

Perceptions of Educators Regarding the Effectiveness
of Alternative Programs in a Southern State

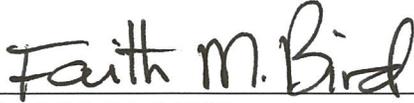
by
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Approval Page

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Abstract

Perceptions of Educators Regarding the Effectiveness of Alternative Programs in a Southern State. Lydia Roberson, 2015: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler School of Education. ERIC Descriptors: Databases, Internet, Media Selection, Middle Schools, At Risk Students

At-risk students are engaged in dangerous behaviors that lead them to become involved in the juvenile justice system and cause the feeling of low self-worth. This eventually causes at-risk youths to drop out of school and engage in detrimental behaviors that meddle in their academic success. The alternative education program provides these at-risk youth with the opportunity to develop positively their academics and behavior to complete a regular high school program. This mixed method study with quantitative and qualitative research enhanced the understanding of the perceptions of the effectiveness of alternative programs from an educator's viewpoint. Conveniently selected educators who worked at an alternative education site, had referred students to an alternative program, had worked with a student who was at an alternative site, or had a student who had been at a program completed a survey examining their perceptions of the effectiveness of alternative programs. From the selection, 10 educators were asked to partake in the qualitative section of the research to strengthen the validity of the research.

The means were estimated to analyze the educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of alternative programs in southern state. The results revealed alternative education programs are needed and are effective in developing the needs of at-risk youths, which was consistent with the research shared in the literature review.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

According to Galotti, Kozberg, and Gustafson (2009), “Youths begin to make consequential, life framing decisions such as educational, career, relationship, spiritual, health, and lifestyle choices during adolescent years” (p. 17). Over 7 million American adolescents—one in four—are estimated to be enormously threatened to many high-risk demeanors and nonaccomplishment in school, while another 7 million are at moderate risk (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Husain & Cantwell, 1992). In 2008, it was estimated over 3 million adolescents aged 16-24 were not registered in high school, preventing them from earning a high school diploma (Chapman, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2010). The Alliance for Excellent Education also conveyed that nearly 7,000 high school students drop out daily (Wise, 2008). Youths who encounter challenges such as absence of positive guidance support, exposure to underprivileged environment and hostility, and lack of stable family relationships become at risk (Karcher, 2008; Sims, Sims, & Brucek, 2008). These researchers also stated these at-risk youths are more likely to drop out of high school when compared to youths who are not at risk. These at-risk youths habitually live in poverty-stricken communities, experiencing violence, and are deprived of resources and the foundation that would empower them to be successful (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore & Fox, 2010).

For the purpose of this study, *at-risk students* are defined as students who could possibly drop out of school or engage in self-destructive behavior, which may interfere with academic and behavior success (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2008). At-risk youths are involved in precarious behaviors, which are evident in their high rate of involvement in the juvenile justice system and caused by low self-esteem and

low self-efficacy (Boyd, 2004; Donnelly, n.d.; Hartmann, 2003). It is believed that at-risk youths who do not partake in positive mediations or positive reinforcement may find themselves embracing aberrant behavior that leads them to reckless acts, such as malingering, substance abuse, and vicious behavior (Bradshaw, O'Brennan, & McNeely, 2008). Bradshaw et al. (2008) believed the problem of at-risk behaviors and academic problems of students at the alternative sites are crucial and can negatively impede them from advancing in school or their personal lives. Laursen (2005) conveyed that teachers who work with at-risk students are able to provide the essential strategies to alter negative behaviors without intimidation or reprimand. Therefore, if the perceptions of the educators directly engaged in these students' lives were taken into consideration when examining the contributing factors, it would allow a realistic understanding of at-risk behaviors to better address enrollment and specific needs of these students at alternative education sites.

The research problem. Alternative educational services help youths develop educational skills that are effective pathways to the prevention and intervention of delinquencies (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). Over the last 20 years, the alternative education program has been in existence in the county in a southern State. This alternative education program provides opportunities that enable students identified as seriously at risk to improve academically and behaviorally and, as a result, return to a school setting that best meets their needs to earn a regular high school diploma. These students are in Grades 6-12 and have been referred by their district student placement committee, their zone school, or for temporary emergency placement by the area superintendent for academic and discipline issues. Students are placed in the program for 45 to 65 days, depending on the extent of their disciplinary problem, and can take

advantage of a positive school environment, caring and competent teachers, small class size, and enhance incentives for change in behavior to assure graduation when placed in their zone schools. The goal is to withdraw students temporarily from the regular high school setting who are experiencing academic and behavioral problems before expulsion (“Alternative Education Program,” 1985). The strategies implemented are small size classes, individualized instruction, positive reinforcement techniques, strict supervision, and successful day slips for good behavior. The problem is that some of the same strategies have been utilized and outcomes of the program have not been investigated.

Background and justification. It is estimated that in the United States, at least one third of public high schools students will not graduate (Thornburgh, 2006). Finding preventative measures to decrease school dropout rate continues to be a challenge (Bradshaw et al., 2008). It is believed that students who commonly follow an optimistic direction enjoy a valuable life in adulthood (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009). Additionally, the Alliance for Excellent Education revealed that, every day, practically 7,000 children give up on high school (Wise, 2008). Similar studies have explained that every 29 seconds a U.S. student gives up on school. Most dropouts have stated they believe they could have succeeded in school if they had been given the right opportunity (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). On the other hand, students who quit high school get involved in precarious health behaviors, have a poor attitude, accomplish less in their lives, and experience impoverish mental conditions (Archambault et al., 2009). Bradshaw et al. (2008) declared that if preventative factors are not put into effect, at-risk students will continue to make their lives more complicated and continue to drop out of school.

Alternative educational services have expanded due to recognizing that helping

youths develop educational skills can be one of the most effective approaches to the prevention and intervention of delinquency (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004).

Disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEPs) are schools designed to assist students who manifest difficulty to operate at their zone schools (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). The vision of DAEPs is to encourage positive behaviors of unruly students (Aron, 2003, 2006). In order to reduce violence in U.S. schools, placement in a DAEP is considered mandatory and designed to enforce ZERO tolerance policies as a disciplinary system, which was materialized by the federal government in 1994 (Cortez & Montecel, 1999; Foley & Pang, 2006). Casella (2003) noted zero tolerance policies expanded the ability of administrators to engage in the “implementation of punitive and judicial forms of discipline” (p. 874). These included in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, induction in DAEPs, expulsions, and fixated in juvenile justice services (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). In addition, comprehending the trends in student discipline provides useful information to serve in teaching these students and to serve discipline committees, developing interventions, and attempting to improve the climate and safety of schools (Booker & Mitchell, 2011).

A few alternative education sites use the Performance Level Progression Plan, which is a behavior modification program designed to help students learn socially adequate behaviors. When an at-risk student at these sites excels, it is an indication that the organization strives in accomplishing its vision and mission. The results of the research should be useful in adding to the progression plan for educators as they work with at-risk youths in developing their personal goals to be successful in school and thus their community.

Likewise, Snyder and Sickmund (2006) stated that the pinnacle delinquency ages

are 15 to 19. Lipsey, Wilson, and Noser (2007) stated that to enhance outcome, youths need training in social, cognitive, and behavioral strategies; attention focusing; social skills training; and personal guidance. Chew, Osseck, Raygor, Eldridge-Houser, and Cox (2010) explained that external and internal protective factors can conclusively facilitate success in life. These assets include being nurtured, showing direction, learning boundaries, being serious minded regarding learning, and allowing inferential use of time, making youth who lack protective qualities approximately three times more likely than their peers, who do possess these assets, to have health problems and develop unhealthy habits. Because of this, Cavell, Dubois, Karcher, Keller, and Rhodes (2009) believed that youths who do not experience positive support or nurturing from caring adults are susceptible to severe challenges that lead to academic disappointments and risky behaviors. Because our society is at a crossroads with a struggling economy, everyone needs to ensure our students are prepared for the changes of the 21st century to overcome the obstacles and ultimately help others through the process of organizing and planning for the betterment of each other (Burton, 2009).

Due to the number of influences on youths in their challenge to overcome adverse negative behaviors, it is crucial to inquire their reason to change the path to a positive outcome. The use of quantitative survey research was an attempt to understand delinquent behaviors and program effectiveness from adult educators at the alternative education sites to develop strategies to address problems effectively in order to prevent adolescents from being at risk.

Deficiencies in the evidence. Important reasonable implications involve explaining connections among risk behaviors (Busseri, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2007). When students have mastered academically and socially, or are on their way to achieve

their qualifications to transition to work or postsecondary school, success is signaled (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Davis, Brutseart-Durant, and Lee (2002) implied that something that is always absent from alternative education programs is the arduous procedure for admitting the students who need help in improving their academic, social, and personal needs. McDonald (2002) explained that if at-risk youths have problems connecting socially, alternative programs should provide interventions to improve social skills and insist on superior behavior expectation. In addition, alternative programs must employ staff members who are capable of providing the services for at-risk youths. It is believed a very high percentage of teachers who work with at-risk youths do not have suitable training to foster their social need (Ashcroft, 1999). It is significant to note that when at-risk youths intensify their social skills, they maintain their academic success (Guerin & Denti, 1999).

A better understanding of the continuous interest among risk behaviors is critical in order to determine prevention and intervention efforts that focus on a common set of risk factors or tailored to specific behaviors (Farrell, Sullivan, Esposito, & Meyer, 2005; Welte, Barnes, Wieczorek, Tidwell, & Parker, 2004). Changing behavior through an intervention aimed at a specific cause or a given risk behavior will not necessarily reduce the other risk behaviors if the factors are not in conjunction with those specific risk behaviors. Although there have been few inquiries that directly introduced alternatives, various explanations for the associations among adolescent risk behaviors have been proposed (Busseri et al., 2007). Instead, investigators focus differences in the nature and degree of risk behavior involvement (Busseri et al., 2007). According to Quinn and Poirer (2006), there is a shortage of research about alternative education programs and of evidence to show whom the program assisted and why, how they operated, the intensity

of their receptiveness to at-risk students' needs, and the degree of positive involvement and outcomes of student achievement.

On the other hand, Quinn, Osher, Hoffman, and Hanley (1998) explained that even though educators understand the mechanism of a successful school, they are skeptical about designing programs for specific students, which sometimes causes wrong placement (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998). However, Hosley (2003) believed there is a demand for alternative education programs. Raywid (2001) shared that students who have failed need a beneficial education in order to be successful, and it is very important for professionals who impart these necessities to be provided with arduous and encouraging developmental strategies. In order to improve the understanding of educators of at-risk behaviors of adolescents, they will need to be able to identify specific student needs and directly construct strategies to better address at-risk behaviors in improving students' future development.

