

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS REGARDING CRITICAL FACTORS
LEADING TO SUCCESS IN NON-TRADITIONAL/
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The essential issue leading to the development of this research is the number of students failing and dropping out of school in traditional schools. In today's education landscape, non-traditional/alternative schools are providing many of these at-risk students a second chance to graduate and earn their high school diplomas. In an urban school district, there are many critical factors that contribute to student success and graduation. This study sought to determine if at-risk alternative students' perceptions of what makes them successful in non-traditional/alternative schools aligns with what is being offered at a non-traditional/alternative school in Middle Tennessee. There are many factors that lead to a successful experience for at-risk alternative students. While research suggests many best practices for at-risk alternative students, the research is heavily focused on student perceptions in higher education. Accordingly, this study sought to ascertain if students in a non-traditional/alternative school in Middle Tennessee could identify these best practices for improving success in obtaining their high school diplomas. The research explored the critical factors at-risk students perceived as important to their success in non-traditional/alternative schools. The study focused on students' perceptions, and identified two major categories of critical factors: Learning Environment and Student-Teacher Relationships. This was a phenomenological study, utilizing convenience sampling. Students were separated into five focus groups of five. The focus groups were made up of non-traditional students from a Middle Tennessee non-traditional urban school and included different genders, races, and ethnicities. The theoretical foundation of the research was based on Linda Darling-Hammond's (2004) theory of educational equity, which illustrates one of the reasons that alternative schools work well for at-risk youth. This theory stipulates that schools serving large numbers of students of color have significantly fewer resources than schools serving mostly white students on every tangible measure, from qualified teachers and class sizes to textbooks, computers, facilities, and curriculum offerings.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family.

Stacy Brown, my wife - thank you for being my first editor and encourager to see this through. Without you this would not have been possible.

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CHAPTER 1: PURPOSE AND ORGANIZATION

Introduction and Background of the Study

In the world of K-12 education, non-traditional and alternative school options are growing at a rapid pace (Graham, 2013). In an urban school district in Middle Tennessee, a non-traditional program began in 2009 that provides young adults another path for a high school diploma. The urban school district in Middle Tennessee started a non-traditional school for students who were on the verge of dropping out or falling behind. These at-risk students are lost in large traditional high schools and do not have the supports or interventions in place to succeed in the traditional school setting (Graham, 2013). With the growing number of at-risk students, the urban school district in Middle Tennessee searched for a non-traditional approach to serve these students.

A high school diploma is one of the most important accomplishments in a young person's life. There is a significant amount of time and investment put in by parents, teachers, schools, communities, and school boards to ensure young people have the opportunities and support to earn a high school diploma. In today's society, a high school dropout is predicted to live below the poverty line (Rumberger, 2013). The need for a high school diploma may not secure one's future like previous generations, but it still opens doors for higher learning, work, or a career. According to Breslow (2012), dropouts between the ages of 16-24 are 63% more likely to end up in jail than college graduates, and this report also states a high school dropout will cost taxpayers \$292,000 in a lifetime because of jail costs and how little dropouts pay in taxes.

In a 2015 report, the U.S. Department of Education stated the high school graduation rate for 2012-2013 was 81%. In the 2012-2013 school year, the national dropout rate fell 7%. That is five point drop since 2000 when it was 12% (Fry, 2014). During the 2012-2013

school year, the urban school in Middle Tennessee graduation rate was 76.6% (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015). The first year of the non-traditional programs in the urban school district in Middle Tennessee was the 2009-2010 school year and the district graduation rate was 73.1%. After one full school year with two of the academies being open, the graduation rate was 82.9%. That is a 9.8% increase in one year (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015).

The non-traditional academies in an urban school district in Middle Tennessee are in place to serve 17-21 year-old students who are motivated to earn their high school diplomas. The academies are also in place to support the traditional high schools and work with students who have fallen behind but still have a chance to graduate on time and help the district graduation rate. The non-traditional academies offer later start times, accelerated classes, blended learning, flexible schedules, and many other supports in order to remove as many obstacles as possible so students' needs are met. The purpose of these efforts is to help students succeed and earn their high school diplomas (Aron, 2006).

Statement of the Problem

The essential issue leading to the development of this problem is the amount of students failing and dropping out of school in traditional schools. In the 2008-2009 school year, there were over 600,000 students who dropped out of high school in the United States (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, and KewalRamani, 2011). In today's education landscape, non-traditional/alternative schools are providing many of these students a second chance to graduate and earn their high school diplomas. In an urban school district, there are many critical factors that contribute to student success and graduation. This study sought to determine if at-risk alternative students perceptions of what makes the successful in non-traditional/alternative schools matches with what is being offered at three non-traditional/alternative schools in Middle Tennessee. As the

research in Chapter 2 indicates, there are many factors that lead to a successful experience for at-risk alternative students. While research suggests many best practices for at-risk alternative students, the research is heavily tilted toward student perceptions in higher education.

Accordingly, this study sought to ascertain if students in the three non-traditional/alternative schools in Middle Tennessee were able to identify these best practices for improving success in obtaining their high school diplomas.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to ascertain student perceptions of the critical factors on success in a non-traditional/alternative school. The study sought to answer if the students' perceptions and the critical factors offered at three urban non-traditional/alternative academies in Middle Tennessee have an effect on their success of earning their high school diplomas. Finally, this study about student perceptions of the critical factors and how they improve student success helped determine what critical factors are necessary to increase student progression and help students earn their high school diplomas.

Significance of the Study

School boards, superintendents, principals and other stakeholders should be familiar with which essential components are successful for students in non-traditional schools. Non-traditional schools provide another avenue for students who do not perform well in large schools or classrooms. Students who are quiet or shy often feel overwhelmed in large group settings (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger, 2011). Students who have issues at home may not feel comfortable sharing with a teacher or counselor they barely know or cannot see without an appointment. Large traditional high schools are designed to serve the masses, and have done it well for a long time (Tyler and Lofstrom, 2009). Non-traditional schools are

designed to meet the needs of the students on the fringe or those at-risk students who need extra supports to stay in school and earn their high school diplomas (Aron, 2006). By offering smaller class sizes and hiring teachers who are committed to building relationships with at-risk students, the chances of success increase (Elias, 2009). In a more practical manner, the per-pupil expenditure is much lower for non-traditional schools. Dr. Jesse Register (personal communication, August 29, 2016), former Superintendent of Schools for MNPS, stated, “The per-pupil expenditure is approximately half of a regular school per-pupil expenditure. There are no frills and graduating students who otherwise would not have graduated, at half the cost makes all the sense in the world.”

Theoretical Foundation

Linda Darling-Hammond’s (2004) theory of educational equity illustrates one of the reasons that alternative schools work well for at-risk youth. This theory stipulates that schools serving large numbers of students of color have significantly fewer resources than schools serving mostly white students on every tangible measure, from qualified teachers and class sizes to textbooks, computers, facilities, and curriculum offerings. Many low-income students experience low quality, inexperienced or ineffective teachers in addition to the challenges they face at home. The effects of an inexperienced teacher on a student’s educational achievement are noticeable and shocking. Students who are assigned to several ineffective teachers in a row have significantly lower achievement gains when compared to highly effective teachers (Sanders and Rivers, 1996).

Research Question

What factors do at-risk or alternative education students perceive as contributing to their academic success?

Limitations of the Study

According to Creswell (2009), limitations are those potential weaknesses or problems within the study. The primary method for data collection was in-depth focus group interviews. Interviews allow for greater participation but they also have the potential to influence participants' own views. Discussions in a group setting compared to an individual interview setting also put the researcher in a position to make note of the group dynamic as well as how it influenced the discussion (Ary, et al., 2014).

Since all respondents answered interview questions with their peers, there was no way to guarantee the respondents answered with their own views, nor is there a way to verify or explore how much their answers were influenced by what they heard other respondents say. Finally, the students who were interviewed dealt with difficult experiences at their traditional schools. The questions they were asked were not to lead them to answer that non-traditional settings are better, but are there reasons why their school situations have changed. However, changing to a non-traditional/alternative setting does not guarantee success.

Since this was a sample of convenience, there exists some external threats to the validity of the results. The threats were the small sample size and the characteristics (e.g., urban school, Middle Tennessee, age range, location of school environment, demographics) of this sample were not necessarily generalizable to the population - all students in a non-traditional/alternative setting.

Delimitations

The target population for this study was one urban non-traditional/alternative school in Middle Tennessee. This population was chosen because it has 18-21 year old students and the

school was easily accessible. This study may be applicable to similar urban school districts, or other districts with non-traditional schools.

Assumptions

The assumption was that all research participants would answer the questions truthfully. It was also assumed the research participants understood the questions they were asked. However, errors in participants understanding of questions and bias could not be controlled.

Scope

The scope of this study was limited to one non-traditional/alternative school in an urban Middle Tennessee district. Even though the findings were limited to one school district, they may be pertinent to other school districts at the local, regional and national levels. Conducting research outside this school district was not practicable, but that does not preclude the findings from applicable to other school systems because of what at-risk or non-traditional/alternative students perceive as contributing factors to their success for earning a high school diploma is not unique to the district where the research was conducted.

Definition of Terms

For clarification purposes the researcher chose to define the following terms. Others are defined in the literature review, and in those instances, sources are cited.

Academic achievement: students achieve satisfactory levels of performance as they move through their high school coursework (Cuseo, 2014). (For example, the students must make a 70 for a course average before they earn a credit).

Critical factors: smaller class sizes, increased attendance, blended learning, online learning, teacher quality and a focus on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) (Elias, 2009),

(Staker, & Horn, 2012, p. 3), (Stanca, 2006), (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg, 2004).

Non-traditional/alternative school: a school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a traditional setting (Sable, Plotts, and Mitchell, 2010).

Student Success: students advance in a timely manner and earn their high school diplomas (Cuseo, 2014).

Organization of the Document

This study was organized into five chapters. The first chapter detailed the background of the study, the problem statement, and the significance of the research. The theoretical framework was also described, and research questions were listed. Limitations and delimitations of the study were indicated, and a definition of terms was incorporated. The second chapter consisted entirely of a comprehensive literature review related to the topic. The literature review integrated information on the following non-traditional/alternative schools critical factors for success: definition and history of non-traditional/alternative schools, Social Emotional Learning, online learning, blended learning, organizational school culture, later start times, and smaller class sizes, barriers to academic success, and summary. The third chapter was solely dedicated to the methodology that detailed proposed research. The fourth chapter reported the results of obtained data, and the fifth chapter specified conclusions, implications, and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Non-Traditional/Alternative Schools Defined

There are many broad definitions of non-traditional/alternative schools, but there is not one on which all educators agree. One of the broadest definitions is “any educational activity that falls outside the traditional K-12 curriculum” (Aron, 2006). Some of the main reasons why there is no consensus in defining non-traditional/alternative education are the ever changing policies, diversity of settings, and the various groups of at-risk students served across the United States (Aron, 2003).

