Alternative Education Completers:
A Phenomenological Study

Becky L. Murray
Carleton R. Holt
University of Arkansas

The purpose of this study was to explore the elements of the alternative education experience significant to successful completion of the program. This phenomenological paradigm provided the framework for all aspects of the qualitative study. Students, parents, administrators, and staff members of two alternative programs in the southeast Kansas area were the pool used to draw the participants. Criterion involved in selecting the student participants were those who were or had been enrolled in the middle level or high school alternative education program in two southeast Kansas districts, currently 18 years of age or older, and who had successfully completed one or both programs. Qualitative methods used to accomplish the research design were: (a) formal, semi-standardized, open-ended interviews with 12 current or former alternative education students, eight parents of program completers, and 10 alternative education staff members; (b) evaluation of student journals from the middle school alternative school; and (c) obtrusive and unobtrusive classroom observations.

Introduction

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

Public school design plus academic, social, and personal concerns are responsible for students failing in school and failing to graduate. A few of the most frequently noted causal issues are:

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

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

Theoretical Framework

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

Dewey's work in the progressive development of education and the influence of several eighteenth-century educational philosophers, posed a significant impact on the late nineteenth century progressive educator Francis W. Parker, whom Dewey called the father of progressive education (Neumann, 2003). Colonel Parker was Dewey's friend and colleague. He shared similar ideas on progressive education and opened a progressive school in Chicago in 1901 (Schugurensky & Agguire, 2002). The progressive education theory, and the public alternative schools movement that ensued, laid the foundation of alternative school programs for the academically and socially disengaged student.

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

Aaronson (1995) understands the need for participation choice by all stakeholders within the alternative program. Successful program completion is more likely to occur when students, along with their parents, and staff choose to participate in that setting. Choosing to attend, rather than forced assignment, fosters ownership and commitment to the school. The whole student focus is necessary so that personal, social, emotional, and academic development may be addressed. Warm, caring relationships with teachers and staff members are a critical piece to the alternative school culture. Alternative programs foster expanded roles for teachers. Instructors not only function in the teacher role but as counselors, advisors, and mentors. A sense of community among teachers, students, and staff creates a connection between the student and the school, in addition to fostering the relationships described above. Alternative education teachers hold high expectations for all students while exhibiting flexibility and consideration of change according to student needs.

In addition to school culture, Aronson (1995) shares that organizational structure of the alternative school is central to success of the program. Personal attention and cultivating a sense of community is more easily accomplished when classes and schools are small. Most successful alternative schools possess some degree of autonomy. A measure of freedom from the customary district operating procedures is necessary given the very nature of the needs of at-risk students. Comprehensive programs linking vocational skills with experiential learning seem to better assist students in connecting their learning with future life and career. Extensive counseling services are necessary since the students landing in alternative programs experience a host of academic, social, emotional, and personal issues. The traditional school for students at-risk of failing has proven to be a hostile setting for most. Alternative programs must be structured in such a way as to generate feelings of comfort and safety. Clear, strict behavioral expectations with the administering of fair and consistent discipline assist in maintaining a comfortable and safe environment. Finally, research frequently reveals that programs that achieve a physical separation from the traditional school building tend to more successfully impact their students than those who remain integrated within the traditional school (Aronson, 1996; Gilson, 2006; Knutson, 1996; Mottaz, 2002; Quinn & Poirier, 1998).

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

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

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

Literature Review

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

Effective Program Elements

Student-to-Teacher Ratio

Universally, effective alternative programs are typified as student-supported environments, with fewer students per class and an emphasis on individual attention that provides opportunities for one-on-one interactions between staff and students (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Numerous authors and researchers have praised the effectiveness of alternative school programs and have identified small programs and class size as effective characteristics all alternative programs should embrace (Knutson, 1996).

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

Utilizing qualified instructional para-professionals in the alternative program is one of the key criteria that separate effective programs from ineffective ones. Licensed instructors provide the aides with the necessary guidance and structure to offer an economical way to achieve a low student-to-staff ratio. The integration of skillful instructional aides is one of many ways low budget programs can offer the individualized support the at-risk teen needs so desperately (Mottaz, 2002).