Audience. The target audience for this research is composed of principals, educators, parents, social workers, the community, and counselors. Social service providers, the juvenile system, and schools have the capacity to support both delinquent youths and their families in enriching their well-being (Frankford, 2007). The optimistic belief is that at-risk adolescents have the potential to change. Designing programs based on that belief allow school personnel to use their power to produce positive identities in adolescents through creating a respectful and caring environment, validating feelings, having high expectations, and allowing expressions of opinions (Nelson & Eckstein, 2008). Thought processing and communication skills are essential, more so when relationships between adolescents and parents differ (Martin & Martin, 2000). It is important for family units to be resourceful, have the ability to overcome conflicts, and

be inclined in developing alternative solutions (Martin & Martin, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

The problem addressed by this study was to gain a better understanding of the educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of the alternative programs for at-risk youths in a county in a southern state. This dissertation can potentially be used to develop and strengthen the alternative programs to address the perilous issues of at-risk youths to improve their social, behavioral, and economic security toward a successful future. In addition, the study proposes alternative strategies to improve the learning opportunities toward a successful assessment of the alternative program that will transform and impact at-risk youths even after they leave the program.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This research is embedded in the developmental changes of adolescence viewed from the social cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory of adolescent development. Theories that relate to social cognitive theory, self-efficacy theory, and at-risk adolescents highlight the importance of fostering positive self-perception and relationships. When at-risk adolescents accept help from others, learning is facilitated and enhanced toward positive accomplishments. These theories are relevant to at-risk students in a program, at school, at work, in a social setting, or any other personal experience. According to Bandura (2005), as human's mature, there is an increase of challenges, new prospects, and obligations towards development. Bandura (2005) believed that adolescent development should be construed from the social cognitive perspective. Bandura (2005) stated that social cognitive theory examines the development through changes and social interactions. Instead of understanding growth in adolescents as a period of turbulence, social cognitive theory highlights adolescent growth as a normal evolving process of learning through experiences (Bandura, 2005). In addition, Pajares (2002) believed that people who make practical and conscious decisions could direct their own path. Social cognitive theory is about having a purpose, a plan, self-restraint, and discipline (Bandura, 2001). Self-control makes people form suitable paths towards their prosperity (Bandura, 2001), and self-deliberation allows individuals to make better choices about their actions to change accordingly (Pajares, 2002).

Furthermore, Bandura (1997) gave a pronounced role in recognizing efficacy in families, more so in relationships and family life. Bandura (2005) explained that having faith is important in developing one's self, adjusting to dissimilar situations, and

transforming. Faith in efficacy functions on rationalizing, emotions, and executing decisions. It influences positive and negative thinking in uplifting or enervating ways that alters people's ambitions to persevere or relinquish when faced with asperity. Because of this, Bandura (2005) believed that efficacy is significant towards intellectual development and achievements. Students who have faith in their efficacy will show accountability for their own learning, teachers who have faith in their own efficacy will uplift students and encourage learning, and the faculties who have faith in efficacy will believe their school can achieve major academic development. Faith in efficacy influences choices that eventually determine an individual's direction. This happens because the social pressures in certain environments maintain particular aptitudes, values, and standards of living. Adolescents who do not exercise personal responsibility toward their goals become uninterested, indifferent, and pessimistic (Bandura, 2005). Bandura (2005) stated that educators play an important role in creating a positive and motivating learning experience for their students.

Alternative Education Programs

The number of alternative education programs that aim to guide students at risk of failure (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002) is definitely increasing, with present-day estimates ranging from 20,000 to 100,000 being managed nationally (Aron, 2006). School districts that register minorities and poverty-stricken students are inclined to have more alternative education programs, and it is estimated that 54% of school districts with alternative programs are challenged with the demand (Kleiner et al., 2002). According to Tissington (2006), No Child Left Behind Act high-stakes responsibility has augmented the number of students in alternative education programs because educators are weary that low students' scores can give their schools a low rate (Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

Tissington (2006) also stated that the increase of students enrolling in alternative education might be a direct result of procedures in traditional school settings that cause students to misbehave and become low achievers. Raywid (as cited in Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006) endeavored to classify alternative programs into three categories. Type I programs are full-time and voluntary for students who are in need of individualized instruction or innovation (Raywid as cited in Brown & Kraemer, 2006). Type II programs address the needs of students with disciplinary issues. Type III programs assist students with academic or social-emotional problems who desire to return to a regular school setting. Furthermore, Raywid (as cited in Quinn et al., 2006) redefined the alternative school categories and stated, “To better capture the complexities of alternative education today, they must be (a.) programs that attempt to change the student, (b.) programs that change the school, and (c.) programs that change the educational system” (p. 12).

Aron (2003) analyzed the literature on alternative education resulting in a typology system. Aron’s (2003) typology is composed of factors that are beneficial in comprehending the variety of options that illustrate alternative education programs in the United States (see Table 1). The typology highlights the scope of alternative education. Alternative education programs are composed of accommodated scheduling, personalized instruction, and low student-to-teacher ratios (Aron, 2006). Tissington (2006) asserted alternative programs often offer increased opportunities for at-risk youths in an engaged learning environment. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education enhanced the policy called the Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate that warrants all students graduate within 4 years. Because of this, alternative education programs have been impacted because they provide at-risk students access to educational opportunities (Lehr, Tan, &

Ysseldyke, 2009) and, according to Beales and Bertonneau (1997), “private providers are well equipped to meet the special needs of difficult-to-educate students” (p. 1).

Table 1

Aron’s Typology of U.S. Alternative Education Programs

Option	Factor
General type of alternative education	Separate school or program Perspective/strategy with a regular K-12 school
Target population	Suspended/expelled students Recovered drop-outs/at-risk youth
Focus/purpose	Academic completion Career preparation Disciplinary Transitional
Operational setting	Resource rooms Schools-within-a-school Separate self-contained alternative school
Educational focus	Short-term bridge back to schools for Students who are off track Students who are <i>very</i> far behind Educationally accelerated program
Sponsor or administrative entity	Nonprofit state or local education agency/charter school Juvenile justice agency K-12 public or private school Federally funded program and contractors (e.g., Job Corps)
Credentials offered	Regular high school diploma General Educational Development (GED) Diploma
Funding sources	Federal State Local Private

Note. From *Towards a Typology of Alternative Education Programs: A Compilation of Elements From the Literature* (p. 25), by L. Y. Aron, 2003. Retrieved from http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410829_alternative_education.pdf. Adapted with permission.

Types of Alternative Education Programs

The typology of alternative education was characterized into three different types by Raywid (1994):

1. Type I alternatives offers a challenging yet enjoyable school environment.

They are often popular schools of choice. The administrators and organization usually stray away from the traditional school beliefs; however, placed emphasis on instructional and content strategies.

2. Type II alternatives are programs are usually a last resort for students before expulsion. This program offers short-term behavior modifications. This program aims to transform behavior giving less importance to curriculum changes.

3. Type III alternatives are for students who are believed to be in need of intervention or therapy for either academic failure of social and emotional troubles. The supposition is that after effective treatment students can return to regular school setting.

However, in the past decade, there have been many changes and amendments in the educational structure of school systems that inspired Raywid (1998) to reorganize her three main types of alternative education programming. Raywid (1998) indicated this reformation was composed of three well-defined levels:

1. Change the student: alternatives that attempt to fix the student.

2. Change the school: highly innovative schools that focus on changing the curriculum and instructional approaches to traditional education.

3. Change the educational system: alternatives that attempt to make system-wide change in educational systems.

Alternative Education Role for At-Risk Youths

The alternative education sites in a southern state provided a program that enabled students identified as seriously at risk to improve academically and behaviorally and as a result return to a school setting that best meet their needs to earn a regular high school diploma (“Alternative Education Program,” 1985). Scales, Benson, Leffert, and Blyth (2000) noted youth prosperity is exposed by evidence of thriving (i.e., achievement of positive developmental tasks). School success, physical wellness, optimistic relationships with others, communication skills, appropriate choices, and able to overcome adversity can be accomplished. By adhering to opportunities that are structured, youths can attain direction and ascertain limitations as well as increase their prospects (Freeburg & Workman, 2008). Many at-risk youths have been encouraged by adults in various programs to find jobs and become involved in careers that will improve their status (Freeburg & Workman, 2008).

Intervention programs for at-risk youths soon after they display harmful behavior, such as drinking, smoking, using drugs, and exhibiting conduct disorder, embodies a link between prevention and treatment of the problem (Frankford, 2007). Opportunities for at-risk youths are available to prevent them from quitting school and to address challenging needs that must be met to be successful in school and in their environment (Sullivan & Bishop, 2005). Interventions such as alternative schools and programs can prevent at-risk youths from dropping out of school and can encourage and motivate them to learn skills for life. According to Rutter (1993), risk cannot be assumed only by overall family environment because different children, given their biological predisposition, birth order, gender, and age, may be adversely affected by their surroundings. Hence, it was incumbent to look at individualized aspects of children’s experiences to obtain the

perspective of adolescents regarding their views and experiences of being at risk. For this reason, it was important to explore and understand why youths behave the way they do in order to better develop effective interventions.

The Effectiveness of Alternative Education Programs

According to Raywid (1998), alternative education programs slowly became permanent placement for students with academic and behavior problems. Students seemed to be immersed in the alternative education programs but failed devastatingly when they returned to the traditional school setting. Reimer and Cash (2003) stated, “there has been a description of a successful dropout program” (p. 14) since 1988 via the maintenance of a model programs database. A classification of nine different varieties of alternative education programs were fostered by the database (Schargel & Smink, 2001).

The list of the different varieties of alternative education programs are as follows (Schargel & Smink, 2001).

1. School-within-a-school is established for students needing a separate location within the traditional school. They are usually held in a separate wing with different staff for academic or social behavior.
2. Schools without walls are for students requiring educational and training programs. Services are delivered from various locations within the community and offer flexible student schedules.
3. Residential schools are for special-case students who are usually placed by the courts or the family with special counseling and educational programs offered.
4. Separate alternative learning centers feature a specialized curriculum such as parenting skills or unique job skills. They are in a separate location from the traditional school, many times located in businesses, churches, or remodeled retail centers with excellent transportation services.
5. College-based alternative schools use a college facility but are intended for students needing high school credits and are operated by public school staff. The college setting enhances the student’s self-esteem and offers other services that benefit the student’s growth.

6. Summer schools are either remedial for academic credits or enhance a student's special interests, perhaps in science, computers, the arts, or other fields.

7. Magnet schools focus on selected curriculum areas with specialized teachers and with student attendance usually by choice.

8. Second-chance schools are for students who are judged to be troubled and placed in the school by the courts or the school district as a last chance before being expelled or incarcerated.

9. Charter schools are autonomous educational entities operating under a contract negotiated between the state agency and the local school sponsors. (pp. 115-116)

Effective Characteristics of Alternative Programs

According to Barr (1981), "It is important not simply to match learners with teachers but to develop an educational system in which parents, students, and teachers can choose the type of program they believe to be in their best interests" (p. 571). For example, the implementation of successful alternative schools has compelled local school systems to review some of their traditional pedagogical practices in order to assist the individual needs of troubled youth (Barr, 1981). Furthermore, Dynarski and Gleason (1998) made the following declaration,

If we as a society want to encourage more students to complete high school, we need to continue trying new approaches and ideas that may work better. A starting point for a new approach is to consider why some programs have an effect while others do not . . . Programs that succeed simply may be the right blend of activities, approaches, and supports for their students. Using a specific program approach, such as creating a school within a school or an alternative school, is fundamentally a one-size-fits-all solution that is in conflict with the many different kinds of students and the many different reasons they have for dropping out. (p. 2)

Dynarski and Gleason (1998) noted educators should not have much confidence in a dropout prevention program that treats all students in the same way.