Non-traditional/alternative education and the definitions associated with it offer two perspectives. One holds the belief that “there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which they may occur” (Morely, 1991). The other belief focuses on students’ education challenges and issues instead of students’ demographic characteristics or programmatic classification (Roderick, 2003). However, even with the constant changes in non-traditional/alternative education, there has emerged one holistic definition of alternative education: According to White, Kochler-Bryant (2005), alternative education refers to programs, schools, and districts that serve students and school-aged youth who are not succeeding in the regular public school environment. Alternative education offers to students and school-aged youth who are under-performing academically, may have learning disabilities, emotional or behavioral problems, or may be direct or indirect of the behavioral problems of others, additional opportunities to achieve academically and develop socially in a different setting.

Non-traditional/alternative schools today are rapidly growing and changing in comparison to what non-traditional/alternative schools looked like in the 1960’s. Today’s non-

traditional/alternative schools serve a wide variety of student needs and circumstances (Lange and Sletten, 2002). However, the main philosophy behind today's non-traditional/alternative schools remains the same as those schools that started years ago, which is "one size does not fit all" (Raywid, 1994). According to Sable, Plotts and Mitchell (2010), at the federal level, traditional/alternative schools are defined as: A public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides non-traditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special, or vocational education.

In a national survey, 64% of districts reported having at least one non-traditional/alternative school or program for at-risk students; these programs served 646,500 students in the United States during the 2007-2008 school year (Carver and Lewis, 2010). Non-traditional/alternative education is a multifaceted approach that targets students who are struggling academically, have learning disabilities, may have some emotional or behavioral issues, and are on the verge of dropping out or need a more individualized approach to learning (Coles et al., 2009). In a survey of state-level policies on non-traditional/alternative education, half the states indicated that non-traditional/alternative schools were designed to prevent students from dropping out of school (Lehr et al., 2008). In 2013, 43 states and the District of Columbia had formal definitions of alternative education (Porowkis, O'Connor, and Luo, 2014), compared with 22 in 1998 (Katsiyamis and Williams, 1998) and 34 in 2002 (Lehr et al., 2008).

These previously mentioned definitions describe accurately the purpose of three non-traditional/alternative academies in an urban school district in Middle Tennessee. The three academies serve students who are 17-21 years old, who are on the verge of dropping out or have

already dropped out of school, and who are looking for another opportunity and format for earning their high school diplomas.

Who are the at-risk or high-needs students' non-traditional/alternative schools or programs serve? The majority of research over the past fifty years has used the term "at risk" to describe students who are not successfully functioning in a traditional setting. Over the past several years "high-needs students" has emerged as a new term and is defined: According to 2016 report issued by the U.S. Department of Education, students at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students who are living in poverty, who attend high-minority schools (as defined in the Race To the Top application) who are far below grade level, who have left school before receiving a regular high school diploma, who are at risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, who are homeless, who have disabilities, or who are English learners. Even the Department of Labor has opined on the subject of non-traditional/alternative schools, stating it is critical for students who are substantially behind to have access to alternative education options (Aron, 2006).

Social Emotional Learning

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process where teachers and students learn how to understand their surroundings, know their feelings and the feelings of others, and learn how to make better decisions (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg, 2004). Over the past decade, SEL programs have grown and become a part of the curriculum in schools and districts across the United States (Dusenbury, Zadrazil, Mart, and Weissberg, 2011). In MNPS, Social Emotional Learning began in 2011 with several meetings in partnership with Alliance Nashville, a local organization working to bring all resources and stakeholders together to improve all aspects of education for Nashville's children (Marchesi and Cook, 2012). SEL is used in all

levels of K-12 education in an urban school district in Middle Tennessee. SEL is defined “as the process through which children enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling and behaving to achieve important life tasks. Those competent in SEL are able to recognize and manage their emotions, establish healthy relationships, set positive goals, meet personal and social needs, and make responsible and ethical decisions” (Elias, et.al., 1997; Payton, et. al., 2000).

Social Emotional Learning has two main goals: skills development and supportive environments. The first teaches social and emotional skills through Evidence-based classrooms. Students are taught new skills and then get to practice applying them in various situations, which gives students confidence to use them in the future (Clarke and Barry, n.d.). The second goal is creating and maintaining a safe, supportive learning environment. In this environment, children should feel cared for and respected by the adults in the school. The SEL model is created so students feel safe and have the skills to work through negative issues in a productive manner which keeps them in the learning environment (Zins et al., 2004).

The evidence is growing in regard to the impact SEL is having on academic achievements. Payton et al., (2008) did a meta-analytic review including 317 studies involving 324,303 school children ages 5-13 years. The review showed children involved in an SEL program improved in multiple areas. The areas include:

- Enhanced social and emotional skills.
- Improved attitudes toward self, school, and others.
- Enhanced positive and social behavior.
- Reduced conduct problems - misbehaviors and aggression.
- Reduced emotional distress - stress and depression.

- Improved academic performance - test scores and school grades (Payton et. al., 2008).

The study also showed that students participating in an SEL program produced an average gain of 11 to 17 percentile points on achievement test scores. There is not a teacher or principal who would not want such an increase in his or her classroom or school. Payton and his colleagues also discovered that there are four specific interventions necessary to ensure an effective SEL program- sequenced, active, focused and explicit. Sequenced means the program applies a planned set of activities to develop sequentially. Active requires the use of active forms of learning such as role play and behavioral rehearsal feedback. Focused means there is sufficient time to develop social and emotional skills. And finally, explicit targets specific social and emotional skills.

Several studies showed that the earlier children were exposed to SEL programs, the more effect it had on the children. Older children who were exposed to SEL programs were not as affected as younger children (Tennant et al., 2007; Browne et al., 2004). Older high needs students need appropriate social and emotional supports from caring adults who give them a sense of belonging and social support that goes beyond what is offered in most traditional schools to succeed in school (Pianta, 1999; Pianta et al., 2003). Students who are struggling academically or with behavior issues need more adult supports than high achieving students (Plybo, Edwards, Butler, Belgrave, and Allison, 2003).

SEL is impacting policy at the federal, state, and local levels. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which President Obama signed into law on December 10, 2015, includes several new elements that could promote SEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.). The first element in this new language is “Broader Definition of

Student Success,” which means states and local school districts can look at other indicators besides academic indicators that lead to student success. Three of these indicators are student engagement, school climate, and safety. The second element is “Encourage Schools to Establish Learning Environments and Enhance Students’ Effective Learning Skills.” These skills are essential for school readiness and academic success. This language is in Title II when it refers to professional development funds, and in Title IV when discussing the new program called “Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants.” Title IV also had specific language recommending safe, healthy, supportive, and drug free environments that support academic achievement. The third element is “A Broader Approach to Professional Development (PD) and Learning,” which means PD must be data driven, ongoing, and focused on the classroom. The fourth element is “The Inclusion of Specialized Instructional Personnel in Developing State, District and School Level Improvements Plans.” These plans must support students most at-risk of failure, address school climate and safety, and support the mental and behavioral health of students (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, n.d.).

Learning is a process and educators must remember the impact emotions have on successful student learning (Kort et al., 2001; Li et al., 2008; Shen et al., 2009). Emotions have two components (Kharna, 2014): the mental (cognitive) and the physical component (body). With this information, educators will be better equipped to serve high-needs students. All students and teachers have emotions and personality traits that impact how they interact and learn (Ibrahimogulu et al., 2013). Schools are places with a great deal of social interaction, and learning is a social process (Zins, Bloodwork, Weissberg, and Walberg, 2007). Through this social process known as school, students learn to understand emotions of self and others, control

their emotions, be attentive, make good decisions, and express themselves appropriately so they have a successful school experience (Denham, Brown, and Domitrovich, 2010).

An important piece of SEL is the student-teacher relationship. Research suggests that the student-teacher relationship is even more important for the high-needs students which non-traditional/alternative schools serve (Sabol and Pinta, 2012). Whether a student is high-achieving or high-needs, the student-teacher relationship has a high impact on a student's school experience, which influences development across social, emotional, behavioral and academic domains (Farmer et al., 2011; Murray and Zvock, 2011; Roorda et al., 2011; Silver et al., 2005).

School-based SEL programs have existed for almost 20 years. The SEL programs were implemented to support childrens' emotional and behavioral development as well as to improve the emotional climate of schools (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning 2003, 2012; Elbertson, Brackett and Weissberg, 2010). There are five SEL skills on which most programs focus. They are emotional competence, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003, 2012; Elbertson et al., 2010; Zins and Elias, 2006).

The activities on which many SEL programs focus target students' development of respect and responsibility, acceptance of others, engagement, anger management, verbal and physical aggression, bullying, conflict resolution, and healthy life choices (Jones, Brown, and Aber, 2008).

Over the past ten years, there has been a large push of SEL programs available to all levels of PK-12 education designed to improve all students' social-emotional and academic skills. Recently the research district has begun implementing SEL in all schools to support social-emotional and academic development and growth in all students. The reason the research

district and other schools and districts are incorporating SEL programs is because they are coming to believe a more holistic approach to PK-12 education has a greater impact than programs that just focus on academics (Social and Character Development, 2010).

Even though SEL can be implemented at every grade level, the main goals for most high school age students are increased positive social behavior, reduced disruptive behavior and emotional distress, and improved academic performance (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012). Students coming to non-traditional/alternative schools in MNPS and other schools across the country are given the opportunity and supports necessary to grow in the manner previously described.

In summary, SEL has become a major trend for all ages of children with many programs from which to choose for many diverse school settings. The impact of SEL is so important that the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016) believes that improvements to lifelong learning, behavior, and health are keys to a thriving society. All ages and backgrounds of students must be afforded every opportunity to succeed in school and life. According to Shepperson and Hemmer (2013), administrators, teachers, and counselors must truly believe and create of sense of belonging for every student so students will gain the academic, social, and emotional skills needed to do well.

Online Learning

Online learning is defined as education in which instruction and content are delivered primarily over the internet (Watson and Gemin, 2008). Online learning started in the mid-1990's as a tool to meet the needs and demands of students who wanted to earn Advanced Placement (AP) credit for college. Then schools started using online learning when there was a shortage of teachers in a certain subject area (Kronholz, 2011). The International Association for K-12

Online Learning (INACOL) believes there are over 80% of school districts in the United States offering at least one online course (INACOL, 2012). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010a), a recent report from INACOL estimated just over 1.8 million enrollments in K-12 online courses during the 2009-2010 school year. The number of full-time online students was 200,000 during the 2009-2010 school year (INACOL, 2012). The following states have added online learning requirements before a student can graduate from high school: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Michigan and Virginia (Bryans-Bongey, 2015).

Online courses at three urban non-traditional/alternative schools in Middle Tennessee are offered because space is limited and there is not enough room for a science lab or for a social studies teacher. With that in mind, the courses offered at three urban non-traditional/alternative schools in Middle Tennessee are biology, chemistry, physical science, ecology, economics, government, personal finance, U.S. history, World History, sociology, psychology, and wellness. There are few other courses that are offered as needed for some students, but those courses are online because of the lack of classroom space and teachers in the building. Although, not having a science or social studies teacher is in some ways limiting, there is increased flexibility for nontraditional/alternative students to earn credits with online learning (Daymont and Blau, 2008).

