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ALTERNATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AS A TOOL FOR STUDENT  
SUCCESS FOR STRUGGLING LEARNERS IN NORTHWEST ARKANSAS  
SCHOOL DISTRICTS

A Dissertation Proposal Submitted  
to the Graduate College  
Arkansas Tech University

in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in School Leadership

in the Department of Educational Leadership  
of the College of Education

May 2020

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## Abstract

Educating *all* students is the foundation of education. However, an epidemic is sweeping throughout America's schools that is threatening the very underpinning of our society. The number of students that leave school each year without a high school diploma is placing an immense personal and economic burden on the student, as well as the economic impact on society. Alternative learning environments have emerged as an intervention to provide a foundation for success for the struggling learner. This quantitative study was conducted to evaluate the perception of high school alternative learning students and high school alternative learning teachers' perceptions of program effectiveness. Forty-seven student and 5 teacher respondents completed the 37 question Likert-type survey covering engagement, academic rigor, relationships with teachers, relationships with peers, school culture, academic interventions and behavior interventions. Independent t-tests were used to determine if the means of the variables were statistically different. Cohen's *d* was used to evaluate effect size in the sample, due to the large differences in sample size between students and teachers. The findings from the study revealed that engagement, academic rigor, relationships with teachers, academic interventions, and behavior interventions were not significant, while peer relationships and school culture were significant. Cohen's *d* results indicated engagement, academic rigor, peer relationships, and school culture had a large effect size, while teacher relationships, academic interventions, and behavior interventions had a medium effect size. No components revealed a small effect size. The results indicate that perception gaps do exist within the individual components, with effect size being a factor in the analysis of the results.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

The *pinnacle* for public education is to successfully educate all students with the skills and knowledge to be successful in a global world. This goal is realistic.

Furthermore, the goal is attainable. However, the one word that begins to dominate educational conversations, especially public education, is the single word *ALL*. When addressing the *ALL* that encompasses the at-risk youth population, stakeholders have been stymied in their efforts to adequately adjust and react to the increasing numbers of students that fail to finish their high school careers. “Whether termed a ‘problem,’ a ‘crisis,’ or an ‘epidemic,’ the large numbers of students who do not graduate from high school generate clear and widespread concern” (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009, p. 77).

Legislators have attempted to legislate a solution to the drop-out epidemic targeting the nation’s youth. Beginning with *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 to the most recent Every Student Succeeds Act, national and state legislation has targeted the effectiveness of public education.

*A Nation at Risk* gave a sobering picture of a perceived reality in American Education. The direct effect of the Reagan commissioned report *A Nation at Risk* introduced American education to the term at-risk. The report was intended to bring to light the decreased achievement American youth were experiencing compared to their counterparts in other countries. At-risk youth factored into the decline; however, the intention of the report was to increase standards. Roderick (1994) credited *A Nation at Risk* for the increased rates of non-promotion. The view of *A Nation at Risk* perceived



social promotion as lenient and lead to the dilution of standards in schools (Roderick, 1994).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) of legislated school districts to establish and maintain rigorous standards for learning and placed increased demands on accountability and ushered in the era of high stakes testing (Gagnon & Bottge, 2006; Dworkin, 2005). Additionally, the Bush administration's 2001 NCLB Act outlined penalties for those districts not meeting those demands on accountability. Dworkin (2005) argued that critics of accountability through high stakes testing often narrow the curriculum. The results are widespread. Outcomes could range from: (a) prompting teaching to the test, (b) deficits in content knowledge, (c) discrimination against students who struggle with tests, (d) harm to low socio-economic and minority students, and (e) perpetuating the drop-out rate (Dworkin, 2005).

The accountability of districts was caught in the middle of No Child Left Behind and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) when faced with meeting the needs of high-risk students. In fact, establishing and maintaining rigorous standards for learning while meeting the specific requirements of special needs students' access to the general education curriculum created the need for alternative schools. The No Child Left Behind Legislation brought the alternative learning movement to the mainstream.

However, the No Child Left Behind legislation did not clearly define the purpose of alternative learning environments. Instead, the legislation created an imprecise system where alternative learning environments operated under loose guidelines (Shirley, 2009). Shirley (2009) stated that the analysis of alternative schools under No Child Left Behind legislation requirements did not delineate if alternative schools were designed to

intervene on behalf of at-risk students, or were they developed to protect traditional classrooms and students from the challenges posed by at-risk students (Shirley, 2009).

George Bush's 2001 No Child Left Behind legislation was not the last political attempt at influencing education. Barack Obama's passage of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, effectively rolled back the No Child Left Behind regulations on schools, ushering in a new area of challenges and opportunities.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allows states to submit accountability plans to the Education Department. Under the accountability piece, alternative schools are counted under the appropriate school. For instance, a 9-12 grade alternative school would be included in the corresponding high school accountability plan if they shared a common Local Education Agency (LEA). The weighted indicators found under ESSA are averaged to calculate the ESSA score for the school. Generally speaking, at-risk students who make-up the majority of alternative learning placements perform poorly on the weighted indicators.