Consequently, Dynarski and Gleason (1998) explained that when assessing the effectiveness of alternative education programs, careful thought of the physical,

intellectual, social, and emotional characteristics of each student should be augmented by some specific intervention factor of the alternative education program. Furthermore, Duke and Griesdorn (1999) performed research on the effectiveness of alternative education programs in Virginia and determined that using one specific criterion to assess the effectiveness of alternative schools was inconsistent and unfair. These researchers believed alternative education programs exist for different reasons and they should not be compared to traditional schools standards. Duke and Griesdorn noted thoughtful consideration should be given to assess outcomes that are more subjective such as “student interest, ability, and motivation to learn” (p. 89).

Lange and Sletten (2002) believed “nontraditional outcomes for alternative students may negate the positive outcomes that have emerged in the areas of increased satisfaction, self-esteem, and connection to school” (p. 22). Barr and Parrett (1997) shared that alternative education programs have been effective in lessening of violent behaviors and high school dropouts, enriched academic achievement, improved self-esteem and attitudes about school and learning, strengthened personal motivation, and better appreciation for ethnic diversity and congenial living. In addition, research showed at-risk youth progress in their commitment phases, motivation, and interest, achieving more than they ever imagined when they are given the opportunity to participate in an effective alternative education program (Barr & Parrett, 1997). Thus, an effective alternative school represents a concerned and sympathetic community, an engaging and adaptable curriculum guide, and a disciplined and systematic strategic plan for student achievement (Raywid, 1994).

At-Risk Youths Delinquent Behaviors

Snyder and Sickmund (2006) stated that delinquency peak ages are 15 to 19 and

some negligent behaviors seem natural (Vermeiren, 2003). For example, eight to 10 high school seniors (81.9%) reported drinking alcohol in their lifetime, and half (50.8%) reported they drank alcohol in the past 30 days (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). Carter (2004) disclosed that 6 million adolescents in the United States have experienced some type of criminal violation in their lifetimes, including up to 95% of inner-city children. Foley and Pang (2006) added that the three most recognized admittance criteria reported for entry into alternative school programs are “social-emotional problems, truancy problems, and home school referral” (p. 11). Saunders and Saunders (as cited in Foley & Pang, 2006) stated,

Other findings from the national survey of alternative schools indicated approximately 50% of the school districts reported physical aggression (52%), chronic truancy (51%), and verbal disruptive behavior (45%) as criteria for removal of a student from a general education setting. Likewise, youth attending alternative schools have reported their placement was most often for absenteeism (57%), low academic performance (47%), suspensions and expulsions (36%), and classroom behavior problems (27%). (p. 18)

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2000), students who are suspended and expelled from schools nearly doubled in the last 25 years. Weissman et al. (2005) stated the increase is in response to the new “zero tolerance” protocol and other correctional disciplinary policies. Bridgeland et al. (2006) indicated that in the United States, the high school achievement rate was between 68-71% and that the failure rate may be as high as 30%. These researchers also explained that every 29 seconds, a U.S. student absconded from school, and most dropouts interrogated later in life stated they believed they could have flourished in school if they had been given the right opportunity and had not treated school so frivolously.

Nelson and Eckstein (2008) stated the term *at risk* indicates that unless students’ support is present, they will experience obstacles to graduating from high school. Chew

et al. (2010) shared that many youths incur undue injury, illness, and even death because of preventable, unhealthy behaviors. Walker, Ramsey, and Gresham (2005) explained that teachers have difficulty teaching and students have problems learning at schools due to problem behaviors like harassment, aggression, social withdrawal, and insubordination. Frankford (2007) explained that positive youth development and the prevention of problem behaviors in adolescents is connected between a child and an adolescent's behavioral disorderliness, a deficiency of individual and family resources, and shortage of neighborhood and community resources. It was reported that at least 25% of youths in the United States are at risk of attaining a gratifying adulthood (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). It is also believed that dropout rates for at-risk students in excessive distressing conditions, such as living in poverty-stricken regions, can increase as much as three times the national average (Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005).

Characteristics of At-Risk Youths

Kansas State Department of Education (2006) noted such at-risk characteristics as students not accomplishing the necessary requirements for promotion to the next grade level, students attaining low grades, students who are potential dropouts, students who have been retained, and students not reading on grade level. At-risk youths usually have low self-esteem and low self-efficacy and are involved in unhealthy behavior as evidenced by their high rate of involvement in the juvenile justice system (Boyd, 2004; Donnelly, n.d., Hartmann, 2003). Donnelly (n.d.) explained that at-risk youths display impetuous behavior and experience dilemma in relationships and often get involved in drug dependency issues, early pregnancies due to unprotected sex, and family predicaments that influence disciplinary and truancy problems at school. In poverty-stricken areas where the district educational funds are not sufficient to provide additional

human resources for prevention programs (Truscott & Truscott, 2005), the dropout rate is higher than average due to an increasing percentage of families with financial struggles (Viadero, 2008).

Frankford (2007) explained that at-risk youths experience vulnerable problems, including emotional and troubled disorders, substance ill-use, hostile and risk-taking behaviors, and poor connection to and performance in school. According to Matsuba, Elder, Petrucci, and Marleau (2008), at-risk youths face additional challenges of being homeless, being a school dropout, contending with substance abuse, and having unlawful criminal records. ASCA (2008) stated that absenteeism; performing below academic potential or participating in self-inflicting harm; and involvement in drug usage, aggression, and physical turbulence are some behaviors that place students at risk.

Origin and Effects of At-Risk Behaviors

Sullivan and Bishop (2005) explained that at-risk students have peculiar needs that must be embraced for them to be successful in school. Nelson and Eckstein (2008) shared that undoubtedly, financial insecurities and family structure has brought ample social and financial pressure and lack of engagement in family and community life sometimes leading to criminal activity, drug use, and dropping out of school. Students leave school for diverse reasons, including teen pregnancy, large student to teacher ratio, social issues, dissimilar learning styles, and difficult home situations, to name a few (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). These situations make it detrimental to at-risk students as well as their communities, states, and nation. Bridgeland et al. (2006) shared that at-risk youths, unfortunately, are more likely to live in impoverished conditions and life-threatening situations, in prison, and with divorced and a single parent compared to their peers who choose to struggle in completing school requirements. Van Acker (2007)

noted the “tendency to criminalize school behavior is associated with increased school dropout, higher levels of incarceration, and minority overrepresentation in juvenile detention” (p. 5). Lane and Carter (2006) discussed that students with emotional and behavioral disorders often misconstrue social cues and confuse their thoughts about their own abilities and social interactions, thus have difficulties with the social and behavioral demands of school.

Academic and Interpersonal Achievement for At-Risk Youths

Freeburg and Workman (2008) indicated it is of importance to build at-risk youth, career-related self-efficacy such as self-confidence about suitable appearance choices for job preparation training. For effective employment training, at-risk youth needs to participate in a differentiated curriculum addressing emotional issues such as low self-worth and alienation in addition to the established job skills etiquette and work obligations (Matsuba et al., 2008). In addition, training in social, cognitive, and behavioral strategies; thoughtfulness; interrelations skills; and personal empowerment have all been validated to improve outcome (Lipsey et al., 2007). Chew et al. said factors of reassurance from external and internal settings ultimately facilitate success and include “support, empowerment, boundaries, use time constructively, dedication to learning, positive beliefs, and positive individuality” (p. 67). These researchers also shared that youth who lack supportive qualities are approximately three times more likely than their peers, who do possess these assets, to have health problems and develop unhealthy habits.

Bridgeland et al. (2006) noted most dropouts interviewed later in life stated they believed they could have flourished in school if they had been given the right opportunity, such as mentoring. Plucker, Muller, Rapp, Jons, and Ravert (as cited in Chalker & Stelsel, 2009) expressed that it is possible to provide self-paced, small class

settings; flexible schedules; one-on-one tutoring; caring teachers who model prosocial behaviors; a climate of respect that limits social distractions and disruptions; emphasis on multicultural interaction and dispute resolution; and computer-based instruction to develop at-risk student success.

In addition, it is hoped that at-risk youths become civil individuals for the betterment of themselves as well as their communities. *Collins Essential English Dictionary* (as cited in Dekker, 2009), defined *civility* as “hold back in pursuit of their own interest . . . affairs without behaving fanatical” (p. 222). In daily life, civility is correlated with possessing virtues and individual manners. Individuals manifest civility when they hold back in the pursuit of their own self-interest, are polite and to a certain extent helpful to other people, and when they express an interest in public affairs without being too fanatical (Dekker, 2009). When individuals behave selfishly and aggressively, do not know how to behave in public (i.e., behave as if they were at home), and are completely indifferent to issues of communal and public interest, they are described as being uncivilized (Dekker, 2009). It is important for civility to be practiced in public spaces, especially in communications between people who might not know each other. Demonstrating collective understanding for similar interests between citizens is always required when there is disparity in opinions to avoid conflicts. Providing support to at-risk youths to develop self-respect and prevent social clashes is a responsibility that can help support the need for state intervention (Dekker, 2009).

Expected Behavior of Youths

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) and Thompson and Rudolph (1998), in devising goals for adolescents schooling, shared five characteristics of an effective adolescent:

1. Effective adolescents are impulsive learners and can enhance their thinking skills. They can communicate persuasively, write and speak intelligibly, understand basic vocabulary for core classes, and recognize the importance of languages and cultures.

2. Effective adolescents are on their way to a meaningful work and life experience. Work is vital to survive and develop self-identity. Youths must have knowledge about professional possibilities and not be limited by gender or racial regulations. They will comprehend the importance of completing high school and take advantage of postsecondary education.

3. Adolescents will be responsible, thus be accountable in being positive role models in developing the world. It is imperative the community become involved in guiding youths to define themselves, thus their school and community. In addition, it is anticipated they will recognize the essential values of our nation and develop awareness for the western and nonwestern worlds.

4. Adolescents will be concerned individuals who are able to reason clearly and favorably and behave ethically. Our youths must understand the disparity between right and wrong and must be resolute in their values. They will understand the grandness of appreciating family and social relationships and that all relationships command sacrifices and effort and if absence can make life meaningless.

5. Our youth will comprehend the connection between healthy eating, physical habits, and overall health. These provide a feeling of strength, which is directly connected to self-image. The effective adolescent will value personal strengths and be able to overcome challenges easily.

Impact of At-Risk Youths on Society

At-risk youth are a major concern in education and development of a community.

It is vital to identify potential problems and provide adequate interventions and outreach to at-risk youths and their families (Chew et al., 2010). Social service providers, the juvenile system, and schools can be productive in assisting both delinquent youths and their families in enhancing their well-being. The hope is that at-risk adolescents have the potential to change, and programs designed based on that belief will enable school personnel to construct and expect positive behavior in adolescents through creating a respectful and caring environment, validating feelings, having high expectations, and allowing expressions of opinions (Nelson & Eckstein, 2008). Adolescents who experience high-risk failure in school and in their communities are often engaged in activities that are designed to foster self-determination and individualized, positive development.