Social and Emotional Support

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

Alternative programs are expected to address a myriad of antisocial behaviors. Although small school size, low student-to-teacher ratio, one-on-one relationships with staff members, a caring environment, and instilling student self-efficacy are all valid and effective constructs for at-risk teens, many require interventions that target a particular nature of antisocial behaviors. Intervention strategies that have been empirically validated reveal the greatest impact in modifying the more exceptional antisocial behaviors. Comprehensive, strategically planned, school-wide designs have fostered positive results, while those programs that have attempted to pull pieces together to meet the behavioral needs as they arise have failed to produce good, consistent results. Proactive, thoughtful program structure addresses the needs of these struggling teens much more appropriately and effectively than the deal-with-it-when-it-happens reactive method (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001). Specialists in the area of at-risk youth understand that antisocial behaviors are most effectively addressed concurrently and rigorously over prolonged periods of time (Van Acker, 2007).

Psychotherapy, behavior analysis, cognitive-behavior methods, and social casework intervention have all received empirical attention and documentation as displaying positive outcomes in attending to individual antisocial behaviors (Tolan & Guerra, 1994). Social and emotional support is crucial to program completion and success of the at-risk teen. Without the instillation of resilient and vigorous social and mental health neither personal nor academic success is to be expected.

Caring and Committed Staff

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

Alternative schools with merit for impacting student success and program completion are designed to meet the needs of a specific at-risk population; consequently the adults that work with these students must exhibit specific attributes in order to address their needs. Every teacher employed in an alternative setting must choose to be there and possess a passion to support the at-risk youth in their personal and educational endeavor (Mottaz, 2002).

In most cases, the students enrolled in alternative programs have experienced negative interaction with school personnel for many years. The very issue they should not encounter is reassignment into yet another hostile educational environment. Alternative schools in the infant stages are susceptible to self-destruction when employing staff that are indifferent and detached from the young people relocated in these types of programs (Mottaz, 2002).

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

Family Involvement

The breakdown of the family structure, lack of family support, and absence of family involvement substantiate a decline in academic progress and deterioration in social behaviors. Family and community participation is an integral component to the effective alternative program. Parents, siblings, spouses, or partners must be involved in self-help groups, school conferences, and school activities if improved performance is to occur (Ascher, 1982; Franklin, McNeil, & Wright, 1990; Franklin & Streeter, 1991, 1992: Orr, 1987; Trickett et al., 1985).

The National Alternative Education Association (2006) remains in constant pursuit of their quest for quality alternative education. Effective program guidelines have been developed as a result of that ongoing pursuit. Guiding Principle number five states that active parent involvement is encouraged in utilizing explicit approaches beyond just parent/teacher meetings. The alternative program must include a solution-focused approach between all stakeholders, relating to parents as equal partners in all aspects of an individual educational plan for their child. Parental involvement, decision-making, communication, and program evaluation are crucial to the success of each child within the alternative education program (NAEA, 2006).

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

Individually Designed Education Plan

Students enrolled in alternative schools are typically provided individual education plans. Every alternative student possesses unique academic and social needs. As noted previously, the challenge found in attempting to define alternative school programs is the no one-size-fits-

all approach to the academic and social structure. Alternative schools frequently provide self-paced, mastery-based curricula, and the school schedule itself can be adjusted to meet the need of the individual student. Students may attend school a few hours a day with options of mornings or afternoons and days of the week (Franklin, et al., 1990; Hamilton, 1981; Trickett et al., 1985).

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

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

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

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy and its importance to alternative education program completion were not apparent through the original review of the literature. The concept of student self-efficacy and its essential capacity to impact program completion was reiterated by all three participant groups, in many of the journal writings, and witnessed in some of the observations. Upon completion of all data collection it was evident in this study that self-efficacy was a critical component to program completion and that further research in that area must be included in the literature review.

Throughout many of the interviews it appeared that not only did self-efficacy impact program completion but was a result of program completion as well. Completing the program led to feelings of self-confidence, self-worth, and the mind-set that they possessed the abilities necessary to be successful. Self-efficacy can play a role in a person's psychological state, their behavior, and their motivation (Bandura, 1977).