School interventions under ESSA require districts to address deficiencies in student performance. The basis for the interventions includes but not limited to (a) collaborate with teachers and staff to develop an evidence-based plan, (b) continued state monitoring of plan, (c) district monitoring of specific sub-groups (examples: alternative learning, special education, English language learner), (d) adopt a challenging curriculum.

In addition to the legislative directives, there has been a tremendous amount of effort put forth by educational professionals in an attempt to clarify the drop-out problem. Additional work in the educational field has been directed at potential solutions.

According to Lange and Sletten (2002), the education profession has observed an increase in educational research to reach the common goal of educating all of America's youth.

In searching for an answer to the drop-out problem in the structure of public education, non-traditional and/or alternative learning options are growing at a frenzied pace (Bullock, 2006; Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006). Alternative learning environments encompass unique options for the student to utilize for academic and social success when they cannot find that success in the traditional classroom setting (Aron, 2006; Caroleo, 2014; Hemmer & Shepperson, 2014; Raywid, 1994). According to Bullock (2006), the frenzied growth of alternative learning programs can be accredited to the disconnection between the traditional educational setting's expectations and the actual academic and/or social performance of the student.

The goal of a high school (grades 9-12 or grades 7-12) alternative program is to ultimately transition the student back to the traditional classroom and avoid the Alternative placement from becoming a destination placement that has the potential to lead to the student dropping out, instead of an intervention that leads to the student graduating or transitioning back to the mainstream educational setting. For this to occur, the student must demonstrate a reasonable advancement in academic and social skills. However, this advancement alone, does not signify the ability of the student to be successful when transitioning back to the traditional classroom nor does it signify that the student's deficiencies in academic and social competency are being addressed in the Alternative learning environment.

Educational research has pointed to the fact that many students who are labeled at-risk and who eventually drop out of high school are academically and socially capable of being successful within the confines of public education if given the right support and choices (Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007; Raywid, 1994).

Hutchison (2006) believed that:

The crisis in public education is well known. High drop-out rates, low test scores, deficits in reading, math, and history, and inarticulate young people who do not read books are so frequently reported in the news that we have almost come to expect bad news about education. Why are these chronic problems so difficult to fix? Answer: the stubborn adherence by the public education establishments to ideas about education that do not work. (p.1)

In an attempt to reduce the drop-out rate for at-risk youth in alternative learning environments, research has clearly identified the benefits of the alternative learning environment for at-risk students (Aron, 2006; Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009; Curley, 2016a; Raywid, 1994). However, research has also provided a warning for school administrators who target alternative learning placement as a means to control disciplinary issues within mainstream education (Curley, 2016a).

Prior research has identified effective characteristics of alternative learning programs (Aron, 2006; Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009; Curley, 2016a; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Quinn & Poirier, 2006; Raywid, 1994; Watson & Gemin, 2008). Alternative learning environments must be designed to increase the academic and behavioral outcomes of the student and/or actively re-engage the student in the educational setting (Curley, 2016a).

As a society, the importance of high school drop-out prevention is twofold. Education or the lack of education has a huge impact on personal earnings; plus, it has a substantial fiscal impact on the United States economy (Joseph, 2014; Lemon & Watson, 2011; Rahbari, Hajnaghizadeh, Damari, & Adhami, 2014; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Second, is the direct effect of not completing high school and the life expectancy of the student (Kliff, 2012; Rahbari et al., 2014).

These disengaged students are in jeopardy of falling through the cracks and becoming lost in the traditional educational setting (Graham, 2013). Additionally, these students often lack the supports or interventions in place to attain the knowledge and skills needed to be competitive in the global market for opportunities (Graham, 2013).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Educating at-risk youth has become an ever-increasing obstacle for educators in trying to address the national drop-out rate. The sheer number of students who are dropping out of traditional educational settings every school year plague public education. Joseph (2014) reports 1.2 million students drop out of high school every year, this translates to approximately 7,000 students per day. These high school drop-outs will earn approximately \$20,240 yearly compared to \$30,600 yearly for a high school graduate (Joseph, 2014).

The attainment of an education is a cornerstone of developing and maintaining life longevity (Olshansky et al., 2011). Comparing specific racial and gender groups, Olshansky et al. (2011) found that the life expectancy between racial and gender groups with less than 12 years of education with the same racial and gender grouping attaining 16 or more years of education was 10.4 years for white females, 6.5 years for black

females, 2.9 years for Hispanic females, 12.9 years for white males, 9.7 years for black males, and 5.5 years for Hispanic males.