There are three typical formats for online courses: web-facilitated, blended/hybrid, and totally online (Allen and Seaman, 2014). While there are a few blended/hybrid math courses at the three non-traditional/alternative schools in Middle Tennessee, the courses listed previously are completely online with the quizzes and tests taken with a teacher. The online courses are expected to be finished and completed within the same time frame as the direct instruction courses (Southard, Meddaugh, and France-Harris, 2015). The fourth online option offered at the

three non-traditional/alternative schools in middle Tennessee is the self-paced option. This is for students who are working to support their families, raising children, or caring for sick family members. This option is not tied to a time frame or a teacher (Gerlick, Mills, and Sollosy, 2009). This allows the student flexibility to complete a course that fits his or her schedule (Rhode, 2009).

As reported by Shackar and Newman (2010), there was a study conducted over 20 years that combined over 125 studies and 20,800 students. The study was about online learning compared to face-to-face learning and the conclusion was that students performed as well or better than their traditional student counterparts. While there have been several online programs and providers used at the non-traditional/alternative school in Middle Tennessee, research shows that online courses must be well structured and have a good design to be successful (Abel, 2005; Grant and Thornton, 2007).

Online learning takes on a variety of forms depending on the needs of the community a school serves. What may have worked in a traditional school with a teacher leading the class may not work in an online course (Goldstein and Behuniak, 2012). There are a variety of format options for online courses to be delivered. Several of those options are teacher led, teacher facilitator, program based, and student paced (Steen, 2008).

In another Meta-analysis from the U.S. Department of Education (2010a), several key findings were identified from 1996-2006. First, students who took all or part of their classes online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction. Second, instruction combining online and face-to-face elements had a larger advantage compared to purely face-to-face instruction and purely online instruction. While there were other findings, it is significant to note that learners in the online condition spent more time

on task than students in the face-to-face condition and found greater benefit from online learning. With all the various forms of technology, there are two models to support online learning: asynchronous and synchronous. The asynchronous model uses virtual libraries/repositories of documents, presentations, graphics, audio files, and videos, email, discussion boards, social networking, wikis and collaborative documents, e-Portfolios, and DVD/CD-Rom to support the online learning. The synchronous model uses chat (text only), voice with telephone or voice-over, video conferencing, web-conferencing, Internet, radio/podcast, and virtual worlds to support online learning (Haslam, 2016). Online learning offers many opportunities for students from any background or setting the opportunity to take classes from the comfort of their own homes, school computer labs, any restaurant, hotel, or library that has free internet access. Online learning is a convenient option for many students (Fedynich, 2014).

Another reason why online learning is growing rapidly is the ability of schools to meet the needs of students who have failed or missed a class. Currently, in Pk-12 education today, more than 75 percent of school districts use blended and online learning for expanded course offerings and credit recovery (Picciano and Seamon, 2009). Online programs or schools are able to provide a wide variety of online courses to reach both struggling and gifted students who want an Individualized Learning Program (Powell, Roberts, and Patrick, 2015).

The future of online learning is not so much about the delivery or platform used to disseminate the information, but more about improving the delivery so students gain a better benefit from the online experience (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Factors that will help improve the online learning experience are finding the successful online programs and then taking those and reproducing them with fidelity at other locations. One way to improve the online learning experience, is by doing a better job preparing the next generation of teachers to

teach in the online learning environment (Pourreau, 2015). One of the main ideas for preparing an online teaching candidate better is to give her the field experience of teaching online, must like the “student teacher” experience most colleges and universities require. Teacher candidates that are given a virtual school teaching experience learn valuable lessons in regard to online resources, instructional strategies, assessments, required technology, time management and pacing for an online learning experience (Williams and Casale, 2015).

Blended Learning

K-12 blended learning is being driven by the changes in higher education and the need to prepare students with 21st century skills (Staker and Horn, 2012). Blended learning is defined as “a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path and/or pace and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home” (Staker and Horn, 2012).

Blended learning allows teachers many options for their students and themselves. Instead of large textbooks and nightly homework assignments, teachers are able to place assignments or receive homework from students online. This also allows educators the opportunity to create a homepage for each class and place video tutorials or discussion questions on Blackboard or an equivalent e-learning platform (Watson, 2008). Today’s students are driven by their abilities to stay connected to their friends and latest issues. Blended learning brings this together so teachers can provide students opportunities to learn in a manner that interests students. It also allows teachers to be available in person and apart from the regular school day hours.

According to Staker and Horn (2012), a common feature of blending learning is when a course takes place partly online and in some way face-to-face. Blended learning takes on many

different aspects depending on what each school or school district can offer. There are four basic models of blended learning. They are the rotation model, the flex model, the self-blended model, and the enriched-virtual model.

The rotation model is a program in which students in a course rotate on a fixed schedule or at the teacher's discretion between learning modalities with one of the rotations being online. There may be small or whole-group instruction, one-on-one instruction, or a written assignment, but at least one rotation is offered online (Staker and Horn, 2012). Within the rotation model, there are four subset models that incorporate an online learning opportunity.

The station rotation dictates that all students go through each learning modality the teacher has incorporated for the entire class. For example, one group may start out in a small group, another group may be working individually on a project, another group may be working directly with the teacher, and the last group working online. After a set time each group rotates to a new station and that continues until each rotation is completed or the class period ends. In the lab rotation, students rotate through a computer lab or somewhere where he or she can use a smart device for online learning. Third, is the flipped classroom. The flipped classroom model implements an online learning delivery of content, but the student has control over time, place, path and pace because the student chooses the location and speed at which they do the work. The individual rotation model means a student rotates on an individually customized rotation. This is different from the station rotation in that the individual rotation model requires a student to rotate to a specific set of learning modalities and not all stations with at least one being online (Staker and Horn, 2012).

In the flex model, the teacher of record is onsite and the students work on an individualized, fluid schedule among the learning modalities. The teacher of record is there as

needed to provide face-to-face instruction. Some schools and districts have certified teachers available while others have an adult available for technical support (Staker and Horn, 2012).

In the self-blended model, the student has a full-time schedule of classes in a traditional school building, but he or she has chosen to take some extra courses entirely online. There is no teacher of record in the traditional school building because the teacher of record is the online teacher. This model is different from a virtual school model because the students still have classes at a traditional school and have also chosen to take more courses online to further their education. Conversely, in the virtual school model, students are enrolled with a full academic schedule online (Staker and Horn, 2012).

There is one major difference in the enriched-virtual model from the previous three. In this model, students meet for the first class in a building, meet the teacher, get the syllabus, and then do all their required work using an online modality (Staker and Horn, 2012).

The four models described previously by Heather Staker and Michael B. Horn (2012) come from “The Rise of K-12 blended learning: Profiles of emerging models” (Staker and Horn, 2011). In that report, there were six blended learning models Staker and Horn identified. The two models that were eliminated were the face-to-face driver model and the online lab model (Staker and Horn, 2012).

While the technology available now has made blended learning a difficult model to pin down, there have been many studies conducted at the university level on blended learning. In the last 10 years, there has been an increase in the research conducted on K-12 blended learning (Drysdale et al., 2013). According to Olson (2003), 163 undergraduate students in a survey stated, by a wide margin, that they preferred blended classes to traditional face-to-face classes. The most common reasons were the ability to complete work when they wanted, time for other

activities, not having to physically go to class, more interaction with others, and the overall freedom that comes from a blended class.

Arano-Ocuaman (2010) found some of the same positive statements. The students' preferred perceptions were accessibility and availability of course materials, use of web-based or electronic tools for communication and collaboration, assessment and evaluation, and student learning experiences with real-life applications.

Chandra and Fisher (2009) studied high school students' perceptions of blended learning, and their findings revealed much of what higher education students preferred. The high school students approved of the convenience and easy accessibility and felt blended learning promoted autonomy of learning and positive interactions between peers. Students also felt the format of this kind of learning was easy to follow and understand. However, their findings also noted that students preferred to ask questions face-to-face rather than through email or other devices.

In a 2011 study, Lopez-Perez' et al., 2011, reported that 1,431 students' perceptions who participated in blended learning activities. The study reported many of the same positive attributes of the previously mentioned studies, but also included important additional information. It reported blended learning reduced drop-out rates and raised exam pass rates. This information helps support the "why" for three nontraditional/alternative urban schools in Middle Tennessee offering blended learning classes to support student success.

Several other studies have also shown that there is no significant difference between traditional learning and blended learning in regard to achievement. However, these same studies show that satisfaction, motivation, drop-out rates for at-risk students, attitude, and knowledge restoration associated with blended learning make it far superior (Deligaoglu and Yildirum; El Deghaidy and Nouby, 2009; Hughes, 2007; Melton et al., 2009; Woltering et al., 2009).

According to Kaur (2013), there are several challenges that schools and school districts must consider when discussing the implementation of blended learning. The challenges to consider are technical, organizational, and instructional.

The challenges with the technical component does not stop with making sure the technology and networks work together, but are more about ensuring participants can successfully use the technology and not simply using the technology because it is available (Hofman, 2011).

Organizational challenges include understanding that blended learning is a complex process that requires thinking about the whole program, not just one individual teacher or school (Kaur, 2013). It also means overcoming the idea that blended learning is not as effective as traditional learning; rethinking and retraining the role of the facilitator; and managing and monitoring student progress (Hofman, 2011).

Instructional design challenges vary from school district, classroom, university, or school, and do not stop with the implementation of technology. Educational leaders must remember to allow for time and money to be left over to make sure the content allows for a successful experience (Kaur, 2013). There are also five other instructional design challenges to consider when creating a blended learning environment. They are: looking at how to teach, not just what to teach; matching the best delivery medium to the performance objective; keeping online offerings interactive, rather than just “talking at” students; ensuring student commitment and follow-through with “non-live elements”; and ensuring all the elements of the blend are coordinated (Hofman, 2011).

It is apparent through the research and rapid advancement of technology that blended learning is going to expand in all levels of education (Alebaihan, 2012; Kaur, 2013). With the

advancement and accessibility of tablets, smart phones, and touch screen devices, the key question remains the same for future educators and school leaders, which is, “How should we organize such learning environments in order to support learning effectively?” “The answer is we should study to integrate constructivist and collaborative models into blended learning environments and aim to educate more creative and curious students who reads, writes and produces for the world” (Guzer and Caner, 2014).

Organizational/School Culture

Organizational culture is defined as “the values and behaviors that contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organization (“Organization culture”, Business Dictionary, 2016). An organization’s culture includes its expectations, experiences, philosophy, and values. The organization’s culture is formed on shared beliefs, customs with written and unwritten rules that have developed over time and are agreed upon as being valid.

Organizational culture and how it has been studied and defined has its roots in the field of sociology. Gentry (1973) stated that culture is not a part of an experimental science in search of laws, but an interpretive one in search of meaning. Culture is not an exact science that has a final answer or explanation, but is rather how organizations solve problems; it is how the organization learns to survive, each generation passing down what works and what does not (Schein, 1992).

The term “school culture” often refers to the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions, but the term also encompasses more concrete issues such as the physical and emotional safety of students, the orderliness of classrooms and public spaces, or the degree to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).