Self-efficacy can be developed. Teachers can implement certain strategies to build self-efficacy in their students. Mastery experiences yields the most effective way to boost self-efficacy. Anxiety, confusion, becoming overwhelmed, and failing erode and possibly destroy self-confidence. Lessons, instructional activities, and pacing designed specifically for the academic level of the student create mastery experiences. Increased self-efficacy is evident when school work is mastered over time. Vicarious experiences can lead to and strengthen self-efficacy as students observe peers succeeding in school. Credible communication and feedback increase self-efficacy by guiding students through the task or motivating them to put forth their best effort. A students' emotional state is a key aspect to self-efficacy. Teachers cognizant of students' anxiety levels will minimize stressful situations

whenever possible. A positive mood can have a positive impact on one's belief in their abilities, while anxiety may weaken it (Bandura, 1992, Margolis & McCabe, 2006).

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

A study of 102 ninth and tenth grade students in an eastern U.S. city explored the causal relationship between perceived self-efficacy and attainment of academic goals. The results suggested academic performance was impacted by personal goals. Additionally, students with a higher degree of self-efficacy set higher goals. Perceived self-efficacy in the area of achievement promoted goal setting and in turn motivated increased academic progress (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992).

Methodology

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

How do instructors and staff members influence successful program completion?
What influence does family involvement play in successful program completion?
How does student self-efficacy impact successful program completion?
In what way does small student-to-teacher ratio influence successful program completion?
How does social/emotional support influence successful program completion?
What significance does the design and implementation of individually designed education plans play in successful program completion?

Research Design

The nature of this qualitative study of the elements alternative education students believed were significant to the successful completion of their alternative education program situates well into the phenomenological paradigm. Additionally, this study employs the phenomenological variant of the exploratory approach. The focus was to explore the experiences of students completing an alternative program while gaining their perceptions of the effective approaches aiding them to successful completion of that program. The structuring of the study in the phenomenological, exploratory paradigm establishes the necessary framework to proceed in the quest of the elements alternative education students believed were significant to the completion of their alternative education program (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

While this study is rooted in the phenomenological philosophy of structures of consciousness experienced from the first-person point of view of a particular group of alternative education completers, it is further embedded in the critical theory paradigm. The perceptions of students regarding their experiences in completing alternative education

programs is important to this study not just for new knowledge, but to advocate and facilitate academic and social change in the alternative school setting in southeast Kansas.

Sample Selection

In phenomenological studies it is vital that all those in the study experience the phenomenon being studied. Criterion sampling was selected as the sampling type because it proposes that all cases meet specific criteria in order to be included in the sampling group. The pool of participants selected for this study had to be students who had completed one of the alternative education programs in the southeast Kansas area, the parents of those completers, and administrators, and staff members of those two alternative programs. Miles and Huberman (1994) affirm criterion sampling in phenomenological studies is valuable for quality assurance in the pursuit of that study.

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

Instrumentation

The qualitative study includes in-depth interviews, observations, and journal writings of young adults who were once at-risk of academic and personal failure. The population involves 12 students who previously completed a Type II or III alternative school in the southeast Kansas area, 10 staff members of those programs, and 8 parents of students attending those alternative education programs. Field notes from a total of six, 30-to-60 minute obtrusive and unobtrusive observations during times of student engagement at the alternative centers and memos from 32 middle school alternative education student journals round out the data sources for this study.

Data Analysis

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

The data analysis and representation process used in this phenomenological study pursued the modified system of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method developed by Moustakas

(1994). Audio tapes of all the personal interviews were transcribed into text. Files were created and organized for the data. The texts were read with notations inserted in the margins for initial coding and recognition of themes and patterns, especially those that directly addressed the research questions. Statements of meaning were recorded for all responses that directly addressed the research question and lists were created for each individual. Analysis of the data collected in the interviews, observations, and student journals revealed five key areas; instructional practices, highly-qualified staff, social/emotional support services, caring and committed staff, and relationships.

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

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

Summary of the Findings

Data were collected as a part of the investigation of what successful completers of alternative education programs perceive to have influenced their positive outcome. Data sources included individual in-depth interviews of alternative education students, their instructors, and their parents, as well as, student journals, and obtrusive and unobtrusive observations.