For example, a cohort of youth who received the RENEW intervention experienced significant progress functioning in school, which is what the model is designed to affect (Malloy, Sundar, Hagner, Pierias, & Viet, 2010). Intervention strategies veer adolescents from wrongdoings, providing relevant alternatives to meet social, emotional, and economic needs such as “after school programs, counselling, work study, social skills, and conflict resolution” (Acker, 2007, p. 8). Acker (2007) shared that alternative education programs have the capability of addressing the needs of youths who exhibit unsocial behavior by providing extensive assistance focusing on individual needs and providing an effective treatment environment. In addition, alternative education programs encourage the removal of students from ineffective and coercive school, home, and community influences and provide a safe setting for addressing their problem behaviors while promoting academic success and establishing a routine discipline that can bring order to youths whose lives may have been chaotic.

Importance of Understanding At-Risk Youths

When developing effective prevention programs, it is important to understand adolescent risk behavior in a theme sense instead of focusing on an independent or separate behavior (Jessor, 1991). According to Jessor (1991), at-risk youth often allow themselves to become entangled in a constellation of risk behaviors (drinking while intoxicated, unprotected sexual encounters, abusing cigarettes, fighting, and harmful drug use). Henggeler's (1982) belief was that adolescents should find significance in embedding in and interacting with various systems and schemes that invigorate them as individuals and strengthens relationships with family members and school, church, and community organizations.

As adolescents adjust to rapid changes in physical, emotional, and social growth, behaviors emerge in search of new identities that are often in conflict with those behaviors desired by persons in their environments (Zirpoli & Melloy, 2001). Adolescents' homes, schools, and communities may often be seen in futility as their desire to develop constructive relationships with these youths is thwarted. Although at-risk adolescent behaviors can be exasperating, they can also foster exhilaration, excitement, enthusiasm, and joy as they choose to embrace life with vigor and resiliency (Zirpoli & Melloy, 2001). Adolescents, ages 11 through 19, must acquire the proper support and expose themselves to relationships that are central to mental, social, and physical development (Zirpoli & Melloy, 2001).

Many persons who live with and work with adolescents find it difficult to define what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of expected behavior (Zirpoli & Melloy, 2001). As teenagers get older, they spend less and less time with their families and more time with their age group, a behavior close fitting with feeling grown (Larson & Richard,

1991). Even though it is expected that adolescents will eventually be able to support themselves, it is obligatory for adults to continue directing them and teaching them ways of following instructions, such as emphasizing curfews, presenting beliefs about the adolescent's peers, and becoming aware of their whereabouts, which sometimes creates conflict between the adult and the adolescent (Zirpoli & Melloy, 2001). Nevertheless, there are adolescents who manifest their desire to be disciplined because they feel it is a sign of love and care when an adult finds the time necessary to be informed about the adolescents' activities and to help them make decisions about friends and other crucial factors in their lives.

Often, behavior exhibited is in direct correlation to support an adolescent (Zirpoli & Melloy, 2001). For example, Benson, Laffert, Scales, and Blyth (1998) expressed that the determinant in nonuse of alcohol and other drugs among adolescents was the degree to which they believed their parents would become furious to find out they had been drinking.

Summary

The literature review affirms that youth who are at risk have many behavioral, academic, social, and family problems. It is unfortunate that high-risk youths live in vulnerable families and in communities that are dysfunctional, contain high rates of dispute, and expose youth to high-risk activities (Frankford, 2007). Smith (2008) suggested that negligent behavior is somewhat extensive, particularly minor delinquencies like petty theft, underage drinking, and truancy. As stated in the theoretical framework, social cognitive and self-efficacy theories prove that at-risk youth undergo different changes but, if directed in the right direction, they can become successful. The influences in the environment put youths at risk for negative behaviors, and they need to

develop resiliency (Philip & Hendry, 2008). Therefore, according to Matsuba et al. (2008), it is essential for any at-risk youth development program to face “the underlying psycho-socio-emotional struggles that at-risk youth experience if their ultimate goal is to attain any meaningful and long lasting effect” (p. 23). Therefore, in this quantitative study, the researcher explored the perceptions of educators of the effectiveness of alternative education programs.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What are the perceptions of educators regarding the program of at-risk youths on alternative facilities in a southern state?
2. How do educators at an alternative school for at-risk youths describe and explain the social behaviors of at-risk youths?
3. How do educators at an alternative school for at-risk youths perceive at-risk youth's performance?
4. What are educators perceptions of the support students receive at the alternative education site in a southern state that influences positive learning towards their future goals?
5. Is there an overall belief that educators at the alternative site in a southern state are encouraged to have an input in developing the program?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to examine the effectiveness of alternative education programs. Furthermore, the researcher explored the perceptions of educators of the effectiveness of the alternative education programs in a county in a southern state through use of survey design questionnaire and interviews. Alternative education programs guide students to adapt to acquiring the knowledge to become successful in counteracting delinquencies and embracing positive interventions (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004).

This chapter presents the focus of the research by explaining the participants, instrument, procedure and research design, research questions, data analysis, ethical considerations, trustworthiness, potential research bias, and limitations in examining the perception of educators of the effectiveness of the alternative education program in a southern state.

Participants

The population for this research included educators from alternative sites and zone schools who had some form of relationship with a student who had been in a program in the southern state county. The researcher targeted 100 educators from a convenient sample in the southern state. Creswell (2005) noted that in convenient sampling, “the researcher selects participants because they are willing and available to be studied” (p. 149). The sample was composed of educators who were easily accessible who had the knowledge and experience to the research topic. The researcher was also an educator in the southern state and easily obtained permission to conduct the research. This study utilized a mixed-method approach. Creswell and Clark (2007) explained, “Mixed method research is a research design with philosophical

assumptions as well as methods of inquiry. The philosophical assumptions guided the direction of the collection and analysis of the data and the mixture of the quantitative and qualitative approaches” (p. 5).

The primary instrument used in this research was a survey. According to Creswell (2005), in quantitative research, survey researchers “typically select and study a sample from a population and generalize results from the sample to the population” (p. 358). Practically, survey researchers study a target population to give an account of the larger population (Creswell, 2005). Participants were adults who were conveniently selected from a pool of teachers to satisfy the target population and the researcher contacted an administrator of one of the sites requesting permission to conduct the study. Gay and Airasian (2000) noted The National Research Act expects “to ensure protection of participants, proposed research activities involving human participants be reviewed and approved by an authorized group prior to the execution of the research” (p. 94). The second instrument the researcher employed was interviews. Creswell (2005) said a “qualitative interview occurs when researchers ask one or more participants general, open-ended questions and record their answers” (p. 593). Open-ended responses provide the participants with alternatives to their responses (Creswell, 2005). Authors such as Charmaz (2006) recommended performing several interviews in order to obtain and refine the groupings for the study. The researcher conducted the interviews with several participants to gather valuable information and control the questions asked (Creswell, 2005).

Instrument

In order to collect data to determine the perception of educators at alternative education sites in a county in a southern state, a survey questionnaire and one-on-one

interviews was utilized. The researcher devised an online 5-point Likert scale survey questionnaire using SurveyMonkey that included 20 closed-ended questions to collect information on the educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of the alternative programs. To create the survey (see Appendix A), the researcher first examined the research questions in order to clarify the main ideas or variables of interest for the research. As a basis of creating the survey, the researcher reviewed several approved surveys from other scholars for reliability and validity. In addition, the researcher also reviewed the survey with other professional educators for accuracy and relevancy.

The researcher explored the objective of the research and ways of collecting meaningful information that would furnish opinions toward the perception of the programs. The questions created were primarily to evaluate similarities and differences of educators' opinions about organization of alternative education programs, the service they provide to change academic and behavior problems, and the effectiveness of the program. The survey questions were specifically associated with personal perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of the effectiveness of the alternative program. Creswell (2005) explained, "A questionnaire is a form used in a survey design that participants in a study complete and return to the researcher" (p. 360).

The purpose of the questionnaire was to answer the research questions on the educator's perception of the effectiveness of the alternative education program in a southern state. The survey was electronically mailed to each participant stating the questionnaire should not take more than 15 minutes to complete and that all information received would be kept confidential. According to Creswell (2005), survey researchers use "cross-sectional surveys to collect data about current attitudes, opinions, or beliefs" (p. 355). Creswell (2005) also stated that cross-sectional survey design could also

determine “community needs of educational services as it relates to programs and evaluate programs” (p. 356). Surveys express trends, reveal opinions, recognize critical beliefs and feelings of individuals, and offer practical information to assess programs (Creswell, 2005).

Even though there are disadvantages to using a survey as a data-collection tool, Creswell (2009) stated the advantage of using a survey is because it is an inexpensive design and it is a speedy manner of acquiring responses from participants. The researcher used nominal scale to determine data analysis for the research. According to Creswell (2005), nominal scale “provides response option where participants check one or more categories that describe traits, attributes, or characteristics” (p. 167). The Likert scale responses were represented by numbers, which did not exhibit any order that was more or less important. Nominal scale allowed data to be placed in categories or labels (Creswell, 2005). The researcher used these labels as codes in providing the data to answer the research questions. Nominal scale provided the mode to cross tabulate the data in providing the descriptive statistics for the research.

In addition, the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews. This entailed a qualitative approach. Creswell (2003) explained qualitative research as “fundamentally interpretive” (p. 182) and added that “this includes developing a description of an individual or setting, analyzing data for themes or categories, and finally making an interpretation or drawing conclusions about its meaning personally and theoretically, stating the lessons learned” (p. 182). The qualitative design of this study allowed it to take place in what Creswell (2003) called a “natural setting” (p. 181).

This study employed this interpretive style by looking at individual educators and their common denominators among the educators’ perceptions of the effectiveness of

alternative education. The methods of data collection in this study included surveys and interviews. In addition, these methods of data collection were consistent with Strauss and Corbin's (1990) description of examples of qualitative research, including interviews, documents, and records used to gather information about the social world. Yin (2003) emphasized the use of multiple sources of evidence in research studies "allows an investigator to address a broader range of historical, attitudinal, and behavioral issues" (p. 98).

Procedures

Design. This study utilized a mixed methods approach in order to examine and have a clearer perception of the research topic. The mixed-method design is a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection (Creswell, 2005). Creswell (2005) noted, "Mixed methods focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to better understand the research problem (p. 510). The researcher collected data through use of a survey questionnaire and one-on-one interviews completed by educators who worked at an alternative education site, had referred students to an alternative program, had worked with a student who was at an alternative site, or had a student who had been at a program. In examining the phenomenon in quantitative research, the researcher used cross-sectional survey research design to examine the perceptions of educators as it related to the effectiveness of alternative education programs. Creswell (2005) noted survey research designs "are procedures in quantitative research in which investigators administer a survey to a sample or entire population of people to describe their attitudes, opinions, behaviors, or characteristics" (p. 354). Information and data collected through use of questionnaires or interviews are used to explore trends of participants' replies concentrating on acquiring

more knowledge about a population (Creswell, 2005). According to Creswell (2005), surveys offer valuable information to assess programs. In this survey questionnaire, the participants were required to offer opinions and perceptions of the effectiveness of the alternative education programs.