Furthermore, Olshansky et al. (2011) reported that 8% of white males over the age of 25, 16% of black males over the age of 25, and 36% of Hispanic males age 25 or older had less than a high school diploma. When examining the life expectancy of white, black, and Hispanic males with less than 12 years of education compared to the same demographic grouping having 16 or more years of education, Olshansky et al. found a life expectancy resembling 50 years or more behind their educated counterparts (Olshansky et al. (2011).

Olshansky et al. (2011) summarized:

Education exerts its direct beneficial effects on health through the adoption of healthier lifestyles, better ability to cope with stress, and more effective management of chronic diseases. However, the indirect effects of education through access to more privileged social position, better-paying jobs, and higher income are also profound. The absence of education and its related socioeconomic status benefits exert their direct harmful effects throughout the relatively shorter lives of those in less fortunate social positions (pp. 12-13).

Education is an important factor for the current and future earning ability of the student. According to Joseph (2014), nationally, 1.2 million students drop out of high school every year, this translates to approximately 7,000 students per day. These high school drop-outs will earn approximately \$20,240 yearly compared to \$30,600 yearly for a high school graduate (Joseph, 2014). Rahbari, Hajnaghizadeh, Damari, and Adhami

(2014) looked at potential earnings and found that the average income of students that fail to finish high school is 27% less than those that do finish high school.

Education or lack of education has consequences to society as well. In terms of the U.S. economy, a high school drop-out on average costs taxpayers \$127,000 over their lifetime (Joseph, 2014). Reducing the 1.2 million drop-outs yearly to one-half or approximately 700,000 would yield a taxpayer savings of roughly \$90 billion yearly (Joseph, 2014).

The consequences of dropping out goes beyond the direct fiscal constraints it places upon students who fail to finish high school and in relationship, to society. Kliff (2012) and Rahbari et al. (2014) outlined the impact on life expectancy of high school drop-outs vs. students that finished high school. Kliff (2012) found that male students who have dropped out of high school experience a life span that is 12.9 years shorter than male students with 16 or more years of education. Additionally, females did not experience much better results, having a lifespan that is 10.4 years shorter than females with 16 years or more of education Kliff (2012). Rahbari et al. (2014) opined that students that did not finish high would have a life expectancy that is 10 years less than the students that did finish high school. Furthermore, the students that did not finish high school were at a greater risk to develop cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity.

Additionally, Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah (2011) discovered four key findings. First, a bachelor's degree is worth 2.8 million dollars over the student's lifetime. Second, a bachelor's degree will have 31% higher earnings over a lifetime than an associate's degree and 84% higher earning over a lifetime than a high school diploma (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). Third, Carnevale et al. (2011) found that women who work full

time for the full year earn an average of 25% less than men with the same education level. Finally, at the highest education level, African-Americans and Latinos earn \$1,000,000 less in their lifetime than that of their white and Asian counterparts (Carnevale, et al., 2011).

The negative attributes of student's not finishing high school goes beyond the financial and life expectancy consequences. Breslow (2012) found that high school drop-outs between the ages of 16-24 are 63% more likely to end up in jail than college graduates. According to Platt, Casey, and Faessel (2006), 108,931 youths in the United States were served in correctional or residential placements. These students are often encumbered with a variety of risk factors, making them the most challenging to educate (Platt, Casey, & Faessel, 2006). Additionally, Rahbari et al. (2014) discussed that a 1% decrease in the drop-out rate equates to approximately 100,000 less criminal charges filed per year. Furthermore, for every 4 years of education, a 6% reduction in the use of illegal drugs was noted (Rahbari et al., 2014). Table 1 lists the graduation numbers for Arkansas by state and region. Descriptive statistics listed in the table provide depth to the understanding of student success in Arkansas.

Table 1

*Arkansas: State and Regional Graduation Data*

State	District Enrollment	District NSLA Percentage	District Minority Percentage	4-Year Graduation Rate	5-Year Graduation Rate
Arkansas	474,324	61%	38%	88%	87%
Region					
Northwest	169,481	58%	33%	89%	89%
Northeast	93,933	65%	30%	89%	88%



Central	140,449	57%	46%	85%	83%
Southwest	45,322	68%	45%	89%	90%
Southeast	25,139	72%	53%	88%	88%
Minimum	78	23%	2%	25%	0%
Maximum	22759	97%	100%	100%	100%
Mean	1897.3	66%	29%	89%	89
Median	986.5	70%	17%	90%	90%
St. Dev.	2944.5	14%	27%	9%	10%

---

*Note:* Adapted from the Arkansas Executive Summary Adjusted Graduation Rates for Arkansas Districts: 2016-2017.