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

In three other studies, Bauman (1998), Dugger and Dugger (1998), and Rayle (1998) concurred with Saunders and Saunders (2001). These common findings and topics include alternative students benefit from personal interactions with teachers and staff; individualized learning plans; social skills development; and a feeling of genuine concern conveyed by the school teachers and staff for the student. This research supports what the non-traditional/alternative academies do in an urban school district in Tennessee with SEL, individualized learning plans, five year plans, and caring and accepting adults who work with the students.

Teachers are under a tremendous amount of pressure to raise student achievement and test scores regardless of what school setting in which they work. What teachers must remember is the students they teach are human beings, not numbers on a state test result (Travers and Cooper, 1996). According to Hattie (2009), it was determined that the student teacher effect size was greater than .70. Hattie had set anything above a .40 would be considered a "game changer," meaning the student teacher relationship had a huge impact on student learning. Additionally, low socio-economic status and poor home life had less than .40 effect size. This information shows that a positive student teacher relationship can offset many issues students bring to school every day. Other research shows how important the student-teacher relationship is for at-risk students. A meaningful relationship with a group of caring adults, or at least one caring adult can

be the most important contributing factor for an at-risk student. When at-risk students know they can trust their teachers because of the positive relationships that have been built, students are much more willing to ask questions and ask for help, which leads to a more successful learning experience (Downey, 2008).

Another aspect of a school's culture is the expectations the teachers, staff, and principals have for their students attending their schools (Hattie, 2011). In Hattie's meta-analysis, teacher clarity and expectations had an effect size of .80 for students. Setting high standards for at-risk students shows the students that the adults in the building believe in them and reinforce that just because they are in a non-traditional/alternative school does not mean the students are somehow inferior students. According to Deal and Peterson (2010), research suggests that a strong, positive culture serves several beneficial functions. They foster effort and productivity by supporting successful change and improvement efforts, building commitment, helping students and teachers identify with the school; and focusing attention and daily behavior on what is important and valued. School culture is not something that happens on its own or by chance. School culture has a profound impact on student success. School leaders must be aware of the culture and work to ensure students have every opportunity to succeed in a positive school culture (Fisher, Frey, and Pumpian, 2012).

Later Start Times

Later start times are offered at the nontraditional academies because adolescent students tend to go to bed later and wake up later (Caskadon, 1999; Denent and Vaughn, 1999). There is a significant amount of research that shows adolescents prefer to stay up later at night causing them to want to sleep later into the morning than younger school age students and adults (Crowley et al., 2007). The later start times at the non-traditional academies allow adolescent

students the option to attend a school that meets the adolescent students' more natural sleep patterns. The traditional schools in the research district start at 7:05 a.m. while the academies start at 8:30a.m. Public school transportation is not provided for non-traditional/alternative students, however city bus passes are provided to every student grades 7-12 through when they receive their student identification at the beginning of each school year.

Over the past 20 years, studies show that adolescent students are sleep deprived when schools start times are before 8:15 a.m. Sleep deprivation causes memory deficits (Anderson, Petros, Beckwith, Mitchell and Fritz, 1991; Dahl, 1996), which impacts performance and alertness in the regular or online classroom setting (Barron, Henderson and Spurgeon, 1994; Carskadon, 1994; Pilcher & Huffcutt, 1996). Research has shown adolescent students who start school later in the morning sleep more at night, which leads to a positive temperament, fewer behavioral issues, and an increase in good academic performance (Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, 1998; Owens et al., 2010; Wahlstrom, 2002). Thus, the issue becomes if educators understand the importance of sleep for adolescents, cannot or will not change start times, or do not want to fight the battle with families, extra-curricular sponsors, after school programs, and communities about the later ending times each day. One issue is it is an ingrained issue in the United States with the traditional and cultural beliefs that adolescents should attend school early because it has been the traditional method (Kelley, 2014).

The 24-hour sleep cycle, or circadian rhythm, is different for adolescents than adults. Other biological changes, such as hormones rising and falling and metabolism rates speeding up or slowing down are also happening in adolescents' bodies. With all these changes taking place, it is almost impossible for adolescents physically and hormonally to go to sleep early (Kelly, Lockley, Foster, and Kelley, 2013). The sleep time disruptions and short sleep duration from

which many adolescents suffer are linked to negative impacts on cognition, emotional and physical health (Lockley et al., 2004). The amount of sleep adolescents get each night has a direct impact on their concentration, mood, depression, falling asleep in class, and ability to communicate (de Souza and Hidalgo, 2014). While this is not surprising to educators, the amount of sleep adolescents get has a direct impact on their learning and academic performances and research backs up what educators have suspected for years (Curcio, Ferrara, and DeGennaro, 2006).

This issue not unique to adolescents. Modern societies have reached epidemic levels of sleep loss and deprivation (Kelley and Lockley, 2015). Currently, there is a growing industry around sleep education for students, families, and teachers. Education about sleep management, the benefits of sleep for adolescents, and how that impacts depression and suicide ideation are growing rapidly (Gangwisch et al., 2010). While it is difficult to change to later start times for most school districts, research shows there are serious ramifications for adolescents and their abilities to learn when school starts before 8:15 a.m.

Smaller Class-Size

Non-traditional/alternative schools are set up to meet the needs of students on the fringe or those at-risk students who need extra supports to stay in school and earn their high school diplomas (Aron, 2006). By offering smaller class sizes and hiring teachers who are committed to building relationships with at-risk students, the chances of success increase (Elias, 2009). In a more practical manner, the per-pupil expenditure is much lower for non-traditional schools.

The study of class size and its relationship to achievement goes back to the late 1800's. The first empirical study looked at class size and its effects on achievement (Rice, 1902). It is difficult to garner much useable information from Rice's study because he reported very few

numbers. From then until 1920, there were a few other studies about class size but their nonexperimental logic and lack of experimental control made their results of little use (Glass and Smith, 1979).

In the early 1920's, the class size and achievement questions were studied using much better methods. Tope, Groom, and Beeson (1924) studied the relationship between class size and achievement in grammar and English at the high school level in Grand Junction, Colorado. These researchers took three English classes of 44, 34, and 20 students each. Each class gave the Terman Group IQ test and each was nearly identical after the first, second, and third quartiles. The experiment lasted for nine weeks and the Starch Grammar Test and Korby Grammar Test were given with a specially designed classroom test on clauses. The results showed a slight increase for the two smaller classes (Glass and Smith, 1979).

In the 1950's and 1960's, many studies were conducted to show larger class sizes did not have an adverse effect on learning, or studies were undertaken to inform and shape national education policy (Glass and Smith, 1979). The two major studies from that era were the Nelson report (1959) and the Coleman study (1966). Neither study proved smaller class sizes had a major impact on student achievement.

The research of the 1970's on class size and achievement studied even smaller class sizes. The research focused on a teacher and two or three students. A two or three student class size was conducted by Bausell, Moody, and Walze (1972). Students in 4th and 5th grades were randomly assigned to receive individual tutoring for one hour over two days on exponential arithmetic. The other group was placed with randomly comparable teachers for the same amount of time with 25 students. The same test was given to both groups and the smaller class scored approximately one-half deviation above the class with 25 students (Glass and Smith, 1979).

In the 1980's, the state of Indiana conducted a study on reduced class sizes in kindergarten and first grade called Project Prime Time. Bain and Achilles (1986) reported that students in smaller classes scored higher on standardized tests than those in larger classes. The smaller classes also had fewer behavior problems. Additionally, teachers of smaller classes reported themselves as more productive and efficient than they were when they taught larger classes.

The Indiana study led the state of Tennessee's legislature to appropriate \$3 million in the first year for a study of pupils in kindergarten and then appropriated similar amounts in subsequent years for the project. The project, known as Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR), was a state-wide study and included (Word et al., 1994), and included classes from inner-city, urban, suburban, and rural areas so that progress of children from different backgrounds could be evaluated. There were three groups studied: classes one-third smaller than regular-sized classes; regular-sized classes without a teacher's aide; and regular-sized classes with a teacher's aide. To assess student performance, two types of tests were used: standardized tests, which have the advantage of being used nationally, but the disadvantage of not being directly related to any particular curriculum or course of study; and curriculum-based tests, which reverse the advantages and disadvantages of standardized tests (Mosteller, 1995).

The first graders took two standardized tests in reading: the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) for word, study skills, and reading; and the Tennessee Basic Skills First (BSF) test for reading. The BSF is a curriculum-based measure. In mathematics, first graders took one SAT and one BSF test. Effect size from the STAR study is defined as the difference between means divided by the standard deviation for individuals in the regular classes without aides. The math and reading scores both showed about a one-fourth of a standard deviation. On the BSF, reading

scores improved by about one-fifth of a standard deviation, and math scores by only one-twelfth (Mosteller, 1995). What would a gain of one-fourth of a standard deviation do for a student? A student moving one-fourth of a standard deviation would move from the 50th percentile to the 60th percentile and surpass an additional 10% of the population beyond 50% that were exceeded originally. As the STAR study moved forward, a question was raised about the persistence of effects when children returned to regular-sized classes, as most would in 4th grade. What was found was students who had been in smaller classes in Grades K-3 scored higher than those who had been in regular-sized classes (Mosteller, 1995).

With this information on smaller class sizes for younger children, what do smaller class sizes do for at-risk adolescent students? Aron (2006) listed nine attributes that impact high quality alternative programs and class size was one of the nine listed. Additionally, many alternative programs have small teacher student ratios that help foster caring relationships between students and adults. Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) stated that smaller class sizes were necessary for success in alternative programs as well.

Glass, Cahen, Smith, and Filby (1982) reported that class sizes 15 or fewer are the threshold to make noticeable improvement in classroom performance. Two more studies followed in the 1990's that also stated the learning increased at 15 or fewer students (Finn and Achilles 1999; Molner, et al., 1999).

The found that a class size of 15 saw a significant and substantial effect size of 0.2 standard deviations, indicating that class size was a very effective school improvement strategy. The most impactful gains were seen in African-American students (Molner, et al., 1999).

Even though this study and the others did not speak specifically to non-traditional/alternative schools, it does support the smaller class sizes for at-risk students and the

extra hands-on attention at-risk students need to succeed. Finally, smaller classes may have a positive impact on student engagement, which includes the amount of effort put forth, initiative taken, and participation from students (Schanzenbach, 2014).

Teacher Quality

Teacher quality and how it impacts student achievement has been studied for years. Darling-Hammond (2000) stated “that different teacher effectiveness is a strong determinant of differences in student learning far outweighing the effect of differences in class size and heterogeneity.” Studies also show students who have several years of ineffective teachers in a row have significantly lower gains in achievement than those who do not (Sanders and Rivers, 1996). Even more troubling from the research is the evidence of bias on students being assigned to less effective teachers (Jordan, Mendro, and Weerasinghe, 1997). Included in that group are African-American students who are being assigned to ineffective teachers at almost twice the rate and half as likely to be assigned to the most effective teachers (Sanders and Rivers, 1996). However, these studies were not specifically studying the characteristics of effective or less effective teachers. There has been a great deal of research on variables of competent teachers and their impact on student learning since the 1940’s. The variables researched are academic ability, years of education, years of teaching experience, subject matter and teaching knowledge, certification status, and teaching behavior in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

As early as the 1940’s, four studies found positive but statistically insignificant correlations between teaching performance and teacher’s intelligence (Hellfritzch, 1945; LaDuke, 1945; Rostker, 1945; Skinner, 1947). In the 1960’s and 1970’s, there were a few studies that suggested a teacher’s verbal ability is related to student achievement (Bowles and Levin, 1968; Coleman et al., 1966; Hanushek, 1971). The teacher’s verbal ability may be differently

strong for teachers of different types of students as found in the Summers and Wolfe study (1975).