The second form of data collection was one-on-one interviews. According to Creswell (2005), “One on one interviews is a data collection process in which the researcher asks questions to and records answers from only one participant in the study at a time” (p. 214). The interviews took 45 minutes at locations approved by the participants. During each interview, the researcher used a guide to facilitate the interview (see Appendix B). However, participants were incited to add other information to develop the data collection where necessary. Questions devised emphasized behavior and discipline issues, academic progress, goals of the program, resource availability, and the need of an alternative education program in the southern state. The questions provided an overall interpretation of the effectiveness and elements of the program (see Appendix C).

Creswell (2005) emphasized collecting data means “identifying and selecting individuals for a study, obtaining their permission to study them, and gathering information by asking people questions or observing their behaviors” (p. 10). After the researcher obtained approval from Nova Southeastern University’s Institutional Review Board, the administrator from the research site, and approval from the participants for the research, the researcher collected data. For this research, participants responded to an online survey and selected participants were asked to participate in a one-on-one interview.

First, a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire devised by the researcher using SurveyMonkey was distributed electronically to all the selected participants chosen

from a sample selected from a target group. Each question was followed by choices of *strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, and strongly disagree*. The survey was sent with a participation letter for consent. If participants did not respond, the researcher sent another electronic questionnaire to the participants and thanked them for their participation. The researcher also enlightened the participants about the benefits of the study for the program and explained confidentiality in answering the questions.

Research Questions

Research Question 1. What are the perceptions of educators regarding the program of at-risk youths on alternative facilities in a southern state? Survey Questions 9, 11, 13, and 14 were used to respond to this question. The survey questions related to academic performance, information of the goals from a behavior perspective, minimum length of stay, and placement (see Appendix A).

Research Question 2. How do educators at an alternative school for at-risk youths describe and explain the social behaviors of at-risk youths? Survey Questions 11, 15, 16, 17, and 19 were used to answer questions related to educators' perceptions on the social behavior (see Appendix A).

Research Question 3. How do educators at an alternative school for at-risk youths perceive at-risk youth's performance? Alternative education programs are expected to stimulate student academic success effectively. To analyze the effectiveness of the academic program at the alternative education site, the researcher used Survey Questions 4, 6, and 18 (see Appendix A).

Research Question 4. What are educators perceptions of the support students receive at the alternative education site in a southern state that influences positive

learning towards their future goals? Survey Questions 5, 7, 8, 12, and 19 were used to answer questions related to the support system of the alternative education site toward future goals (see Appendix A).

5. Is there an overall belief that educators at the alternative site in a southern state are encouraged to have an input in developing the program? Alternative education educators provide services to alter an at-risk student's behavior. Their input towards the implementation of interventions is vital. In order to evaluate whether educators at alternative education sites contributed to the development of the program, this researcher used Survey Question 20 to answer this question (see Appendix A).

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved separating the data to verify responses in order to summarize the information (Creswell, 2005). This entailed making conclusions; using figures, tables, and pictures to express it; and expounding on the research question with words (Creswell, 2005). Creswell (2005) stated that to analyze a questionnaire, the researcher must identify participants' responses and biases, descriptively examine the information to distinguish specific trends, and write a report representing the descriptive outcomes or use of statistics. An educator's survey and interviews were the basic instruments for collecting data. The survey was used as the initial tool as well as to obtain baseline data for the teachers who were conveniently selected for the study. Educators were then selected to partake in the one-on-one interviews. Participants were interviewed to add to the research and answer the research questions.

After the researcher obtained all electronic questionnaires and conducted the interviews, the data were organized for interpretation. The researcher presented a methodological triangulation (Morse, 1991) by converging quantitative and qualitative

data as in combined research and mixed methodology (Creswell, 1994). The researcher reviewed all the survey and interview responses. The data were revised numerous times to enhance clarity and to verify commonalities and differences in responses. Qualitative researchers triangulate their data to develop accuracy (Creswell, 2005). Creswell (2005) explained triangulation is the manner of “corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research to develop accuracy and credibility” (p. 252).

Additionally, According to Green et al. (2007), coding requires a detailed manner of categorizing data. The researcher created codes by revising all the surveys and interviews, breaking the information into segments, categorizing the segments using codes, and breaking down the codes into manageable themes (Creswell, 2008). For the survey and interviews, the researcher identified similar themes that connected to the research question. Identifying common themes provided a greater understanding of the participants’ experiences and perspectives.

In addition, the researcher analyzed data from the Likert scale responses by entering the data in an Excel spreadsheet displaying results based on percentages so the readers could understand. To become familiar with the data, the researcher organized, managed, and broke down the data (Gay & Airasian, 2000). In order to answer the research questions regarding educator’s perceptions, students’ social behaviors, youth’s academic performance, support of students toward positive attitude, and educators input for program development, the researcher analyzed the data. First, using nominal scale categories, the researcher developed an Excel spreadsheet listing all survey questions and the responses from which the participants were to choose. Under each choice, the researcher calculated the percentages including mean for the questions based on the

number of participants who responded to the individual questions.

The researcher also created an Excel spreadsheet with responses from the different subgroups, specifically administrators, teachers, and staff. The results showed data percentages of survey questions pertaining to common themes that answered each research question. The researcher then “calculated and presented a table of descriptive analysis for each question on the instrument” (Creswell, 2005, p. 376). The researcher looked at the percentages and frequency distribution of the different survey questions that guided the response to the research questions. In addition, the researcher used the results to compare and contrast responses, particularly how participants from the alternative education site and those of regular zone schools responded to the questions. The researcher also used the data to compare the demographics of the educators’ roles in the southern state county.

In order to check the validity or trustworthiness of the data, there was a quantification of the qualitative research through coding. This involved creating codes and themes qualitatively then, as Creswell (2003) explained, “counting the number of times they occur in the text data . . . This quantification of qualitative data then enables a researcher to compare quantitative results with the qualitative data” (p. 221). Merging closed-ended questions with open-ended questions allowed the researcher to identify patterns among the answers that strengthened validity of the data. Coding for themes provided validity in the results of the study. Creswell (2003) said descriptive statistics “described trends that indicated general tendencies in the data, the spread scores, or a comparison of how one score relates to all the others” (p. 181). Descriptive statistical data were appropriate for this research because they listed the categories represented on the Likert scale related to the perceptions of educators regarding the effectiveness of

alternative programs in the southern state. The researcher guided analysis of trends and answered the research questions. The researcher then wrote a report presenting descriptive results by developing categories, merging questions that related to each other, comparing responses of different demographic groups, and addressing the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher got approval from the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board to collect data on the perceptions of educators at two alternative education sites in a county in a southern state. Creswell (2005) stated the importance of “conveying to participants that they are participating in a study and inform them of the purpose of the study” (p. 225). In order to conform to ethical standards, the researcher enlightened the participants with the purpose of the research and the intended strategies for the research. Furthermore, each participant who participated in the interview signed an informed consent form and acknowledged the process was voluntary. Participants were also promised confidentiality; specifically, that disclosure of their names, school sites, and any responses for the purpose of the study would not appear in the research.

Trustworthiness

Golafshani (2003) stated that even though the terms validity and reliability are handled separately in quantitative studies, these terms are not considered separate entities in qualitative research. Instead, Golafshani said terminology that incorporates both, such as “credibility, transferability and trustworthiness is used” (p. 600). Similarly, Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) reported that well-known qualitative researchers have discussed that “reliability and validity were terms pertaining to the quantitative paradigm and were not pertinent to qualitative inquiry” (p. 2). Dependability and

credibility can be used to determine the validity and reliability of qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). This study met the standards for dependability and credibility in its purpose of generating knowledge of real-life perceptions of educators.

To adhere to trustworthiness, the researcher established confidence in the participants' responses (Krefting, 1991). According to Krefting (1991), "Truth value is usually obtained from the discovery of human experiences as they are lived and perceived by informants" (p. 215). The researcher guaranteed confidentiality of data. In addition, the researcher used data objectively when revising data for findings. In addition, participants were not limited to alternative sites but to educators who had some form of relationship with a student who had been at an alternative site.

Potential Research Bias

The researcher worked at alternative education sites in the past and is presently in a county in the southern state. However, when doing research, abiding to professional ethical behavior is necessary. Therefore, the researcher was hopeful the participants felt comfortable in responding honestly to the survey questions. Being truthful was beneficial to the research to develop and strengthen the alternative educational programs to address the needs of at-risk students.

Limitations

An important limitation to this research of the perception of program effectiveness was the sample of the target population. However, to alleviate the limitations, the researcher conducted the research at several sites including different demographics of student population of the southern state county. The educators' responses to the survey and their honesty when responding to the questions could have caused inaccurate outcomes. The participants also voluntarily gave their time to be part of

the research and it was dependent on them whether they provided adequate time, understood the questions, and were honest about their responses to make the research accurate. Another limitation can be bias responses to the survey. However, the researcher helped the limitation by using a sample of educators from alternative education programs and educators who had worked with students who had been at an alternative education program.

In addition, when collecting information that dealt with perception of educators, the data collected differed. However, it was presumed that if educators were cognizant of the needs of at-risk students with emotional and behavioral problems, they had a goal of reducing the dropout rate in the county; therefore, their responses were comparable to each other (Laursen, 2005; Marshall, 2005).

Chapter 4: Results

The problem that was addressed in this study was the concern that the effectiveness of the targeted alternative programs of a southern state had never been investigated. Therefore, the purpose of this applied dissertation ascertained educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of alternative programs at selected sites of a southern state. A triangulation mixed-method research design was used. Data were triangulated using both a survey and interview instruments. This chapter presents the results from the study.

Research Question 1

What are the perceptions of educators regarding the program of at-risk youths on alternative facilities in a southern state? Survey Items 9, 11, 13, and 14 and Interview Questions 1, 2, and 3 were used to respond to Research Question 1.