With over 1.2 million students dropping out of school, the drop-out crisis in American education will exert tremendous pressure on America's youth to be successful. The student's potential earnings, life expectancy and personal freedom are at stake (Breslow, 2012; Joseph, 2014; Kliff, 2012; Olshansky et al., 2011; Platt et al., 2011; Rahbari et al. 2014). Consequences from dropping out of school manifest itself in approximately \$10,000 less income per year coupled with approximately a 10-year deficit in life expectancy (Breslow, 2012; Joseph, 2014; Kliff, 2012; Olshansky et al., 2011; Platt et al., 2011; Rahbari et al. 2014). *The stakes are too high to fail.*

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the overall quality of student experiences while enrolled in alternative education programs in Northwest Arkansas.

Research has clearly identified gaps in determining those characteristics of effective alternative learning programs partly because measurement of success in these programs is often ambiguous and inconsistent (Curley, 2016a). Alternative learning programs can be effective or ineffective in providing at-risk students opportunities for success, depending on how the alternative learning program is designed and used (Curley, 2016a). A program that does not adequately address the needs of students has

the potential to cause academic and behavioral consequences (Curley, 2016a). This study will attempt to address the questions regarding perceptions of effective versus ineffective characteristics, by evaluating Likert-scaled responses and open-ended discussion questions of teachers and students. The views and perceptions of the students compared to the views and perceptions of the teachers regarding what is considered effective may identify gaps and misconceptions between teachers and students in an attempt to avoid creating an ineffective opportunity for at-risk students.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study of student and teacher perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of the alternative learning environment was designed to examine the individual student and the individual teachers' experiences. The hypotheses for each question examine whether a statistical difference exists between how students and teachers perceive the alternative learning environment experience. The questions used for the study are adapted from Youth Truth (2018).

- RQ – 1: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with student engagement while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 2: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with academic rigor while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 3: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with teacher relationships while attending the alternative learning environment?

- RQ – 4: What are the differences in the perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with peer relationships while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 5: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with school culture while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 6: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with academic interventions while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 7: What are the differences perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with behavior interventions while attending the alternative learning environment?

### **Research Hypothesis**

- H<sub>0</sub>-1: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view student engagement while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-2: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view academic rigor while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-3: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view teacher relationships while attending alternative learning environment.

- H<sub>0</sub>-4: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view peer relationships while attending environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-5: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view school culture while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-6: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view academic interventions while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-7: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view behavior interventions while attending alternative learning environment.

### **Definitions of Terms**

- Alternative Education – Alternative education evolved and narrowed during the 1980's to its current definition of educating students who are at-risk of failure (McKee & Conner, 2007). An alternative education program is an intervention program that is established to serve students who are not successful in traditional schools and programs. The function of the alternative program is to give support to students who are experiencing academic failure (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010).
- Mainstream Education / Traditional Education – Publicly funded schools that deliver teacher centered instruction to classes of students in basic educational

practices and expect mastery of core academic subjects of math, reading, writing, science, and social studies (Huson, n.d.)

- Alternative Learning Environment – an alternate class or school that affords all students an environment that seeks to eliminate barriers to learning for students whose academic and social progress are negatively affected by the student's personal characteristics or situation (Arkansas Code Ann. § 6-48-101, 2016).
- Nontraditional/Flexible Instructional Methods – Innovative methods of instructional delivery such as flexible time frames, applied learning, integrated curriculum, and work-based learning that allows the student varies options for success (Arkansas Code Ann. § 6-48-101, 2016).
- At-Risk Youth – the At-risk students are those students whose educational and social progress deviates from the standard expected for a successful transition to a productive adult life (Hubner & Wolfson, 2001).
- Engagement – The level of participation of students in academic and non-academic activities with the students' attitude toward the activities (Hu & Kuh, 2002).
- Student Engagement – Affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement among students with peer groups, in the classroom (Klem & Connell, 2004).
- Disengaged Student – Students that are withdrawing in an activity that relates to academic learning (Ali & Hassan, 2018).
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – A US law passed in 2015 that governs the United States K–12 public education policy. The law replaced the No Child Left

Behind Act (NCLB). ESSA modified NCLB requirements of periodic standardized testing (Klein, 2016).

- No Child Left Behind – Federal legislation created in 2001 by President George W. Bush that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, including Title I requirements for disadvantaged students and testing requirements for states to receive Title I funding (Klein, 2015).
- Socioeconomic Status – measured by determining the education, income, occupation, or a composite of these variables (Winkley, Jatulis, Frank, & Fortmann, 1992).
- Marginalized Students – Students that becomes marginalized due to cultural differences, knowledge gaps, and socioeconomic status resulting in the need for supplemental support. (Akin & Neumann, 2013).
- Status Drop Out Rate – Percentage of people who are not enrolled in high school and who do not have a high school credential (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).
- Event Drop Out Rate – Percentage of high school students who dropped out of grades 10-12 (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

### **Significance of the Study**

Through a more in-depth understanding of alternative education and its impact on at-risk youth, the findings of this study may aid in reducing the drop-out rate of secondary students in Arkansas. Evaluating and reporting the identified components of alternative learning programs that are identified through this study will be valuable to superintendents, principals, and teachers of alternative learning programs in determining what common components of the alternative learning environments that are effective and

has the greatest possibility to reduce the likelihood that students will become disengaged and fail to finish their high school education.

Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Balfanz (2009) conducted focus group surveys of students aged 16-25 who reported that they were high school drop-outs in 25 separate geographic locations throughout the United States including urban and rural settings. Bridgeland et al. (2009) found that most principals and teachers believed that drop-outs are a major problem. However, only a small portion of each group believed it reached crisis level, with a corresponding number believing it was only a minor problem (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz, 2009). The reason, Bridgeland et al. (2009) discovered an “expectation gap” exists in today’s educational setting.

Drop-outs often reported that they would have worked harder if it were demanded from them by teachers and administrators in their schools. Additionally, teachers unanimously reported they would support educational reforms to guide drop-out prevention (Bridgeland et al., 2009). However, the educational reforms are most often doomed to failure due to the fact that a fundamental expectation that all students should be held to high academic expectations and receive the support needed to reach that level of academic attainment is not universally practiced in the educational field (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

To compound this “expectation gap”, a divide among teacher and student perceptions of school and engagement exists. Bridgeland et al. (2009) found nearly 50% of student respondents reported disengagement as the primary cause for dropping out. However, only 20% of teachers and 21% of principals felt boredom (disengagement) was a factor in the student dropping out. In fact, 42% of teachers believed that students who

reported that school was disengaging were just making excuses for poor performance (Bridgeland et al., 2009). Additionally, 74% of teachers and 69% of principal respondents reported that parents bore all the responsibility for their child dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

Furthermore, in today's reality, a high school diploma may not necessarily guarantee a student's success after leaving high school, but a high school diploma still opens doors to higher education and careers. However, without a high school diploma, the outcome is much more certain. According to Rumberger (2011), students exhibit signs of disengagement during elementary and middle school. The consequences of this disengagement place the student in a compromised position as he/she enters society as adults. Furthermore, the shortcomings in health and earnings seen by these compromised students place a toll on society and economy (Rumberger, 2011). In fact, a large majority of drop-outs will never attain the level of earnings of their high school graduate counterparts. Additionally, and tragically, the life expectancy for drop-outs is shorter by seven years than for those who earn a diploma (Rumberger, 2011).

Deciding what is effective and what is not effective in alternative learning programs has provided a perplexing dilemma for school leaders trying to meet the needs of all students while simultaneously meeting state and federal legislative accountability guidelines. According to Nibbelink (2011), the interventions and support provided by alternative learning environments are often personalized for each individual student. Furthermore, the individual student often is plagued by multiple barriers to academic and social competence.



A specific alternative learning component may address one barrier but fail to address the other barriers. This creates a specific problem when evaluating alternative learning programs (Nibbelink, 2011). The main challenge facing alternative education is to define success and failure. Nibbelink (2011) addresses this characteristic of alternative learning programs in regards to accountability, stating “Historically, the goal for general education has not been clearly defined, so it is no surprise that alternative schools have an identity crisis” (Nibbelink, 2011, p. 13). In reality, the bar for alternative education students has been set too low. In fact, Nibbelink (2011) believes that an early goal for alternative education was to allow bad students to be kept away from good students. In reference to the accountability that educators have to these students, few have expected the alternative education students to achieve at the same level as traditional education students (Nibbelink, 2011).

The significance of the study lies in this disconnect between perception and reality. Clearly teachers want to advance learning and reduce drop-out rates (Bridgeland et al., 2009). Additionally, alternative learning is a proven tool to address the systemic drop-out problem (Nibbelink, 2011). However, a lack of understanding of the perceptions of teachers to student outcomes is prevalent in the educational system.

The common components of alternative learning programs that are identified through this study will be valuable to superintendents, principals, and teachers of alternative learning programs in determining what common components of the alternative learning environment that is effective and will reduce the likelihood that the student will eventually drop-out and fail to finish their high school education.

School leaders, when addressing the needs of at-risk students by utilizing an alternative learning program, must first determine the effective components. Equipped with this knowledge the school leaders can design a better program aligned to student and teacher input. This study attempts to provide knowledge to enhance alternative learning programs' academic and social components.