How do instructors and staff members influence successful program completion?

1. Caring and committed staff members are the key element shared by all participant groups as critical to successful program completion.
2. Student participants stated that, staff members caring for them in the sense of their willingness to see them through to the end, was key to program completion. Caring and committed staff members are tireless and relentless in pursuit of student achievement and program completion.
3. Staff members agree that the critical element to successful program completion is to believe in the alternative education process and the students that fill their classrooms, developing positive relationships with students and family.
4. Highly-qualified staff members develop effective individual learning plans, designing the pace and the instruction to the individual ability and learning style, while holding high expectations for all students.
5. Parents considered highly-qualified staff members as more likely to impact program completion than the students did.

How does student self-efficacy influence successful program completion?

1. The belief that you are incapable of learning or effectively completing the curriculum is the biggest obstacle to program completion.
2. Implementation of an appropriately designed individual learning plan develops self-efficacy and leads to program completion. Adjusting the academic pace to the appropriate level for each student assists the student to successful assignment completion. Completing assignments correctly and on time helps students to believe in their academic ability. Realizing daily success develops self-confidence.
3. Alternative education teachers believe in the students and their ability to successfully complete the program. They instill hope in their students. Hope helps students to stay the course through completion of the program.

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

1. The smaller setting is more comfortable, safe, and orderly. Comfort and safety are two of the basic physiological needs that must be met in order for learning to occur (Maslow, 1943).
2. Smaller numbers of students allow teachers more opportunity for one-on-one attention and instruction. Individualized attention and instruction are more likely to assist students to program completion.
3. Smaller numbers creates a less intimidating environment and makes it easier to ask and answer questions in class. Once students begin to ask questions, they receive more individual feedback. Understanding, progress, and the likelihood of program completion increases.
4. Smaller numbers allow a greater opportunity for student and teacher relationships to develop. A positive student-to-teacher relationship increases student self-efficacy and the likelihood of program completion.

What influence does family involvement play in successful program completion?

1. At the middle level, appropriate, supportive family involvement is critical to program completion.
2. At the high school level, family involvement is very limited. Students and teachers understand that the responsibility for program completion lies with them.
3. Non-supportive or antagonistic family involvement inhibits progress and/or reduces the likelihood of program completion.

How does social/emotional support influence successful program completion?

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

2. Students stated that daily journaling at the middle school program was a therapeutic experience for them, allowing them to unload their minds of troubling thoughts or circumstances, while mindfully processing the issues to develop a sense of peace and comfort in preparation for the academic day.
3. Social interaction and appropriate conduct are stressed at the middle school program with rewards for positive social behavior. All participant groups involved in the middle level program believe this practice trains and reinforces appropriate conduct in real life situations.
4. Middle school program teachers, students, and parents feel that regular, internal and external, social/emotional support produces a more balanced individual and increases the likelihood of program completion.
5. Students, parents, and especially teachers at the high school program, believe that utilizing extended outside resources for social/emotional support would increase greater chances of program completion.

What significance does the design and implementations of an individually-designed education plan play in successful program completion?

1. An individual learning plan ensures effective assessment of academic level and ability at onset of the program.
2. Students do not become overwhelmed when instruction and pace are geared to their ability levels.
3. Experiencing daily success is critical to successful program completion.

Summary of the Findings into Major Themes

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

Caring and Committed Teachers Promote Successful Program Completion

Teaching, in general, requires more than the ability to instill knowledge. Caring and commitment are regularly echoed in the teaching field as critical qualities of the effective teacher (Payne, 2005). Caring and commitment of the alternative school teachers revealed a deeper, broader foundation than simply liking the students and the enjoyment of assisting their success. Countless demonstrations of caring and commitment were revealed in the conversations with the participants. Students and parents defined and embodied the caring and committed teacher with specific examples of actions and behaviors. Teachers at the alternative programs pursued extended schooling and training, making them better equipped to instruct at varied learning levels, modify instruction, and gain a deeper grasp of the core

content. Their assistance transcended beyond the classroom. Much of the time they would provide, counseling, resources, consolation, guidance, and sometimes just an ear to listen. Instructors and staff members truly believed that all students could learn, understanding that they do not all learn in the same way or within the same time frame. Teachers assume a large role in the student learning process, taking ownership of their students' learning, and understanding that merely teaching does not equate to learning. Staff members were a constant source of encouragement, recognizing and celebrating achievement as it occurred. Program completion was realized by these students because teachers were willing to do whatever it took and tackle any obstacle, while never giving up or giving in.

