your request to extend the referenced protocol and modify its title has been approved by the IRB. If at the end of this period you wish to continue the project, you must submit a request using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. Failure to obtain approval for a continuation on or prior to this new expiration date will result in termination of the protocol and you will be required to submit a new protocol to the IRB before continuing the project. Data collected past the protocol expiration date may need to be eliminated from the dataset should you wish to publish. Only data collected under a currently approved protocol can be certified by the IRB for any purpose.

This protocol has been approved for 35 participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 210 Administration Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.