Survey results. Table 2 contains descriptive statistics for the survey items related to Survey Items 9, 11, 13, and 14. Survey Question 9 stated, "Academics are second to discipline." Fifty-one percent of the participants agreed academics are second to discipline, 37% disagreed, and 12% had no opinion. Survey Item 11 stated, "Before enrolling, students and parents are informed about the goals of alternative education from a behavior perspective." Seventy-four percent of participants agreed students and parents were informed about the goals of alternative education from a behavior perspective, 9% disagreed, and 18% had no opinion. Survey Item 13 stated, "The minimum length of stay requirement for students is adequate to accomplish the goals of alternative education." Forty-nine percent of participants agreed the minimum stay requirement for students was adequate to accomplish the goals at alternative education programs, 24% disagreed, and 28% had no opinion. Finally, Survey Item 14 stated, "Alternative education students are

treated unjustly at their home schools and should not have been placed in alternative education programs.” Seventy-four percent of participants disagreed that students are treated unjustly at their zone schools and should not have been placed in alternative education programs, 15% had no opinion, and 12% agreed.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Research Question 1 (N = 101)

Survey item	Frequency	%
9. Academics are second to discipline.		
Agree	51	51
No opinion	12	12
Disagree	37	37
11. Before enrolling, students and parents are informed about the goals of alternative education from a behavior perspective.		
Agree	74	74
No opinion	18	18
Disagree	9	9
13. The minimum length of stay requirement for students is adequate to accomplish the goals of alternative education.		
Agree	49	49
No opinion	28	28
Disagree	24	24
14. Alternative education students are treated unjustly at their home schools and should not have been placed in alternative education program.		
Agree	12	12
No opinion	15	15
Disagree	74	74

Interview results. Responses to Interview Questions 1, 2, and 3 were used to

answer the first research question. The first interview question was, “What is your perception of the alternative program?” Responses were provided by 10 participants. All 10 educators reported the alternative education program addressed the needs of the students. They stated the program placed more emphasis on behavior; however, the academics guide behavior, which will make students return to their zone if successful academically. According to these educators, the program provides students with the opportunity to be caught up with their academics by use of individualized instruction in order to become successful. They also shared that the structured environment makes students more accountable for their actions. For example, they followed the performance-level progression plan, which was a behavior modification program. Students earned points for good behavior. Students gained behavior points for every 20-minute segment in which they completed their task, attendance, attitude, and good behavior expectation. If they earned a certain amount of points depending on the level of their progression, they earned a successful award slip for the day, which was designed to help the students advance in their reentry into their regular school.

The second interview question was, “Apart from academic courses, explain other programs within the school that assist students to be academically successful.” The educators shared that they believed students at the alternative education sites benefited from small class environment. One of the educators shared that it limited the distractions and made students focus on their schoolwork and lessen behavior problems.

The educators also explained that the smaller student population helped when teachers did interventions and remediation when students were not doing well academically and behaviorally. The students also got more attention and praise in smaller groups, which increased their motivation.

The third interview question was, “Explain the expected stay of the students at the alternative education program. Is the length of stay sufficient time to achieve the goals the program aims for?” All educators agreed the length of stay, which was 45 days, was sufficient time for students to achieve their goals and make a change to become successful. They even mentioned students were ready to leave after the 9 weeks and had seen behavior problems arise when they stayed longer.

Summary. Based on the responses, there were several conclusions related to the first research question. First, all 10 educators reported the alternative education program addressed the needs of the students. They expressed the view that the program placed more emphasis on behavior modification; however, the academics guided behavior made students return to their zone school if successful academically. According to these educators, the program provided students with the opportunity to be caught up with their academic courses with individualized instruction.

In addition, the educators shared that they believed the alternative education sites benefited from small class environment, which lessened distractions and encouraged small-group interaction. The students also received more attention and praise in smaller groups that increased their motivation. Finally, educators agreed the length of stay, 45 days, was sufficient time for students to achieve their goals and make a change to become successful.

Research Question 2

How do educators at an alternative school for at-risk youths describe and explain the social behaviors of at-risk youths? Survey Items 11, 15, 16, 17, and 19 and Interview Questions 4, 5, and 6 were used to answer this research question.

Survey results. Table 3 contains descriptive statistics for the survey items related

to the second research question. The 11th survey item stated, “Before enrolling, students and parents are informed about the goals of alternative education from a behavior perspective.” Seventy percent of the participants stated they agree that before enrolling, students and parents were informed about the goals of alternative education from a behavior perspective, 18% gave no opinion, and 9% disagreed.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for the Second Research Question (N = 101)

Survey item	Frequency	%
11. Before enrolling, students and parents are informed about the goal of alternative education from a behavior perspective.		
Agree	74	74
No opinion	18	18
Disagree	9	9
15. Student office referrals decrease after completing alternative education program.		
Agree	47	47
No opinion	34	34
Disagree	20	20
16. Parents and students are informed about behavior progress and participate in resolving issues.		
Agree	71	71
No opinion	15	15
Disagree	15	15
17. Alternative schools are needed to assist with student’s behavior.		
Agree	94	94
No opinion	6	6
Disagree	1	1
19. Students at alternative education programs are influenced positively in achieving their future goals.		
Agree	72	72
No opinion	17	17
Disagree	12	12

Survey Item 15 stated, “Student office referrals decrease after completing the

alternative education program.” Forty-seven percent of participants agreed that students’ referrals decreased after completing alternative education program, 34% gave no opinion, and 20% disagreed.

Survey Item 16 stated, “Parents and students are informed about behavior progress and participate in resolving issues.” The majority of participants (71%) agreed parents and students were informed about behavior progress and participated in resolving issues, 15% gave no opinion, and 15% disagreed.

Survey Item 17 stated, “Alternative schools are needed to assist with student’s behavior.” The majority (94%) of the participants agreed alternative schools are needed to assist with students’ behavior, 6% had no opinion, and only 1% disagreed.

Survey Item 19 stated, “Students at alternative education programs are influenced positively in achieving their future goals.” The majority (72%) of the participants agreed students at alternative education programs are influenced positively in achieving their goals, 17% of the participants had no opinion, and 12% disagreed.

Interview results. Responses to Interview Questions 4, 5, and 6 were used to answer the second research question. The fourth interview question was, “Explain how the program assists students with grave behavior problems?” As mentioned before, the educators discussed the structured environment of the program and the behavior modification plan. The educators indicated that even when students were angry they were placed in the program, they became supportive of each other as they progressed in the program. One educator described the students as being “rough” and therefore consistency in managing the behavior was very important. One educator also shared that new students were influenced by the old students leaving and sometimes created drama and escalated issues that sometimes sent them to higher-level programs. Therefore, because students

sometimes enjoyed an audience, the rules had to be enforced for conflict not to escalate.

The fifth interview question was, “Describe the rules of the program and explain how they enforce good behavior that will benefit students even after they leave the program?” The educators all shared the expectations of the program. Students were expected to follow the policy of the school from the time they boarded the school bus. They were expected to fulfill the academic tasks in all classes and have good behavior in order to acquire their successful day slip.

The sixth interview question was, “Describe how you foster teamwork with at-risk students to improve their social skills?” All educators mentioned, “Competition was encouraged” in the program. They explained that when students realized they were given the attention that they did not usually get at the regular school, they did well. When they felt successful, they became inspired and motivated by what they were learning.

Summary. The participants indicated in their survey responses that students were informed about goal expectations of the alternative education program as it pertained to behavior. In addition, 47% of participants agreed student referrals decreased after completing an alternative program, 71% agreed that parents and students were informed about behavior progress and participated in resolving issues, 94% of participants agreed alternative education programs were needed to assist with student behavior issues, and 72% agreed students at alternative education programs were influenced positively in achieving their goals. The interview responses indicated the structured environment and behavior modification plan guided the educators to stay consistent in managing tough behaviors. The educators expressed that students were expected to abide by the policies of the program. In addition, teamwork was encouraged, which helped to solve behavior issues. Teamwork often inspired at-risk students to become motivated and excel.

Research Question 3

How do educators at an alternative school for at-risk youths perceive at-risk youth's performance? Survey Items 4, 6, and 18 and Interview Questions 7 and 8 were used to answer this question.

Survey results. Table 4 contains survey items related to the third research question. Survey Item 4 stated, "Alternative education students are expected to perform at a high level academically." Seventy-seven percent of the participants agreed that students at the alternative education sites were expected to perform at a high level academically, 9% had no opinion, and 15% disagreed.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for the Third Research Question (N = 101)

Survey item	Frequency	%
4. Alternative education students are expected to perform at a high level academically.		
Agree	77	77
No opinion	9	9
Disagree	15	15
6. The alternative structure at the alternative program is appropriate for the students it serves.		
Agree	68	68
No opinion	16	16
Disagree	17	17
18. Alternative education students' interactions with peers have a positive effect on their performance in the classroom.		
Agree	68	68
No opinion	14	14
Disagree	19	19

Survey Item 6 stated, “The alternative structure at the alternative program is appropriate for the students it serves.” A high percentage (68%) agreed that the structure of the alternative program was appropriate for the students it served, 16% had no opinion, and 17% disagreed. Survey Item 18 stated, “Alternative education students’ interactions with peers have a positive effect on their performance in the classroom.” The majority (68%) of participants agreed alternative education students’ interactions with peers had a positive effect on their performance in class, 14% had no response, and 19% disagreed.

Interview results. Responses to Interview Questions 7 and 8 were used to answer the third research question. The seventh interview question was, “Can you explain precise instructional tactics you use to make students academically successful?” The educators mentioned they took advantage of the small number of students and provided individualized instruction for reading and offline courses. This allowed scaffolding on a slower pace especially for students who felt they were a failure. Even though the students got a lot of individual support, they encouraged critical thinking, interaction, and showing how what is learned will be used in the real world. Students also took part in online classes at the students own pace. Sometimes this built their comfort level and they got motivated to do well.

The eighth interview question was, “How do you determine student success in the program?” The synopsis of the responses is that the educators determined student success by their successful days on their chart, academics, course completions, attendance, change in attitude and behavior, and the effort they placed on their assignments.

Summary. The survey responses reflected the majority (77%) of participants indicated that at the alternative education program, students were expected to perform at a high level academically. A high percentage (68%) of participants agreed the structure of

the alternative program was appropriate, and 68% agreed students' interactions with peers had a positive effect on their performance in the classroom. The interview responses indicated educators worked hard in guiding students in performing well. Educators provided one-on-one instruction and incorporated critical thinking, teamwork, and life lesson instructions. The educators expressed the view that successful days, course completions, change in attitude and behavior, and increased self-confidence determined a student's success in the program.

Research Question 4

What are educators perceptions of the support students receive at the alternative education site in a southern state that influences positive learning towards their future goals? Survey Items 5, 7, 8, 12 and 19 and Interview Questions 10 and 11 were used to respond to Research Question 4.

Survey results. Table 5 contains descriptive statistics for the survey items related to Research Question 4. Survey Item 5 stated, "Teachers are provided adequate resources to provide quality instruction." The majority (67%) of participants agreed teachers were provided adequate resources to provide quality instruction, 14% had no opinion, and 20% disagreed. Survey Item 7 stated, "Parents are involved with their child's academic progress." The majority (45%) of participants disagreed parents were involved in their child's academic progress, 33% agreed, and 23% had no opinion. The eighth survey item stated, "There are support programs in place to help alternative education students achieve academically." Fifty-three percent of participants agreed there were support programs in place to help alternative education students achieve academically, 23% had no opinion, and 25% disagreed.