John C. Maxwell, author of *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (1998) has echoed the trait of caring throughout his writings and workshops on leading people and organizations to the successful achievement of their goals. His quote and leadership mantra, "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" (Maxwell, 1998, p. 103), sums up the responses related to the first major theme of the findings. Maxwell understands, as do the participants in this study, it is all about relationships; whether you are leading adults in an organization or teaching an at-risk student in an alternative school.

Instilling Hope Promotes Successful Program Completion

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

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

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

Staff Members' Relentless Pursuit of Student Progress Promotes Program Completion

Most at-risk students, specifically the individuals interviewed in this study, have experienced family and educators who have given up on them and their ability to be successful in school. Repeated interventions and repeated failures have led family and educators to a sense of frustration and exhaustion, not knowing what to do, or where to turn to for help. Most of the students interviewed did not feel they were capable of completing the program on their own,

especially when they first arrived at the alternative school. Teachers' relentless pursuit of student progress was new and necessary. The students had never experienced the dedication and determination of the staff members within these programs. The at-risk teachers working in the two alternative programs understood and were willing to stay the course to program completion with each student, working in the trenches every day, helping the student to understand that they would never give up helping them to achieve their goal.

Future Recommendations for Study

Mending Wall (1914), a poem written by Robert Frost at the turn of the 20th century, speaks to the custom of neighbors meeting each spring to walk the fence line that divide their properties. The neighbors discuss the damages incurred to the fence from the previous winter. From that communication, neighbors reach consensus on an action plan to repair the damages and restore the fence to good condition. Walking the fence line with alternative education completers could provide the extended research necessary to identifying the key elements to academic success and program completion. Seeking input from alternative education students, their parents, and teachers as to the central components leading to program completion may repair and restore at-risk teens. That input could support the design and implementation of effective alternative programs and establish staff hiring requirements, creating a greater opportunity for more students to successfully complete alternative education programs.

Research

More studies, especially case studies and interviews of students completing programs, could provide the communication necessary to educators for design and development of new alternative education programs. National input from students completing alternative programs is needed to provide extensive data for all facets of alternative school programs.

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

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

Practice

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

Policy

The most important task in any organization is the hiring and retention of highly- qualified, talented, and skilled personnel. Successful organizations employ job-specific interview procedures in order to select the most knowledgeable, skilled, and talented individual for each position opening. Considering the results of this study and the magnitude to which caring and committed teachers impacted academic success and program completion, policies and procedures for hiring highly-qualified, specifically skilled, and talented staff members should be the priority for alternative education programs. Numerous hiring programs are available to organizations and education systems. Many include interview content and procedures specific to the hiring of highly-qualified teachers. The most successful hiring programs gather knowledge, skill, and talent-specific attributes to match compatibilities and create job-specific interview questions for particular employment positions. Using the responses of alternative education program completers, better interview criteria and tools can be constructed in order to hire teachers who are qualified and willing to work with the at-risk teen.

Academic progress is limited when teachers are placed or reassigned to alternative education positions without their consent or desire. In contrast, teachers choosing and applying for positions in the area of alternative education realize positive academic gains with students. An aspect of alternative education that is frequently overlooked is the placement of staff with the appropriate mindset to engage with at-risk students. Bringing together teachers who share a common passion to assist and educate these youngsters increases the potential for student and school success. Most teachers value the prospect of teaching in a setting where colleagues share their educational philosophy. A teacher choosing to work with the at-risk teen is one of the major factors of increased student performance in the alternative setting as opposed to the traditional public school setting (Barr & Parrett, 1997).