### **Assumptions**

The overriding assumption for this study was that all participants would answer the questions truthfully. A secondary assumption to the truthfulness of participants was that the research participants would understand the questions. Furthermore, it was assumed that no pre-knowledge bias would be displayed by the research participants. Finally, it was assumed that misinterpretations of questions and/or pre-knowledge bias by the research participants could not be controlled.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provided the theoretical foundation for the study of alternative learning environments. To understand Maslow's theory requires an understanding of human nature. McLeod (2018) defined the theory as a motivational theory consisting of a pyramidal structure of five human needs: physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. The structure underlying the theory states that the lower in the pyramid, the basic the need becomes. Maslow separated the five needs into two categories: deficiency and being needs. The first three needs, physiological, safety, and belonging, are considered deficiency needs. Deficiency needs surface due to deprivation and must be wholly or substantially met before progressing into being

needs. The final two needs, esteem and self-actualization are considered being needs (McLeod, 2018a).

### **Limitations**

Limitations of a study are potential weaknesses within the study that would affect the reliability or validity of the research (Creswell, 2003). The limited grade span and the small sample size makes the results not strictly generalizable to other alternative learning environments. Both limited grade span and small sample size are the most significant limitations of the study.

Although alternative learning environments have been present in American education since the 1950's, the impact and function have changed significantly in recent years to address the drop-out epidemic. ((Bullock, 2006; Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006; Raywid, 1994). The lack of empirical data on alternative learning programs as recently as 10 years old can be considered a limitation of the study.

Several at-risk factors are correlated to community and family factors (Cameron & Heckman, 1998; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Socio economic status of free reduced lunch percentage is a limitation as no data on parent income is present within the study. Additionally, free and reduced lunch status must be applied for by the parent and may not encompass the entire student populations of the schools. Demographics of students from rural to urban family settings are also a limitation of the study.

Data for this study was collected using five schools within the Northwest Arkansas Educational Cooperative. Because the study involved only five schools in a specific geographical region of Arkansas, the external validity should be considered a limitation when viewed through the lens of generalizability of the study. The researcher

also serves on the Board of Directors for the Northwest Arkansas Educational Cooperative, which could be considered a limitation.

### **Delimitations**

The target population for this study was 60 alternative education students. The small sample size is a delimiting factor. The availability of a larger sample size in the context of alternative education was not possible. A broader population of participants with experience in alternative education would have allowed for purposeful sampling. The convenience sample was intentionally drawn from known alternative placements. Given the limited sample size the results outlined in this study may not exactly conform to other districts or states alternative learning programs.

The next delimiting factor is the context of the study. The study involved five Northwest Arkansas school districts. Each district has one alternative school for high school. A wide margin of discrepancies exists within Northwest Arkansas in demographic make-up. Socio-economic and racial make-up are the largest discrepancies among districts. The study will focus on smaller school districts with total district enrollment of less than 1,000 students, while excluding larger districts with over 1,000 students. Again, given the large differences in demographics, the variance in student social, emotional, and academic attainment varies across district, state, and national boundaries will make generalization of results a delimiting factor.

The study faces delimitations due to the geographic location of the participating districts. The study was confined to Northwest Arkansas. Given the geographical isolation of the sampling population, the results outlined in this study may not exactly conform to generalizations about other districts or states alternative learning programs.

## **Chapter 1 Summary**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the overall quality of student experiences while enrolled in alternative education programs in Northwest Arkansas.

One challenge facing educators is how to educate every student given the differences in learning abilities and outcomes for each child. Alternative Learning Environments have materialized as an intervention designed to provide a resource to educate students that typically do not learn or adjust to the traditional model of education (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Nibbelink, 2011).

Alternative education programs are no place for limited aspirations. Sugai (1998) believed that children placed into alternative learning programs face an arduous climb to be successful. Additionally, time is not on the student's side and is unforgiving in nature and scope of attaining the skills and knowledge for the student to transition to employment or additional education options (Sugai, 1998).

Because research has established a cause and effect relationship between dropping out of high school to students' earnings, the economy, and life expectancy (Joseph, 2014; Kliff 2012), additional research must be completed in drop-out prevention strategies to alter the course of at-risk youth.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **At-Risk Students**

Defining at-risk students with a single definition only provides a shallow understanding of what at-risk students experience. For reference, alternative learning environment is defined as an alternate class or school that affords all students an environment that seeks to eliminate barriers to learning for students whose academic and social progress are negatively affected by the student's personal characteristics or situation (Arkansas Code Ann. § 6-48-101, 2016). Although entirely adequate for the purpose of defining at-risk students, the definition only scratches the surface of the issue.

To better understand the dynamics of at-risk students, it is more beneficial to frame at-risk in terms of the characteristics of at-risk students. The first step to systematically addressing the drop-out problem facing public education is to develop an understanding of the characteristics and lives of students most likely to leave school early (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). This systematic approach provides a holistic foundation for the discussion of interventions and paves the way for evaluating Alternative Education's role in providing the support to students to see them transition from high school to college and career readiness.