In regard to subject matter knowledge, there is not a real statistical difference on student achievement (Andrews, Blackmon, and Mackey, 1980). Teacher experience studies on student achievement have found a positive relationship between years of experience and effectiveness (Murname and Phillips, 1981), but not always statistically significant.

Teacher certification typically refers to the knowledge about subject matter and teaching and learning. Most universities and states require a major or minor in the area to be taught, 20 to 40 education credits, and 10 to 15 weeks of student teaching to earn a teaching certification degree (Darling-Hammond, 2000). In the short-term, students who go through this type of training are likely to be effective (Evertson, Hawley and Zlotnik, 1985). Teachers hired with less than full preparation, no preparation, or very short alternative routes have greater difficulties planning curriculum, teaching, managing the classroom, and diagnosing students' learning needs (Bents and Bents, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1992).

Several studies from the late 1980's and early 1990's on student achievement found that teacher qualifications, at the district and school level, had a substantial impact on what students learn, especially when scores from teacher licensing examinations were included (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Ferguson (1991) found that combining teachers' expertise, scores on a licensing examination, masters' degrees, and experience made for more of the inner district variation in students' reading and math achievement in grades 1-11 than did student socioeconomic status. Of all the teacher qualification variables, the strongest relationship was found in scores on the state licensing examinations, which is a test that measures both basic skills and teaching

knowledge. The effects were so strong, and the variations in teacher expertise so great, that after controlling for socioeconomic status, the large disparities on achievement between black and white students were almost entirely accounted for by differences in the qualifications of the teachers. Ferguson also found that each additional dollar spent on more high qualified teachers netted greater increases in student achievement than did less instructionally focused uses of school resources (Darling–Hammond, 2000).

All of this information magnifies the quality of the teacher workforce in the United States. In the United States, teachers tend not to be from the top end academically, in comparison to the nations who are at the top of the international testing scores like Finland, Korea, and Singapore. These countries' teachers are from the higher end academically (Goldhaber and Walch, 2014).

According to Goldring and Bitterman (2013), there are just over 3.8 million teachers in elementary and secondary schools. There are just under 3.4 million teaching in public schools across the United States. About 82% of all public school teachers were non-Hispanic White, 7% were non-Hispanic Black, and 8% were Hispanic. With only 24% were male, 76% of all teachers are female. Compared to 58% in high schools, 89% of elementary teachers are female. Also, 48% of public school teachers held a master's degree (Goldring, Gray and Bitterman, 2013). An interesting fact from these statistics is public charter schools reported only 37% of their teachers had their master's degree. In the last 20 years, the push for stronger policies and requirements to bring smarter people to teach has grown considerably (Goldhaber and Walch, 2014).

In summary, research finds that student learning and growth are related to teachers who have strong academic backgrounds, quality preparation prior to entering the field, certification in the fields being taught, and experience and National Board Certifications (Darling-Hammond,

2011). All of these factors have more influence on student learning gains than race and parent education combined (Clodfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor, 2008).

Barriers to Academic Success

There are numerous national and state studies over the last 50 years which provide reasons why students do not complete high school. The research shows there are many factors that cause students to drop out (Finn, 2006; Rumberger, 1987; Rumberger, 2004). These studies found that the final decision to dropout is often after a long process of students feeling left out and neglected.

Finn (2006) found that events and circumstances of students' school experiences, whether positive or negative, ultimately helps or hinders a student's academic success. Shannon and Bylsma (2003) reported that students at-risk of dropping out may have repeated at least one grade, have poor school attendance and are frequently truant, display behavioral problems, belong to a peer group who does not value school, have learning disabilities, have moved several times throughout the school year, live in single parent homes, live in low-income homes and neighborhoods, have parents or siblings who did not complete high school, are Hispanic or African-American, and are an adolescent male.

Educational leaders and researchers have attempted to understand why students drop out so effective programs are offered to improve educational outcomes for all students (Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani, 2001; Rumberger, 2013). Students drop out for numerous reasons, and as previously stated, it happens over time and after a series of culminating events (Finn, 2006). It is the goal of many non-traditional/alternative schools to remove those barriers and provide a place for students to succeed and earn their diplomas.

Summary

Research shows a consistent set of key elements that appear to have the most impact for creating and sustaining a successful non-traditional/alternative school or program. The list is not exhaustive as ongoing and future research may find more appropriate or new characteristics, but currently, the list is an excellent foundation for any school leader or school district to follow.

The list consists of eight elements, and while some may have a more significant statistical impact than others, it is the whole list that gives students the best chance for success, as this chapter has shown in its review of the research. According to Reimer and Cash (2006), the eight characteristics are: a maximum teacher/student ratio of 1:10, a small base not exceeding 250 students, a clearly stated mission and discipline code, a caring faculty with continual staff development, a school staff having high expectations for student achievement, a learning program specific to the student's expectations and learning style, a flexible school schedule with community involvement and support, a total commitment to have each student be a success.

There are many options and formats to provide these eight characteristics to at-risk alternative students, but the main goal for all educators is to provide opportunities for young people who are on the verge of dropping out or have already dropped out. These options may not or cannot be offered in a traditional school setting, but non-traditional/alternative have a purpose and solution that traditional schools may not have. The three non-traditional/alternative schools in an urban Middle Tennessee school district strive to offer opportunities that incorporate many of the eight characteristics, along with other characteristics, to students who would have otherwise dropped out of school before earning their high school diplomas.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Methods and Procedures

This study focused on the factors that at-risk or alternative students perceive as contributing to their academic success. A phenomenological study was utilized with the primary research instrument being in-depth open-ended interviews, and 25 students used. They were separated into five groups of five with a mix of males and females, different ethnicities, and school experiences. The smaller group size was used because it was less intimidating and encouraged greater participation from all involved. Participants were also able to share their own experiences, hear other responses and frame their answers with the viewpoints of others. A focus group setting also allowed the researcher to hear participants discuss themes or issues with which they agreed or disagreed without the researcher dominating or directing the conversation (Ary et al., 2014). The interviews were audio recorded. This study was conducted in an urban non-traditional/alternative school in Middle Tennessee. Students from this non-traditional/alternative school served as the accessible population for this study. Convenience sampling was utilized, and participation was entirely voluntary.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that at-risk or alternative school students perceive as contributing to their academic success. Qualitative methods relying on a phenomenological approach were used for this study. Qualitative methods are effective for exploring values, opinions, attitudes, behaviors, and contexts of specific groups of individuals. What separates phenomenology from other qualitative approaches is that the participant's experience is at the center of the research (Ary et al., 2014). Phenomenological research is essentially the exploration of the views of individuals who have experienced some phenomenon.

Further, it assumes each person's experiences drives his or her own reality and that the meaning assigned to an experience may differ among individuals. Thus, it acknowledges that experience is subjective. Analysis of information collected using this approach allows identification of common experience or themes, as well as variation, for example, why and under what circumstances individuals' attitudes, opinions, and behaviors differ. Relative to quantitative approaches, qualitative approaches often yield more nuanced understanding of phenomenon which often enable reform and quality improvement efforts.

This chapter is organized as follows – target population and participants, data collection procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Target Population and Participants

Students from one urban non-traditional/alternative school in Middle Tennessee served as the population for this study. The non-traditional school is in a large urban Middle Tennessee school district of 85,124 students- 43.5% are African American, 30.1% are White, 21.9% are Hispanic or Latino, and 4.2% are Asian. While 17.6% of students are English Language Learners, 12.8% are students with disabilities, and 53.9% of the students are economically disadvantaged (State Report Card. (n.d.)). The non-traditional school chosen for this study reflects many of the same attributes as the school district with the exception of students with disabilities. The non-traditional school is small and does not employ a full time Exceptional Education teacher, therefore the non-traditional school does not accept students with disabilities unless the student can access the general curriculum with minimal supports. Only students who were 18 years of age or older were eligible for the study, as written informed consent (See Appendix A) was required for participation. The principal from the non-traditional school made several announcements on behalf of the researcher for age appropriate students who were interested in

volunteering for the study. The announcements conveyed that participants were invited to participate in a small focus group with other students to discuss their experiences in regular and non-traditional high schools. The focus group was expected to last approximately 30 minutes and student participation was completely voluntary. No credit or compensation was offered to students. After 25 students were identified, the researcher went to the school to explain the study, reviewed the consent form, and answered any questions the volunteers may have had. The researcher then met with each potential participant who had expressed an interest in participation and explained the study.

As a result of the volunteer process, 25 students consented to participate, 10 males and 15 females, 3 white males, 3 Hispanic males, 4 African American males, 5 white females, 2 Hispanic females, 2 Arabic females, and 6 African American females.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher facilitated the focus groups using a semi-structured interview guide. A major characteristic of qualitative interviews is that the questions are designed to avoid a simple yes or no response, thus providing richer information making the phenomenon under study more revealing and easier to understand. Some questions are formulated ahead of time, based on professional literature about the critical factors that lead to academic success. However, during the focus group, the interviewer has the latitude to follow-up on key themes that arise during the interview process and to clarify or enrich participant's feedback, garner examples and probe for differences in experiences among participants (Ary et al., 2014). The guide included 16 questions (see Appendix B) designed to elicit students' perceptions about their high school experiences in regular and the non-traditional school settings and factors that contributed to their academic success or challenges. For example, questions pertained to students' non-traditional school

experience in general, favorite and least favorite aspects of the school, online learning opportunities, perceptions of school administrators and teachers, and feelings about safety. The focus groups were audio-recorded and then later transcribed to ensure thorough collection of data to aid later analysis and interpretation.

Protection of Human Subjects

Per district-protocol, the research proposal and interview questions were submitted to the appropriate district-level supervisor, who subsequently granted permission for research to be conducted. The candidate requested and received permission to conduct research from the appropriate school district supervisor in November, 2016, and IRB approval was granted from Carson-Newman University in December 2016. Research was conducted over one week in January 2017. Participation in this study was completely voluntary. Accordingly, a consent form was provided to each participant in order to notify him/her of the purpose of the study. Additionally, the consent form notified each participant that he/she had the option of participating or not participating in the study. Participants were not required to provide any type of identifying information, such as name, contact information, or social security number.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach based on grounded theory was used to analyze and interpret the focus group data. This process is common in qualitative research (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) and generally involves three processes: familiarizing and organization, coding and reducing, and interpreting and representing (Ary et al., 2014).

Familiarizing and organization requires the researcher to spend a great deal of time with the data. When audio and transcripts exist, the researcher reviews transcripts and sometimes refers back to the audio for clarification of words and exchanges. By doing so, the researcher is

able to better organize the information by questions, focus group, or by people (Ary et al., 2014).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Data were collected for this study via interviews using convenience sampling, from 25 non-traditional students, ages 18-21 in a Middle Tennessee school district. The researcher requested permission from the Middle Tennessee school board and a principal at a Middle Tennessee non-traditional school. The Middle Tennessee school board and the Middle Tennessee non-traditional principal approved the researcher's request for the 25 non-traditional 18-21 year old student interviews. The researcher interviewed five focus groups of five students over a four day period. The researcher used in-depth, open-ended interview questions with the focus groups to collect information regarding student perceptions regarding the critical factors that lead to academic success. The five focus groups were a mix of races, cultural, and gender backgrounds.