Figure 1 below is a graphic representation of the overall findings from the study. The lower half of the graphic depicts the program elements found to be critical to program completion, with all roads leading to self-efficacy. As the study unfolded the attributes of caring and committed teachers resounded as the crucial component to program completion. One significant by-product of the attributes of the caring and committed staff members was the development of student self-efficacy. Results of the study reveal that student self-efficacy is the primary basis for program completion and in-turn is a result of program completion.

The upper portion of this graphic reveals the three areas the study discloses that necessitate attention for the design, implementation, and evaluation of an effective alternative education program. If designed appropriately program, policy, and personal components of the school lead to the development of student self-efficacy as well as program completion.
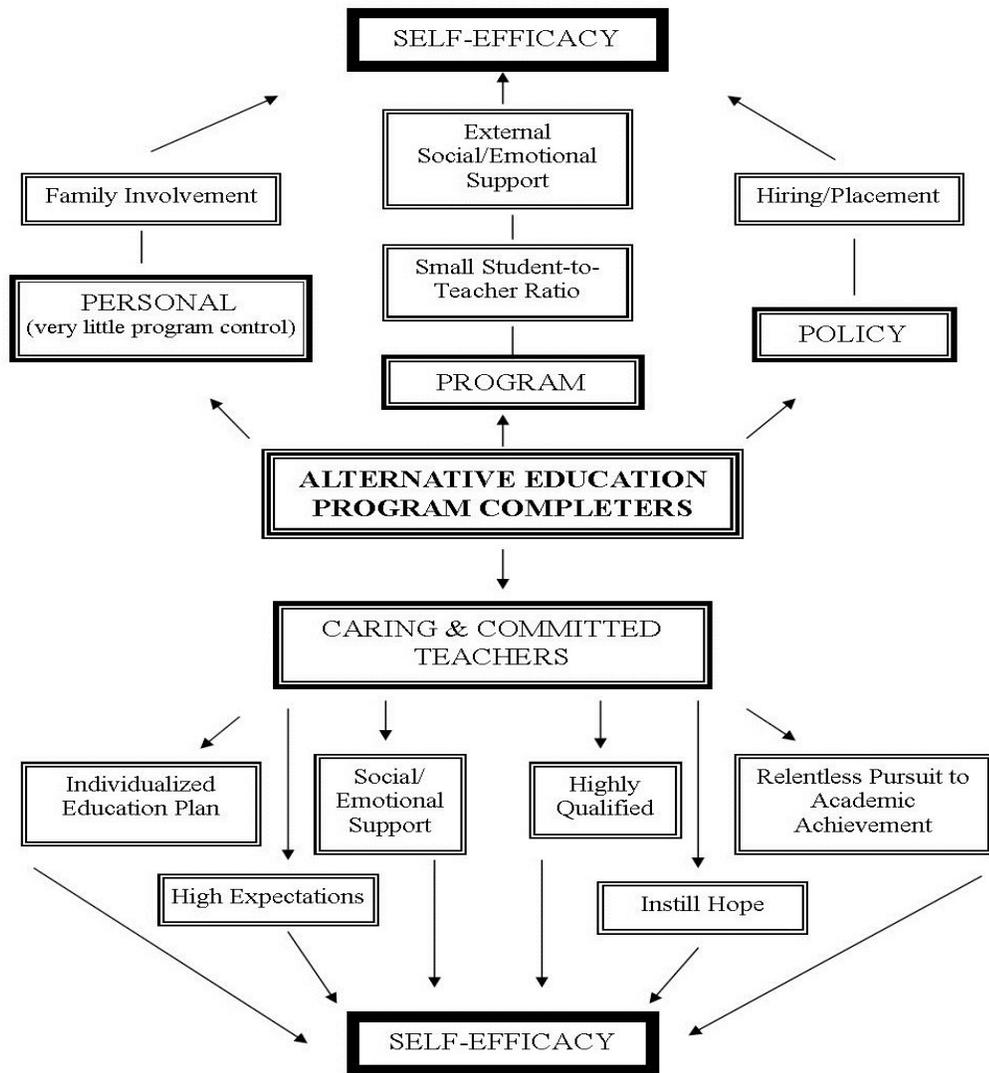

Figure 1. Graphic representation of overall findings.

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