School leaders can glean an accurate illustration of potential drop-outs. Bowers, Spratt, and Taff (2013) identified 110 drop-out predictors or risk factors exhibited by students identified as at-risk. During the study, drop-out predictors were calculated from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Bowers et al. (2013) found that drop-out indicators are precise in the understanding that the majority of the students that exhibit that indicator drop-out. However, the indicator may not be an accurate barometer of total drop-out

prevention from a strategy standpoint, given that the drop-outs that exhibit the precise indicator may only account for a small percentage of total drop-outs. Finally, the study identified three precise indicators that were highly accurate: cumulative semester GPA, student engagement, and mathematics test scores (Bowers, Spratt, & Taff, 2013).


Risk factors contributing to youth becoming classified as at-risk manifest itself along many avenues and exert pressure on marginalized students' success. Leonard et al. (2015) reported that economic and academic pressure is creating fear, anxiety, and depression with the school. The study involved 128 eleventh grade students from two settings that participated in an online quantitative survey developed from interviews with 19 teachers to elicit the teachers' perspectives on student stress. The results pointed to youth experiencing academic, athletic, social, and personal challenges throughout their educational careers.

Often, these types of activities are considered good stress, as they are mediated by schools, parents, and peers and prepares the student for adulthood (Leonard et al., 2015). Although these factors are considered acceptable under normal circumstances, and can be controlled by the student or with the aid of peers, parents, or schools, the impact on this stress for the marginalized students can cause significant damage to their school success. (Leonard et al., 2015). Regardless of possible consequences of the challenges faced by students, these factors can be grouped into four broad categories: (a) factors focused on the student, (b) factors focused on the student's family, (c) factors associated with the community, and (d) factors associated with the school (Nolan, Cole, Wroughton, Clayton-Code, & Riffe, 2013; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Grayson (2002) completed research on at-risk youth behaviors. The research was framed on answering one simple question: why are some students successful, while other students are not (Grayson, 2002)? In order to answer this question, Grayson (2002) qualitatively compiled research on 100 youth resiliency studies. The findings pointed to a direct correlation of at-risk behavior with social skills, problem-solving skills, a sense of control and self-esteem, and a future sense of hope (Grayson, 2002). Table 2 lists the risk factors associated with youth along a continuum from minimal to at-risk behavior.

Table 2

*Risk Factors along a risk continuum.*

Risk Factors				
				
Minimal Risk	Remote Risk	High Risk	Imminent Risk	At-Risk Behavior
High SES	Less Positive	Depression	Smoking	Hard Drugs
Few Social-Emotional Stressors	Some Stressors	Anxiety	Early Sexual Activity	Teenage Mother
Good Schools	Single Parent / Bad Crowd	Aggression / Homelessness	Alcohol	Been imprisoned
Positive Peers	Minority Status	Poor Schools	Severe School Problems	Dropped Out of School
Good Family	Bad Crowd	Homelessness	Legal Trouble	Dropped Out of School

*Note:* SES = Socio-Economic Status. Adapted from Grayson, R. (2002). At risk students and resiliency factors. Retrieved from <http://www.visionrealization.com>



**Student characteristics affecting at-risk youth.** Several attributes of a student directly affect the ability of the student to be successful in school. When researching student characteristics/predictors aligned with dropping out of high school, four main themes are evident: (a) Academic Performance, (b) Student Engagement, (c) Student Discipline, and (d) Student Self -Worth (Nolan et al., 2013). Each act independently and in cohesion with other student predictors to define the overall student. For example, attendance and student engagement are directly correlated. Additionally, academic performance and discipline are directly correlated (Nolan, et al., 2013).

Academic achievement is one of the most broadly and often researched components of student performance. Rumberger and Lim (2008) found that low standardized test score(s), course failure(s), and grade retention(s) all factored into high predictors of not completing high school. Rumberger and Lim (2008) studied 389 research reports to determine common themes associated with academic performance. The results of the analysis found that 200 of the 389 reports revealed that test scores and grades as the two culprits behind poor academic achievement that put pressure on students to drop out.

To add to the layers of performance, Allensworth and Easton (2007) found that several ninth-grade indicators of academic performance can be used to predict high school graduation. The strongest predictor is being on-track. This is misleading, as on-track performance involves a complex set of variables such as grade point average, course absences, behavior referrals, and engagement (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Student engagement can be the single most important variable for schools to overcome in preventing school drop-outs. Ali and Hassan (2018) introduced three

dimensions of engagement. Each dimension can be either positive or negative depending on the outcome of the experience. Examples of the three dimensions of engagement are provided in Table 3.

Table 3

*Student Engagement Dimensions*

	Positive Engagement	Indirect Engagement	Negative Engagement
Behavior	Attend Classes Participate in Activities	Skip Classes with reasons	Disrupt classes and distract classes
Emotion	Interest	Bored	Disapproved
Cognition	Meet and/or Exceed the task requirements	Absent from class Late Submission of Assignments	Question tasks given by teacher

*Note:* Adapted from Ali, M. M & Hassan, N. (2018). Defining concepts of student engagement and factors contributing to their engagement in school.