Demographic Data

Twenty five students from a Middle Tennessee non-traditional school volunteered to participate after the non-traditional school principal made several announcements about the study. The researcher went to the school, explained the study, and answered any questions the 25 students had. Over the next four days, students in each of the five focus groups were interviewed. There were 10 males and 15 females, (3 white males, 3 Hispanic males, 4 African American males), (5 white females, 2 Hispanic females, 2 Arabic females, and 6 African American females) that participated in the study.

Coding

Coding requires that the researcher granularly identify and label different topics expressed by participants. Thus, codes are actually labels clearly and consciously identifying topics that emerge in the data. It is an iterative process that requires several thorough reads of the

transcripts. When the initial coding is complete, the researcher looks for ways to naturally synthesize individual codes into overarching categories or themes that are similar and puts them together.

The researcher then seeks to determine if there are any codes that can be tied together to create larger categories or themes. The researcher also must pay close attention to the information and ascertain if there are any negative or discrepant data. Negative data conflicts with the main data or is so contradictory that it must be included in the results. Discrepant data offers another perspective about the data and gives counter balance to the researcher's first impression. Interpreting qualitative data is difficult because there is not a statistical test to help interpret the data. Interpreting requires the researcher to reflect and report on the most important aspects of the data and how that information will look. Or, the researcher reports how it was different based on the knowledge and skills the researcher brings to the study. Representing the data is influenced by the qualitative process the researcher used and by the types of data analyzed. How the data is presented is the most important aspect in presenting the findings. The researcher must decide if it is best to present the findings by themes, topics, or cases while using descriptive detail. In this study, phenomenology gives the researcher the opportunity to extrapolate what the participants truly experience and how they experience it (Ary et al., 2014).

For this study, the researcher reviewed the five transcripts using a thematic analysis approach. After multiple iterations, the final coding structure included 40 individual codes that captured student perceptions. These were used to code all data in the five transcripts. This list was utilized as a starting point to structure and summarize the data. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times in order to consistently apply these codes and find emergent themes, patterns, and identify trends and identify key quotes in support of the findings. Next, these codes

were examined and then synthesized into four topics: (1) Administrators and Teachers, (2) Student Feelings and Reactions, (3) Overall School Environment, and (4) Instruction and Student Learning. Subsequently, two themes were identified. For improved interpretation and discussion, the Administrators and Teachers and Student Feelings and Reactions categories were integrated and labeled Student-Teacher Relationships, and similarly, the Overall School Environment and Instruction and Student Learning categories were integrated and labeled Learning Environment.

The qualitative data generally related to four topics: teachers, school environment, learning, and students' own feelings. In turn, in the context of much of the educational literature, these were integrated into two major themes, the learning environment and student-teacher relationships.

Each of the focus groups began with a general question asking how the students experienced their alternative school. Although students' responses to this more open-ended prompt varied across the two major dimensions and fell into the two major themes identified in the data, one student's response is worth highlighting before exploring the two dimensions in detail. Student 1 said,

This was a great experience here and it definitely left a good note on just high school, getting to it. Just all of it, I loved it and I still love it. I appreciate everything that the staff and everybody else here has done for me, for sure.

Learning Environment

The importance of the learning environment cannot be overstated in non-traditional school settings. As stated in the research from the second chapter, there are several critical factors that create a positive learning environment: Social Emotional Learning, online and blended learning, smaller class sizes, later start times, and teacher quality. These all work

together to create a flexible working environment for student success. SEL is the process where teachers and students learn how to understand their surroundings, recognize their own feelings and the feelings of others, and learn how to make better decisions (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg, 2004). It is necessary for adults and adolescents to know and understand their surroundings and feelings in order to make more positive decisions.

Students frequently reported the difference--often quite stark, polar opposites--in the learning environments between their non-traditional and regular high schools. They saw the regular high schools as filled with "drama" and "distractions," where teachers did not care about students and where many students did not care about learning. Several students noted how they felt lost in the shuffle in their regular high schools for multiple reasons. Whether they struggled to keep up, get help from teachers, or felt they were being held back by student-related distractions or teaching practices, students stated all of these were results of feeling lost or overwhelmed in their environments.

In contrast, students saw the general non-traditional school environment as "welcoming," "laid back," "quieter," "supportive," "peaceful," and "caring," as well as everyone having a common goal of finishing their education. Student 2 stated, "they actually care about the students and our well-being." Similarly, Student 1 said, "Wow, they actually care. They're pushing me to do better. They don't just throw work in my face and just ignore [me] and the rest of the class." Student 4 declared, ". . . I think everybody is very supportive here and, you know, kind of views each other as a family." Students commented on the fact that their learning objectives, and generally, what they needed to complete in order to graduate, were very clear. They also appreciated that the school personnel recognized their life contexts, including children and jobs,

and made accommodations that enabled their abilities to juggle multiple demands with earning their diplomas.

Many students commented on the benefits of being in a small school. They generally saw this as leading to less drama, fewer distractions, and generally a safer environment. Although almost all students seemed to define "safety" as physical safety--less fighting, presence of security, screening of students-- some students also implied that they felt emotionally safe. This concept emerged for example in the following exchange from one of the focus groups:

Student 2: Also here, the teachers will talk to you if you need help or advice or anything, which is another great thing.

Student 5: About anything.

Student 4: Whether it's school, life, anything.

Student 2: If you come in in a bad mood or something, they'll talk to you just to figure out what's going on and accommodate to you for that whole day just to make sure that you're okay.

Student 3: I can't tell you how many times I came in here crying.

Student 4: Yeah, me too.

Student 3: They made me feel better.

Not only did these students appreciate being in a small school in general, most of the students commented on the benefits of having small classes. The students appreciated that small class sizes allowed the teaching and learning at the school to be "flexible" and tailored to their individual needs. They pointed out numerous ways that this was evidenced. Commonly, students mentioned the ability to learn at their "own pace" and the "one-on-one attention" they got from teachers to support their learning. For example, Student 3 observed,

You have . . . one-on-one where you get a teacher, there's a lot of less students in each class. It's easier to focus and they can give you more individual time and you can work kind of at your own pace, and keep up.

Student 5 asserted,

In a traditional school, you don't get that type of attention that you do here. That one-on-one attention. . . . And you know over here, I feel like I'm actually getting helped, and I'm actually learning the lesson and all of that.

Student 3 said, "Everyone learns differently. . . . Here you can get that. Whether you need one on one attention or you can just do by yourself. . . . Everybody learns and works at their own pace." Still another suggested, ". . . you're not pressured for if you're not understanding something, it's a lot easier and you can go back and you can try to relearn it a different way."

Many mentioned that the tailoring of teaching and learning at the alternative school "motivated" them more and gave them confidence. Student 2 observed,

It doesn't make you feel stupid either because at my old schools, they'd be moving so quickly I would feel dumb because I wouldn't know the information. But here I actually got the time to learn all of it, and I actually feel good about myself in some subjects that I didn't feel good about last year at my old school.

Students also highlighted that the days were structured in a way that better promoted their learning. Some described the "chaos" at their regular high schools, multiple class periods and transitions. Students appreciated the "two classes" that allowed a large block of time to work, although several commented that they could benefit from some built-in breaks during that time. Others recognized that the structure of the day, as well as the time in the classroom, in regular schools, was more regimented.

Student 5 stated, and it's not like a routine when you come in here. There's not a routine that you have to do a certain thing over and over like in a regular school. Like, if you come in you can do this class if you want to first or if you want to do the other class, you can do that one first. You don't just have to do what the specific class the school is making you do.

Generally, students appreciated access to online learning opportunities because it allowed them to work at their own pace. Student 2 who had a child asserted that it was ". . . kind of good to like have the online programs because I do work on it at home."

Finally, students seemed to recognize that the differences between their regular schools and the alternative schools were better fits for them personally. For instance, Student 3 declared, I get all the help I need. It's a good way to graduate like, cause like I would never be in school. Here like when I miss a day of school they call be like where you at you know? What happened?

Some students articulated that they very much saw themselves in control of their own learning in the alternative school context. Several students contrasted that with their experiences in regular high schools where the teacher was in control and they had no idea what was coming and often not able to address their own learning needs. Overall, students acknowledged that they might not have earned their diplomas in the absence of the alternative school experience. But they also strongly felt that they learned more effectively in the alternative school environment.

Student 1: you actually retain the information here." Another reflected, "I've learned more here than I ever did at my old school, especially when I did math. I learned so much more than I did at my old schools."

Student 2: I get all the help I need. It's a good way to graduate like, cause like I would never be in school. Here like when I miss a day of school they call be like where you at you know? What happened?

Student 4: This was a great experience here and it definitely left a good note on just high school, getting to it. Just all of it, I loved it and I still love it. I appreciate everything that the staff and everybody else here has done for me, for sure.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Research shows the importance of the student-teacher relationship for non-traditional students, the student-teacher relationship has a high impact on a student's school experience, which influences development across social, emotional, behavioral and academic domains (Farmer et al., 2011; Murray and Zvock, 2011; Roorda et al., 2011; Silver et al., 2005). The student-teacher relationship category also includes aspects of SEL and smaller classes, as noted in the learning environment category. However, there are also several other critical factors to include, such as: organizational/school culture and barriers to academic success. Non-traditional students in the focus group discussed the welcoming and open feelings they perceived from the teachers and principal in non-traditional schools, which is discussed in the following section.

When asked to describe their teachers, the students frequently had the most to say about this topic. They described their teachers as having "compassion, "being supportive," as "not judgmental," and "understanding." Several also pointed out that teachers held them accountable, and did so firmly, but with a caring approach. Several stated, "They believe in us." While similar to the sentiments conveyed by students in other focus groups, one focus group in particular captured many of the sentiments expressed by students in the following exchange:

Student 3: The teachers here are awesome. They're great. All of them are awesome. . . .

Because they care. . . . They actually care about the students.

Student 4: They're kind, they can relate to us.

Student 3: They sit there and work with you and no matter how much you don't get it, they'll still sit there and work with you. They don't get frustrated with you.

They work you through all of it.

Student 4: They all want to see us succeed. They all want us to graduate.

Highlighting how he felt the teachers went the extra mile, Student 2 stated:

Well, the teachers here, they will be on your side. . . .if you've got problems at home or anything, you feel like you want to give up, they also call your phone to see if everything is okay and still try to help you out.

In several focus groups, students noted the visibility and support of the principal. Student 1 mentioned, ". . . He want to see you succeed. He pushes you just to graduate." Student 3 said, He's more of a buddy you can rely on. Sometimes be like, "Man, I don't think I can do it." . . . He'll be like . . . "Hey man, I'm always going to be there for you, so if you need anything, let me know." He's like a leader.

Student 5 acknowledged, "The principal, I mean, he's cool. He gives me a hug every morning, so he's uplifting and stuff like that."