Survey Item 12 stated, "Teachers have adequate resources to accomplish the

behavior goals of alternative education.” The majority (59%) agreed teachers had the resources to accomplish the behavior of alternative education, 24% had no opinion, and 18% disagreed. Survey Item 19 stated, “Students at alternative programs are influenced positively toward their future goals.” Seventy-four percent agreed, 17% had no opinion, and 10% disagreed.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for the Fourth Research Question (N = 101)

Survey item	Frequency	%
5. Teachers are provided adequate resources to provide quality instruction.		
Agree	67	67
No opinion	14	14
Disagree	20	20
7. Parents are involved with their child’s academic progress.		
Agree	33	33
No opinion	23	23
Disagree	45	45
8. There are support programs in place to help alternative education students achieve academically.		
Agree	53	53
No opinion	23	23
Disagree	25	25
12. Teachers have adequate resources to accomplish the behavior goals of alternative education.		
Agree	59	59
No opinion	24	24
Disagree	18	18
19. Students at alternative programs are influenced positively toward their future goals.		
Agree	74	74
No opinion	17	17
Disagree	10	10

Interview results. Responses to Interview Questions 10 and 11 were used to answer Research Question 4. The Interview Question 10 was, “Are parents supportive to their student at the program?” The educators’ responses indicated parents were not supportive of their students in the program. However, if students got into problems at the program and parents were called, they did not hesitate to attend the meeting to discuss the problem. They all agreed they would love to see more faces of parents and hear their concerns or find ways of collaborating with the program and changes in their students.

The Interview Question 11 was, “Does student interaction with peers in the program have a positive effect on student’s performance in the program?” All responses suggested that collaboration with peers had a positive effect on the students. One educator shared that the program provided online courses for students. They were encouraged to guide each other and it helped in building their own self-esteem and changed behavior.

Summary. The survey responses reflected the majority of participants (67%) agreed that teachers had adequate resources to support quality instruction, 45% believed that parents were not supporting their students while at the alternative programs, and 53% shared there were support programs to guide students to achieve academically. The interview responses indicated that students at alternative program needed more support from their parents. However, it was apparent that collaboration with peers builds on support students need to become successful in the program.

Research Question 5

Is there an overall belief that educators at the alternative site in a southern state are encouraged to have an input in developing the program? Survey Item 20 and Interview Questions 12, 13, and 14 were used to respond to Research Question 5.

Survey results. Survey Item 20 stated, “Educators at alternative programs are encouraged to provide new visions to develop the program.” The results are summarized in Table 6. According to the responses from the participants, the majority (46%) agreed educators at alternative programs are encouraged to provide new visions to develop the program, 34% had no opinion, and 21% disagreed.

Interview results. Responses to Interview Questions 12, 13, and 15 were used to answer the Research Question 5. The Interview Question 12 was, “Describe ways in which teachers at the alternative education program are encouraged to provide new visions to develop the program.” All the educators suggested they were encouraged to add to the vision of the school. The educators also mentioned that when they met as small and large groups, they discussed concerns and tried to make amendments. They also indicated that sometimes there was not enough time to implement new ideas.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for the Fifth Research Question (N = 101)

Survey item	Frequency	%
20. Educators at alternative programs are encouraged to provide new visions to develop the program.		
Agree	46	46
No opinion	34	34
Disagree	21	21

The Interview Question 13 was, “Describe ideas you would propose to develop the design of the program.” The responses revealed the educators felt that an intervention room could prevent major conflicts from escalating; however, limited staff had prevented

this from continuing. The responses also indicated educators believed other program involvement could boost the program as well as give students new insights into building on their strengths. The educators spoke of a community contact person or groups to provide more access to basic needs of students and parents. They mentioned these groups could be advocates for the students, parents, and the program. The responses indicated that the program should offer General Educational Development (GED) courses for students who were not successful in earning a regular high school diploma. The GED, according to the educators, could be a last resort to provide students so they would not feel as if they were failures. They also spoke about service-learning programs for students to be involved in other extracurricular activities outside school but acknowledged by the school. In addition, one response indicated that interacting with the community was limited and that more speakers from the community should be invited to present, incentive should be provided for field trips, and teachers should be taught team building. Another response indicated the program should work hand in hand with the coaches to motivate students who are in a sport but were released due to a behavior problem and placed in the program.

The Interview Question 14 was, “Is it a necessity to have alternative programs for youths in this county? If yes, Why?” All the educators indicated alternative programs are needed in the county. They shared that sometimes students act out of frustration or react because they are not provided the academic support and sending them to a program might be the best choice to see the positive change.

Summary. The survey responses reflected the majority of participants (46%) indicated that educators at alternative programs were encouraged to provide new visions to develop the program. The interview responses reflected that educators viewed

alternative education programs as effective and necessary for at-risk student's progress and development and building positive relationships in showing respect for the needs of the students it serves. Furthermore, the participants indicated they were provided opportunities to contribute to developing the program. Overall, the participants' responses revealed a positive attitude toward the effectiveness of alternative education programs in southern state.

Chapter 5: Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Studies showed that at-risk youths are at risk of discontinuing school and becoming engaged in dangerous social and behavioral issues, which affects their relationship with family, peers, and the environment. According to Almeida, Johnson, and Steinberg (2006) and Kaufman, Alt, and Chapman (2004), about 20% of students who discontinue school end up in prison. Students, then, have to be resilient to overcome these struggles (Sagor, 1996). According to Harvey (2007), resilient students are positive and practice the qualities of social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and belongingness (Krovetz, 1999). Krovetz (1999) also believed that educators must embrace these attributes to guide students. Benard (2004) explained that “one of the most important and consistent findings in resilience research is the power of schools, especially teachers, to turn a child’s life from risk to resilience” (p. 65). For this reason, most policy makers and educators believe alternative education programs are needed to serve and positively influence at-risk students (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1994).

In this study, educators’ perceptions of the effectiveness of alternative education programs in a southern state were measured. A survey outlining questions on academic performance, social behaviors, resource availability, parental support, extracurricular programs, goal expectations, positive support system, and overall perception was used to examine educators’ perceptions. Participants from a zone school and alternative education program gave their perceptions, which was helpful information towards analyzing the effectiveness of the program with opportunities to revise areas of need to improve the program. The analysis involved a survey, interviews, and a review of the literature. One hundred and one educators participated in the survey and 10 participated

in the interviews.

Findings and Implications

This section gives a review of the findings of the survey, the interviews, and the implications of the study.

Research Question 1. What are the perceptions of educators regarding the program of at-risk youths on alternative facilities in a southern state? The results of the survey and the interviews regarding the effectiveness of alternative education program were consistent with evidence of researchers. A high percentage of teachers agreed alternative education programs are effective, especially in areas of developing academic, social, and behavior skills. Data revealed 51% of participants agreed academics were second to discipline at the alternative education program; 74% agreed that before enrolling students, parents were informed about the goals of the alternative program from a behavior perspective; 49% agreed the minimum length of stay was adequate to accomplish the goals at the alternative education program; and 74% disagreed students were treated unjustly at their zone schools and should not have been sent to an alternative program. In addition, the interview data revealed similar responses. The educators believed the alternative program improved behavior and that academic guided good behavior. The program offered a structured environment whereby students could take advantage of one-on-one instruction and small class sizes to be successful. The length of stay for the students was sufficient.

This was consistent with what researchers had expressed. According to Elias, Mahyuddin, Noordin, Abdullah, and Roslan (2009), at-risk youths are those who are doing poorly academically and are susceptible to getting involved in disciplinary issues. Many of them will not profit from the education available, become vulnerable to

numerous behavior and emotional disorders, and add to the social nuisances in the community (Elias et al., 2009). Success has been reported with alternative education programs, which have become widespread in the U.S., in providing services to help these youths avoid potential delinquent behavior (Zhang, 2008). Brown (1995) proclaimed that absenteeism, poor performance, and disapproving social relations cause delinquency; however, building student confidence, providing motivation, augmenting the program to benefit students' needs, and making the environment a positive one play a vital role in the development of at-risk students. Aron (2006) noted the programs at effective alternative schools are "both highly structured and extremely flexible" (p. 13).

According to Lehr et al. (2009), meeting the needs of at-risk students who are not successful in a regular traditional school is becoming more critical. Most of these students come from different backgrounds and have a variety of needs that must be met (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Suh, Suh, and Houston (2007) shared that all educators involved in alternative programs must be concerned with identifying the needs of at-risk students and effect change. The responses of the survey and the interview indicated educators believed the alternative education program was effective. The structured environment and one-on-one instruction were motivators for students to feel accomplished. The students at the alternative program had an array of needs and the services provided by the program and the length of stay was adequate for students in the program.

Research Question 2. How do educators at an alternative school for at-risk youths describe and explain the social behaviors of at-risk youths? The results of the survey and the interview were related to what researchers shared. Most educators agreed that alternative education programs significantly change negative social behavior. The

survey indicated 74% agreed that before enrolling, students and parents were informed about the goals of alternative education from a behavior perspective, 47% agreed office referrals decreased after completing alternative education program, 71% agreed parents and students were informed about behavior progress and participate in resolving issues, 94% agreed alternative schools are needed to assist with students behaviors, and 72% agreed students in alternative education programs are influenced positively toward their future goals. In addition, the interview data indicated educators believed the school's structured environment and enforced rules by use of the behavior modification plan made students understand and embrace the support provided and made them more collaborative with each other.

The feeling of success often changes negative social behaviors. Raywid (2001) explained that effective alternative education programs may be able to amend the path of at-risk students to a more meaningful one and which is uniform to the social cognitive theory that explains how people connect and change if the support system is positive (Pajares, 2002). People are proactively connected to their own advancement when they have a support system (Pajares, 2002) and will portray poor behavior when faced with difficulties or when they lack belief in themselves (Bandura, 2001), which is based on the theoretical framework of social cognitive theory. Alternative education programs are expected to have a supportive school environment (Foley & Pang, 2006; Wolf & Wolf, 2008). It is vital for these programs to set a high-level of behavior standards (Kerka, 2003; Wolf & Wolf, 2008) and trust in the potential of students to succeed (Lehr, Moreau, Lange, & Lanners, 2004; Lehr et al., 2009). It is evident after the analysis of the results from the survey and interviews that when students become absorbed in negative social behaviors they become at risk. To change these behaviors, they are sent to an

alternative education program. The researcher believes alternative programs become more effective in changing behavior problems when educators create an engaged environment for the at-risk youths it serves and their behavior changes to a positive outcome.

Research Question 3. How do educators at an alternative school for at-risk youths perceive at-risk youth's performance? Conclusions of the responses to the survey and interviews were consistent with what researchers had stated. The data from the survey revealed a very high percentage of respondents agreed that even though alternative education programs serve behavior issues, a high importance is also placed on academics at alternative education programs. For example, 77% agreed alternative education students are expected to perform at a high level academically, 68% agreed the academic structure was suitable for the students it serves, and 68% agreed that students were influenced positively toward their future goals. Most educators shared in their interviews that they embraced the small size environment and one-on-one teaching strategies. This helped students who felt defeated become motivated and perform better. The educators also shared students' performance was optimized by having a supportive environment where students engaged in their learning and became accountable for their successes and failures. The data confirmed the belief of Raywid (1994) who stated that effective alternative education programs provide a supportive community, flexibility in curriculum to meet the needs of the students, and structure for student success.