When asked to provide examples of how teachers conveyed that they had high expectations of students, Student 1 said, "Because they keep pushing us to do our work and keep telling us that we are going to graduate." Student 4 stated, "They'll hold you to a high standard." Student 3 noted, "They'll try to push you. Even if you feel like giving up, they'll be like, 'You got this, you can do it,' stuff like that."

While students did not frequently explicitly link teachers' behaviors with their own feelings, they did at times. Students mentioned being "treated equally" and as "not labeled." One, as did others, said, "We're all accepted." Student 2 asserted, "You're treated equally as an adult and as a, as like your own self."

Student 4 said, "Ever since I've been here it's like a motivation." In one focus group, several students alluded to what teachers and administrators did to make them feel valued and respected:

Student 1: If they say good morning to us every morning we come in ...They tell us to have a great day when we leave. . . . They really just pay attention to us, like if they see something that is wrong they will ask you what's wrong, is there something wrong and stuff like that.

Student 2: Like, If I don't come to school I'll get like several text messages saying, "Where are you, where are you?"

Student 1: Yeah, that too. They worry about us when we're not here and so.

Student 2: They gained a relationship with me, like I fist-bump my principal and my teachers are like, "See ya, man." And that's cool, like they go out of your way to try and be your teacher but also like, not a friend but like a friend in a sense.

Student 3: You feel more as an individual than as a whole. They don't see you as a group.

When specifically asked what teachers did to make the student feel valued, Student 2 said, "I feel like I'm valued because anytime I come in, I get a 'good morning.' That's not usual from people. They say good morning to you every morning." Student 4 observed,

Some teachers here, they can look into you. They'll ask you what you want to be in life and then they can look into you and be like, "I can see you doing that." They'll keep pushing you up. They won't put you down . . . That's how I feel like I'm valued.

Ultimately, a few students alluded to or recognized an important characteristic of healthy relationships, trust. Student 3 said,

I think, like at my other school ... I kind of like feel like they had you by a chain ...

Because you kind of like couldn't do much. But here it's like, they give you the freedom to do stuff, but if you abuse it like, they have no problem taking it away. . . . And I like it here because it's like . . . You get put on a chain if you deserve it, and that's how I think it should be like everywhere else.

And finally another summed it up this way,

Student 3: Here you're being treated even more as an individual. . . . Teachers get to know you more and they actually get to trust you, give you more freedom. As you get more freedom, you have less reason to try to rebel and do your own thing, you know.

Findings

The goal of non-traditional schools is to meet the needs of students on the fringe or those at-risk students who need extra supports to stay in school and earn their high school diplomas (Aron, 2006).

The two categories that emerged were learning environments and student-teacher relationships. Within these two categories, two sub-categories emerged. Learning environments encompassed environment and learning responses from the 25 non-traditional students. Student-teacher relationships encompassed teacher and feeling responses from the 25 non-traditional students. Whenever one is interviewing students, many topics and themes are discussed, but there was a clear distinction that created the final categories.

Relative to the findings for learning environment, the non-traditional students from each focus group discussed the set-up of the school day because it was easier to navigate compared to

their regular schools. The non-traditional students stated it was easier to learn and retain more information. They also discussed the greater ability to focus on their work because the objectives for graduating are very clear and the two classes per day for two and half hours over a four-week term gave them an opportunity to catch-up to graduate on time or work ahead to graduate sooner. The non-traditional students indicated the non-traditional school has less distractions and drama in the classroom compared to their regular school experiences.

The student-teacher relationship findings showed how non-traditional students perceived the adults in the non-traditional school and how they related to them with such words and phrases as: accepted, supported, treated equally, relatable, compassionate, understanding, treated as an adult, more freedom, and they want us to succeed.

As shown in Figure 4.1, there were statements and perceptions that at least 18 students (72%) articulated specifically or referred to that put their perceptions in one of the four sub-categories. For example, in the teacher sub-group there were 20 students (80%) who spoke about teachers being kind, 19 students (76%) referred to the one-on-one opportunities with teacher, 21 (84%) described teachers as supportive, 18 (72%) believed the teachers were on their side, 24 (96%) stated the teachers believed in them, 20 (80%) described the teachers had high expectations, 19 (76%) stated the teachers were able to relate to them, 19 (76%) felt the teachers held them accountable, 21 (84%) believed they were more in control of their education, 18 (72%) perceived their teachers as non-judgmental, 19 (76%) shared that the teachers were compassionate, 21 (84%) believed their teachers were understanding, 20 (80%) described how they had more freedom than in their regular schools, 20 (80%) shared that they were treated as adults, which meant they did not have to raise their hand to go to the restroom or take a break when the students needed to, 24 (96%) stated teachers wanted them to succeed, and 25 (100%)

referred to teachers as caring. In the feelings sub-category, 23 students (92%) described how they felt accepted by their teachers, 22 (88%) were motivated by their teachers, 20 (80%) believed they were not labeled by their teachers, and 19 (76%) of students felt they were treated equally, which meant they were treated like adults by their teachers.

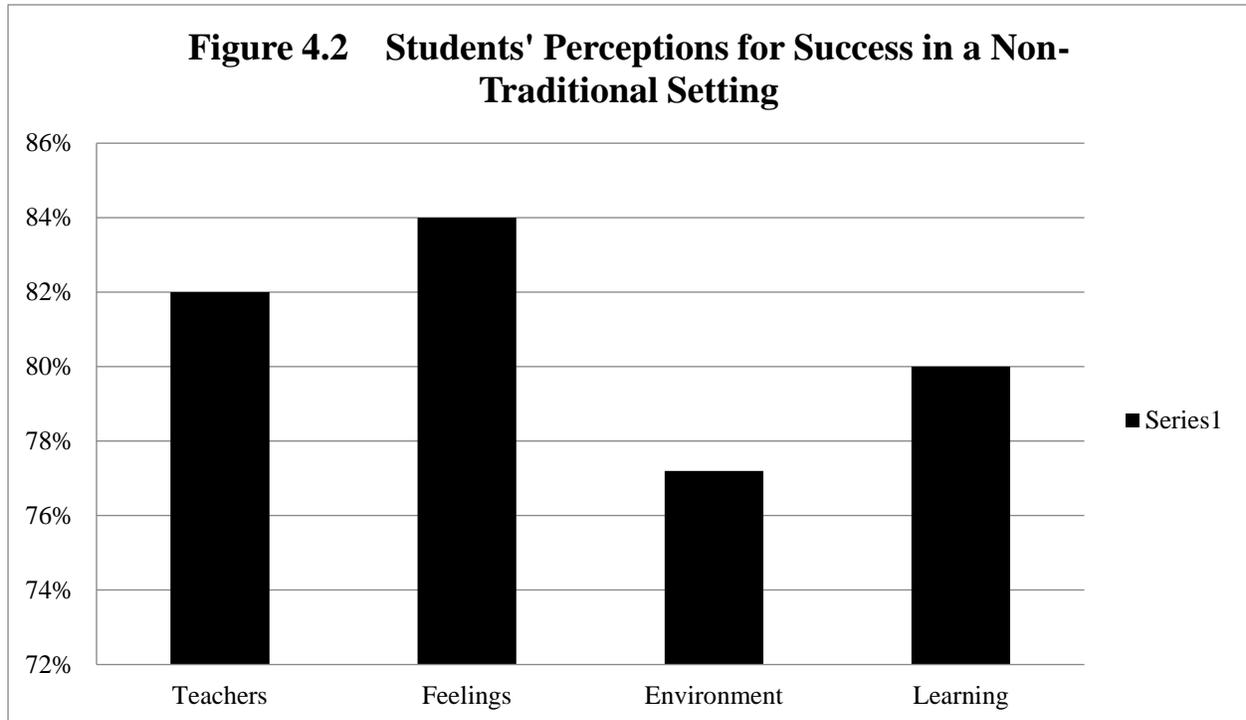
Figure 4.1 also provides a picture of the 25 non-traditional students' perceptions within the sub-categories of environment and learning. In the environment sub-category, there were 18 students (72%) who discussed how the environment in a non-traditional school had less or no drama compared to their regular school experience, 18 (72%) referred to the small school setting with 20 students (80%) referring to the small class sizes as a positive, 21 (84%) believed there were fewer distractions, 19 (76%) felt physically safe, 19 (76%) felt welcomed, 18 (72%) believed everyone had the common goal of earning their high school diplomas, 18 (72%) appreciated the flexible structure of their academic day, 19 (76%) enjoyed the laid back atmosphere, and 23 (92%) stated the non-traditional setting was much quieter than their regular school experiences. The learning sub-category showed 24 students (96%) thought the school was easier to navigate in regard to space and academics, 22 (88%) discussed the flexibility of the learning in regard to taking only the classes the students need, working online, and working at their own pace, 19 (76%) stated they were able to go deeper with their learning, 18 (72%) stated they learned more (greater learning), 20 (80%) believed they retained material better, 21 (84%) discussed they did not feel rushed, 20 (80%) believed they had a greater ability to focus on work, 19 (76%) discussed how the objectives were clear, meaning the students knew what they needed to do for each class and what was needed to earn their high school diplomas, 19 (76%) believed it was easier to focus because of the later school start time, and 18 (72%) enjoyed the fact they had longer minutes in class.

Figure 4.1 Focus Group Codes Occurring in at least 72% of Students' Perceptions

Student-Teacher Relationships		Learning Environment	
Teachers	Feelings	Environment	Learning
kind	accepted	less/no drama	easier
one-on-one	motivated	small school/classes	flexible
supportive	"I'm not labeled"	fewer distractions	work at own pace
your side	"Treated equally"	safe--physically	deeper learning
"they believe in us"		welcoming	greater learning
high expectations		common goals	retain material better
relate to us		flexible structure	not rushed
accountable		laid back	greater ability to focus on work
more in control		quieter	objectives are very clear
not judgmental			easier to focus
caring			longer classes
compassion			
understanding			
more freedom			
treat students as adults			
want us to succeed			

Tabulating all the information from the 25 non-traditional student's perceptions by sub-category breaks down into the percentages shown in Figure 4.2. The tabulated findings showed what percentage of students perceived Teachers, Feelings, Environment, and Learning, within their non-traditional school, as critical factors in their academic success: 82% of students perceived the teachers in their school affected their success; 84% expressed feelings of acceptance, motivation, equality, and not being labeled as important factors in their success; 77% perceived the environment of the non-traditional school was a critical factor; and 80% of

students way and ability of learning in their school was a key factor to being successful and graduating with their diplomas.



CHAPTER 5

Statement of the Problem, Discussion

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

There are many definitions for “non-traditional” schools found across the educational spectrum in the United States. Although there is not one universal definition on which all agree, there is agreement regarding some common themes and best practices necessary in non-traditional schools. These include social emotional learning, online learning, school culture, later start times, smaller class sizes, and teacher quality. While many studies have involved teachers, professors, and other stakeholders in all levels of education, there is very little data regarding non-traditional students’ perceptions contributing to their academic success.