Lange and Sletten (2002) shared that alternative education programs usually have small enrollment where teachers can have one-on-one interaction with their students and where the support students receive will increase their interest in understanding the relevance of the curriculum and positive behavior. In addition, Wasburn-Moses (2011)

explained that alternative education educators expect student's behavior and performance will be impacted while enrolled in an alternative education program. The alternative program is believed to safeguard students from unsafe behaviors and offer a more meaningful and rigorous education for at-risk students (Van Acker, 2007). Additionally, the educators at alternative education programs had faith the at-risk students had the ability to perform at a high level academically. The small-class sizes allowed the students to get more assistance and thus feel supported to acquire good grades and become successful. When students feel they are being effective, they strive to flourish and do perform well academically as well behaviorally.

Research Question 4. What are educators perceptions of the support students receive at the alternative education site in a southern state that influences positive learning towards their future goals? The data for the survey and interviews were also uniform with what researchers had expressed. The data showed that 67% agreed teachers had adequate resources, and 45% disagreed parents were involved with their child's academic progress. However, 33% agreed parents were involved with their child's academic progress. In addition, 53% agreed there were support programs in place to help alternative education students achieve academically, 59% agreed teachers had adequate resources to accomplish the behavior goals at alternative education program, and 74% agreed students were influenced positively toward their future goals. The educators disclosed in the interviews that students are more positive when they have a support system. They also shared that when peers help each other, it increases the motivation. On the other hand, they also explained that parents were not involved unless they were called for a behavior issue of their child. They all agreed that student's behavior problems decrease after parent conferences.

Krovetz (1999) ascertained that student support is a necessity and affirmed that all schools should exhibit a positive school environment in order to aid students in progressing academically and improve their social and behavior skills. Support for at-risk students in alternative education programs is vital. Krovetz maintained that all schools should have a positive school environment. If students have the support they need, they will connect and understand why it is important to strengthen themselves academically, socially, and behaviorally. Foley and Pang (2006) explained that parents are encouraged to show support of their children by volunteering or being a part of the school program committees. Epstein (2008) added that students become more successful at the program when families are involved. In fact, it has been stated that former alternative education students credited family support as part of their success (Foley & Pang, 2006). Gilson (2006) stated the purpose of alternative programs is to produce and support the “it takes a village to raise a child” altitude for student’s success. Educators who were interviewed believed the alternative programs provided students the support needed from educators and family to accomplish their goals in the program and make changes toward their future.

Research Question 5. Is there an overall belief that educators at the alternative site in a southern state are encouraged to have an input in developing the program? The conclusion regarding input of educators in developing the program was consistent with what researchers had exposed. Results of the survey showed 46% agreed educators at the alternative sites in a southern state were encouraged to contribute to the development of the program. Most educators interviewed agreed they often had small-group discussions to evaluate the program as well as offered suggestions for amendments. They shared several changes they would like to see implemented in the near future, such as

community involvement, parental involvement, service learning programs, and an alternative to high school program such as GED. They all agreed the alternative education program is crucial for at-risk students. D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) expressed it is important to have a diverse population of educators who aspire to help in the transformation of at-risk students at these programs. Quinn et al. (2006) stated that students, regardless of their behavior issues, yearn to be in an environment where they are treated with respect. Barton (2005) indicated, "We face a hard battle on two fronts—one to make high school more rigorous, and the other to keep more students in high school through graduation" (p. 18).

In the researcher's opinion and after analyzing the data of the survey and the interviews, it is apparent the educators believed they could freely provide input that will positively benefit at-risk students at the alternative education program. The responses and the discussions revealed they were looking at the future of at-risk students optimistically including academics and volunteering to build on the strengths of the students.

Conclusions

The results for this study revealed that a large percentage of educators agreed the alternative education program in a southern state was effective, particularly in areas of academic structure, student academic performance, changing social behaviors, resource availability, extracurricular programs, students and staff goal expectations, and positive support system. Therefore, the researcher ascertained that the alternative education program provided at-risk students the opportunity to obtain a high school diploma or some form of academic improvement. Most participants, however, agreed there was a lack of parental support for at-risk students in the alternative education program.

The results also indicated that even though educators were encouraged to provide

insight to enhance the alternative education program, there was room for improvement, especially those concerning community involvement, parental support, and extracurricular activities for the students, which would recognizably increase its effectiveness. It is vital for these alternative education programs to assist at-risk youths to realize their potential. Consequently, all those responsible in the implementation of policies regarding alternative education programs must continue to revise the depth of its strengths and weakness to create elements for at-risk student's success and to affect the alternative education program positively and constructively.

Limitations

The research data in this dissertation were restricted to one regular school and alternative sites in one county. A very large percentage of the survey responses were *no opinion*. The assumption can be made these participants had no clue of alternative education programs or found it easier to give no opinion for those questions.

Recommendations

The precept of an alternative education program believes that all students should be given the opportunity of an education for developing productive and conscientious individuals and a support system to foster student development. However, there are many significant concerns that ultimately influence the efficacy and success of alternative education programs.

Because parental support is a critical issue, educators must be more proactive in approaching parents and making them more aware of the school's expectations and their student's performance. In addition, alternative education programs should incorporate art programs, such as art, music, and drama, which would further aid students who are at risk and kinesthetic learners to express their talent. The community can also provide other

insights to boost the morale of at-risk students.

It is also important to provide alternative education with sufficient resources to meet the needs of at-risk students. This includes current academic resources and trained personnel. This will create uniformity in rigorous, student-centered curriculum throughout the district that teaches academics relevant to students' lives.

Educators throughout the district should become trained and more knowledgeable about at-risk students and alternative education. This will lessen the questionable thoughts about what alternative programs provide and be more cognizant about the learning environment and belief that all students can attain an education instead of being the place where students are sent for behavior problems.

State policy makers should reevaluate the strengths and weaknesses of alternative education programs for effectiveness. This will influence more accountability in areas of academics, student discipline, trained personnel, curriculum uniformity, extracurricular involvement toward proficiency, and student success.

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Appendix A
Survey Instrument

Participant Survey
Perceptions of Educators Regarding the effectiveness of Alternative Programs in Southern State

Please complete the following survey by checking the number that most closely exemplifies your agreement with each statement. All data gathered will be used for this research only. Please take note that all information collected will not be disclosed. Your input is confidential and appreciated. Answer the following question by choosing 5 Strongly Agree, 4 Agree, 3 No opinion, 2 Disagree, and 1 Strongly Disagree.

1. Have you been or are you an Alternative Education educator?
 Yes No

2. What is your role at your institution?
 Faculty
 Staff
 Administration

3. Is your school site an alternative education program?
 Yes No

4. Alternative Education students are expected to perform at a high level academically.
 5 4 3 2 1

5. Teachers are provided adequate resources to provide quality instruction.
 5 4 3 2 1

6. The academic structure at the alternative programs is appropriate for the students it serves.
 5 4 3 2 1

7. Parents are involved with their child's academic progress.
 5 4 3 2 1

8. There are support programs in place to help alternative education students achieve academically (e.g. enrichment and or tutorial services).
 5 4 3 2 1

9. Academics are second to discipline.
 5 4 3 2 1

10. The primary purpose of alternative education is to improve inappropriate student behavior.
 5 4 3 2 1

11. Before enrolling, students and parents are informed about the goals of alternative

education from a behavior perspective.

5 4 3 2 1

12. Teachers have adequate resources to accomplish the behavior goals of alternative education.

5 4 3 2 1

13. The minimum length of stay requirement for students is adequate to accomplish the goals of alternative education.

5 4 3 2 1

14. Alternative education students are treated unjustly at their home schools and should not have been placed in an alternative school.

5 4 3 2 1

15. Student`s office referrals decrease after completing alternative education program.

5 4 3 2 1

16. Parents and students are informed about behavior progress and participate in resolving issues.

5 4 3 2 1

17. Alternative schools are needed to assist with students` behaviors.

5 4 3 2 1

18. Alternative education students` interaction with peers have a positive effect on their performance in the classroom.

5 4 3 2 1

19. Students at alternative education program are influenced positively toward their future goals.

5 4 3 2 1

20. Educators at alternative programs are encouraged to provide new visions to develop the program.

5 4 3 2 1

Appendix B
Interview Guide

Perceptions of Educators' Regarding the Effectiveness of Alternative Programs in Southern State

What are the perceptions of educators regarding the program of at risk youths in alternative facilities in the Southern State?

1. What is your program design that allows you to be a successful teacher for at risk youths?
2. Apart from academic courses, explain other programs within the school that assist students to be academically successful.
3. Explain the expected stay of students in the program. Is the length of time sufficient to achieve the goals the program aims for?

How do educators at an alternative school for at risk youths describe and explain the social behaviors of at risk youths?

4. Explain how the program assist students with grave behavior problems.
5. Describe the rules of the program. Explain how they enforce good behavior that will benefit students even after they leave the program.
6. Describe how you foster teamwork with at-risk students to improve their social skills.

How do educators at an alternative school for at risk youths perceive at risk youth's performance?

7. Can you explain precise instructional tactics you use to make students academically successful?
8. How do you determine student success in the program?
9. What are some of the strategies you use to empower students in guiding them to understand their strengths to become successful in the program?

What are educators' perceptions of the support students receive at the alternative education site in Southern State that influences positive learning toward their future goals?

10. What types of interventions do you use to intensify positive behavior and lessen negative behaviors in your classroom?
11. Does student interaction with peers in the program have a positive effect on student's performance in the classroom?

Is there an overall belief that educators at the alternative site in Southern State are encouraged to have an input in developing the program?

12. Describe ways in which teachers at the alternative education program are encourage to provide new visions to develop the program.
13. Describe ideas you would propose to develop the design of the program.
14. Is it a necessity to have alternative programs for youths in this county?
If yes, why?

Appendix C
Sample Interview Responses

“I believe that this alternative education program addresses the needs of students with behavior and academic problems, however, it places emphasis on behavior.”

“I believe the alternative education program puts more emphasis on the academics to encourage students to get their course completions to hopefully motivate them to return to their zone school and not return to the program”

“The alternative education site is a structured environment that make students accountable for their actions.”

“I give students ample time to catch up on their online program, and the one on one guidance motivates them to eventually get course completions.”

“The alternative education program benefits students who don't function well in regular school environment. The students benefit from small environment with higher staff and smaller student population.”

“Students are inspired to do well in small groups, they get rolling and motivated to complete their courses.”

“In smaller groups, students get more attention and praise and they seem to like that.”

“At the program students are competitive and they defy stereotype whereby they still encourage and help each other.”

“The program is like a family or team environment.”

“It is easier to assess in this program from different perspective.”

“The students are expected to abide by the student behavior plan, however the staff understands that it takes time to correct their negative behaviors.”

“Sometimes the group of students at the program become rough when a new group comes in.”

“It is difficult to ask for the support from parents. They come to parent teachers meeting only when there is a problem. Last year for example there were no parent show at the open house.”

“When students complete their successful days and complete assigned work or completion then I would consider that the student has been successful.”

“I believe we need community contact persons to provide support for students, example, basic needs, GED, parent contact, assist in assignments, or mentoring.”

“I think all the students bring their own talent and I can see other services that can be utilized, for example after school counselling, Presentations from National Guards, Team

Building and maybe have field trips as part of the learning Process.”