The purpose of this study was to acquire feedback from non-traditional students and ascertain their perceptions on what factors contribute to their academic success in non-traditional schools. Twenty-five non-traditional students were divided into five focus groups of five, including males and females, several diverse ethnicities, and various school experiences. In-depth, open interview questions were used with the focus groups to collect student perceptions regarding the critical factors that lead to academic success. The interviews were audio recorded and the data was coded into four topics: teachers, school environment, learning, and student’s own feelings. These four topics were subsequently merged into two major categories the learning environment and student-teacher relationships. The data was analyzed in order to answer the research question guiding this study: What critical factors do at-risk or alternative education students perceive as contributing to their academic success?

This chapter provides a summary of the statement of the problem, discussion, conclusions, implications, and recommendations. This chapter also includes implications of the study and recommendations for further research.

Statement of the Problem

Without a complete understanding of why at-risk students dropout or succeed, there is no way for educators to plan for or adjust successful programming for non-traditional/alternative schools and their students. In the absence of research from K-12 at-risk students, the critical factors needed to be identified in order to develop strategies for non-traditional/alternative school leaders to consider when working with at-risk students. This study sought to determine which critical factors at-risk students perceived as improving their success in non-traditional/alternative schools.

Discussion

In regards to the learning environment, students consistently discussed and distinguished the differences between their regular school experiences and their non-traditional experiences. Many students stated they felt lost in the shuffle in their regular schools. They also expressed their experiences were full of “drama and distractions” and that teachers were uncaring. According to students, feeling lost in the shuffle was one reason they struggled to keep up. Larger class sizes contributed to these feelings. They also felt larger class sizes inhibited their access to teachers for additional help and held them back academically because of student-related distractions. Students felt teachers were uncaring because they catered to either the very intelligent or the problem students.

The non-traditional school learning environment was perceived by the non-traditional students as generally being welcoming, laid back, quieter, supportive, peaceful, caring. Also,

students indicated that everyone seemed to have a common goal of completing their high school educations. Another finding from the non-traditional learning environment from the non-traditional students was the benefit of being in a small school.

Students generally reported that a small school led to less drama, fewer distractions, and a safer environment. A “safer” environment was identified in two ways: physically and emotionally. The students defined a physically safe environment as one where there was little to no fighting, campus security personnel, and students had to apply and be interviewed by staff before being accepted to come to school.

Emotionally safe was described by the non-traditional students as the way teachers and staff members talked to them about life issues, not just school issues. Students stated teachers would talk to them about anything and give them support and advice as needed or when asked. Students described how often they would come to school upset or in a bad mood and the teachers and staff encouraged and listened to them, which subsequently got them ready for school and learning.

Non-traditional students also described how a small school also meant smaller class sizes. With smaller class sizes, the students described how that led to a flexible, tailored, individualized approach to their educational needs. The non-traditional students noted how this allowed them to work at their own pace and even work ahead, whereas in the regular school setting, the students would have to wait for the entire class to move forward or they would be left behind.

Non-traditional students liked the daily structure of the non-traditional school compared to their regular school experiences. They enjoyed the two classes per day format compared to four classes per day at regular schools. Non-traditional students stated how this created less chaos and gave them more time in class to stay on track or work ahead. Non-traditional students

then stated that non-traditional schools allowed them to work on the classes they needed in the order that best fit the students' needs. Students pointed out that online classes allowed them the flexibility to work on their own time and own pace from home or anywhere with internet access.

Finally, non-traditional students recognized the differences between their regular schools and non-traditional schools from a personal standpoint. These students knew their non-traditional teachers would call them if they missed school to check on them and their well-being. Students knew they had much more control of their learning in a non-traditional school compared to regular school where the teacher and class schedule dictate the learning environment. Many students expressed they may not have graduated high school if it was not for the non-traditional school opportunity. Students conveyed they learned and retained more information from their time in the non-traditional school.

While discussing student-teacher relationships, the non-traditional students described their teachers as being compassionate, supportive, non-judgmental, and understanding. Students stated they felt cared for, believed in, and all teachers wanted them to graduate. Students believed teachers showed concern for their overall well-being of the students by talking to them about their problems outside of school, by calling and checking on them when they were absent, and generally caring about them outside of the school setting. Several students specifically pointed out how the principal encouraged students to graduate, be successful, and demonstrated a willingness to listen.

Students detailed how teachers hold them to high expectations by encouraging them to do their work and being supportive by telling them, "You can do this." Students pointed out how they were treated as adults and as individuals.

At the non-traditional school, students felt more motivated because the teachers and administrator say, “Good morning”, “Have a great day” when they leave, typically offer individualized attention to students. The students also said that the teachers worry about them, but more importantly the teachers build relationships with them.

Students felt valued because teachers would say, “Good morning” every day, but more importantly, students stated teachers talked to them about their futures and what they wanted to do with their lives after graduation. When students opened up and shared their ideas, teachers provided the students support and let them know they believed in them. Teachers continued to challenge students, but also helped to develop self-confidence. Many students attributed the sense of being valued as a contributing factor to the creation of healthy student-teacher relationships. Many students attributed being valued by the fact teachers and staff created healthy relationships.

Several students summed up the student-teacher relationship by discussing the freedom they had in non-traditional schools based on the trust they received from the teacher, which ultimately encouraged students to strive for achievement.

Research Question

What critical factors do at-risk or alternative education students perceive as contributing to their academic success? The study gathered information from 25 non-traditional students in a Middle Tennessee non-traditional school and evaluated students’ perceptions of many critical factors. The two main categories that emerged from the research are learning environments and student-teacher relationships.

When discussing learning environment, non-traditional students discussed and referred to factors such as less drama, smaller school and smaller class sizes, flexible schedules, physical

safety, deeper learning, self-paced learning, welcoming, greater ability to focus, and retaining more information. The findings are detailed in the second chapter, which states that smaller class sizes, flexible schedules, online and blended learning, welcoming and safe environment, and the ability to work at one's own pace are critical factors to student success.

According to non-traditional students, common themes that are found in the student-teacher relationship category include acceptance, compassion, high expectations, being treated as adults, one-on-one support, being held accountable, and motivation. These are also critical factors that support student success in non-traditional schools. According to Reimer and Cash (2006), the eight characteristics are: a maximum teacher/student ratio of 1:10, a small base not exceeding 250 students, a clearly stated mission and discipline code, a caring faculty with continual staff development, a school staff having high expectations for student achievement, a learning program specific to the student's expectations and learning style, a flexible school schedule with community involvement and support, and a total commitment to help each student be successful.

Conclusions

This study explored non-traditional students' perceptions of the critical factors that lead to academic success. Relationships, school size, class size, flexibility, school climate, and high teacher expectations are essential. Non-traditional students consistently referred to and commented on the importance of student-teacher relationships, school size, class size, flexibility, school climate, and high teacher expectations. While many regular schools do offer and seek to provide their students with meaningful relationships, high teacher expectations, and a positive school climate, it is not feasible for them to offer smaller class sizes, flexibility, and meaningful student-teacher relationships on a large scale. While it cannot be stated that student-teacher relationships, school size, class size, flexibility, school climate, and high teacher expectations

increase academic success only in non-traditional schools, it can be determined that with those critical factors implemented and followed with fidelity, non-traditional students believe it improves their academic success.

Implications

Phenomenological studies should be viewed cautiously. This study utilized a small sample size from one non-traditional school and the respondents were only able to respond based on the experiences of only the students involved in the study.

In order to generalize the results beyond the one non-traditional school in Middle Tennessee, it would be necessary to replicate the study across a larger pool of non-traditional high schools in Tennessee and the United States.

Non-traditional students perceptions of what critical factors lead to academic success were studied to develop for future studies and continuing research. However, to obtain a true picture of the critical factors that lead to academic success, one would need to ask similar questions to teachers and parents who are directly involved with non-traditional high schools.

Finally, the goal of this study was to identify the critical factors that lead to academic success based on non-traditional students' perceptions. Student-teacher relationships, school size, class size, flexibility, school climate, and high teacher expectations were perceived by non-traditional students to increase their academic success. However, the study focused only on one specific non-traditional school and there are many types of non-traditional schools and other options that students may have for non-traditional education

Recommendations for Further Study

This study was conducted at a small non-traditional Middle Tennessee school. It would be informative to repeat this study at different types of non-traditional schools, at all levels of

K-12 schools across the state of Tennessee and United States to see if the critical factors remained consistent. In this study, two major categories emerged: learning environment and student-teacher relationships. Further studies should seek to determine if these two categories emerge in multiple non-traditional settings, or if new factors arise to create a new category.

Critical factors that lead to academic success in non-traditional schools are far more difficult to identify than what was used in this simple interview study. It would be helpful if quantitative research was conducted to statistically prove which critical factors are most significant so school leaders could ensure these were incorporated in all non-traditional schools to improve academic success.

Summary

Research indicates at-risk students perceive certain critical factors are imperative to their academic success of achieving their high school diplomas. The purpose of this study was to ascertain at-risk students' perceptions of the critical factors to success in a non-traditional/alternative school. This study examined at-risk student perceptions through focus group interviews and determined that the Learning Environment and Student-Teacher Relationships were the two most influential critical factors to at-risk students' academic success. These findings illustrated that when students perceive a safe, accommodating, and smaller learning environment, and accepting, challenging, and caring student-teacher relationships, they embrace their opportunities to earn their high school diplomas. This study also illustrated these at-risk students perceived they found this kind of learning environment and student-teacher relationships at a non-traditional middle Tennessee public high school. Although this was a small study, it did consider at-risk student perceptions rather than educators or students in higher education.

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Appendix A

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Mr. Carmon Brown Principal Researcher] from The Academy at Opry Mills. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about student perceptions of critical factors at school. I will be one of approximately 25 people being interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one at my school will be told.
2. Participation involves being interviewed by researchers from The Academy at Hickory Hollow. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. A tape recording of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. If I don't want to be recorded, I will not be able to participate in the study.
3. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.
4. Faculty and administrators from my school will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.
5. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Studies Involving Human Subjects: The College of Education at Carson-Newman University. For research problems or questions regarding subjects, the Institutional Review Board may be contacted through information of the contact person at IRB office of Carson-Newman University.
6. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
7. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

 My Signature

 Date

 My Printed Name

 Signature of the Investigator

Appendix B

Student Participants Interview Protocol

1. How does this school setting compare to your previous school setting?
2. To what extent do the small class sizes impact your success in a non-traditional setting?

3. To what extent does individualized instruction impact your success in a non-traditional setting?
4. How does this school environment compare to your previous school environment?
5. Why or why not do you feel safe in this school setting?
6. Why or why not do you feel valued as a person in this school setting?
7. Tell me about taking online courses in this setting compared to your previous setting?
8. Tell me about taking blended courses in this setting compared to your previous setting?
9. Why or why not is flexible scheduling important to you?
10. To what extent do you feel the teachers have high expectations?
11. How does the later start time impact you staying awake in class?
12. To what extent do you feel the teachers/principal at this non-traditional school has the skills and knowledge necessary to lead students' to their goals? What are their strengths? In what areas do they need to improve?
13. How do the adults in this school care about you?
14. Why or why not is it important to work at your own pace to earn your diploma?
15. Why would you rather graduate from this school setting rather than your previous school setting?
16. Is there anything I have not asked you about that you would like to comment on?