Studies have documented ways that students who feel ‘connected’ with other people and school activities perform better academically than do students who feel ‘disconnected’ (Lofstrom & Tyler, 2007; Ali & Hassan, 2018). Strahan (2008) stated that at-risk students “expressed a ‘survival orientation,’ describing ways they tried to look busy or ask for help. Some took pride in creating disruptions, ‘getting into it’ with classmates and teachers as a way to avoid work” (Strahan, 2008, p. 7). While students that progress in school “reported functional strategies for completing assignments and ways they avoided getting into trouble. They attributed their success to supportive relationships with their teachers and to academic tasks they could accomplish” (Strahan, 2008, p. 7).

In most academic circles, engagement is often termed to identify engagement in academics. For example, attending class, participating in class, completing homework, and studying for tests and assignments. However, Rumberger (2001) lists social engagement as a contributing factor in the attitude of students toward school and their willingness to finish. In fact, Finn and Rock (1997) proposed that the correlation between dropping out of school and low school performance related to engagement was significant. The study involved 1803 students who completed the U.S. Department of Education's National Educational Longitudinal Study. Data for the study was comprised of student achievement and discipline records. As stated, students who were engaged in school through participation in activities or working with an adult mentor contributed to the student achieving academically and socially at a higher level than students who lacked engagement in school activities or adult mentors (Finn & Rock, 1997).

In terms of research, student engagement is hard to define across the educational spectrum. Most research has identified absenteeism as the most common engagement indicator (Nolan et al., 2013). Research by Nolan et al. (2013) concerning the risk factors for truancy included a total of 16,418 students from 21 schools including 12 elementary, five middle, and four high schools for the 2009-2010 school year from one midwestern school district. Demographic information was collected from enrollment paperwork filled out by parent(s)/guardian(s), student discipline, attendance, and grades were obtained from the Infinite Campus, the student information system used by the district. Data collected was analyzed using p-values to determine statistical differences between start and finish dates for the school year (Nolan et al., 2013). Student attendance is crucial in the success of high school students in preparing them for college and career success.

Nolan et al. learning environments are the (2013) found that keeping students at grade level and subsequently proficient on state-mandated testing was difficult given the school engagement changes due to truancy and/or attendance deficits. The study identified a high-risk factor for truancy associated with students changing schools, even within the same school district. This seems to put students that undergo a change of placement from a traditional classroom environment to an alternative classroom environment squarely at risk (Nolan et al., 2013).

Several factors contribute to student engagement. Ali and Hassan (2018) outlined the effect that family factors, school factors, and peer factors have on student engagement. Of particular importance to alternative four concepts (4Cs) theory of school environments. The 4Cs introduces school culture, school community, school curriculum, and school co-curriculum (secondary curriculum) as the main components that constitute a school environment). In practical terms, the school environment generates engagement through involvement and pride in the school (Ali & Hassan, 2018). Table 4 lists the 4Cs concept by definition.

Table 4

*Four Concepts (4Cs) Theory of School Environments*

Concept	Definition
School Culture	School's Mission and Vision, Trust, Value, Tradition, School Structure, School Organization, Curriculum
School Community	Interaction between students, teachers, and administrators.

School Curriculum	Knowledge expected by the school to be gained by students in the form of attitudes and skills.
School Co-Curriculum (Hidden Curriculum)	Opportunities to learn outside of the traditional classroom setting (Ethics/Norms)

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*Note:* Adapted from Ali, M. M & Hassan, N. (2018). Defining concepts of student engagement and factors contributing to their engagement in school. Creative Education

Key findings from the work by Ali and Hassan (2018) illustrates the importance of student engagement in the academic process. In order to address the level of engagement of students requires collaboration between stakeholders (administration, teachers, parents, and students). Relevant activities that target academic achievement, as well as socio-emotional development, is a key priority in developing and maintaining a positive school environment (Ali & Hassan, 2018).

Roby (2004) conducted research on 3,171 schools in Ohio for the 1999 school year to examine the relationship between student engagement and student attendance. Each school reported data used for the study to the Ohio Department of Education. Pearson's  $r$  correlations were used to analyze the relationship between student achievement and attendance. Common variances for correlating student attendance and student achievement were evaluated using the coefficient of determination ( $r^2$ ). A strong positive relationship exists between student achievement and student attendance (Roby, 2004). Student engagement related to high academic standards and high academic expectations are factors in students regularly attending school (Roby, 2004).

Rumberger and Lim (2008) outline the interconnection of all four themes. Rumberger and Lim (2008) identified 694 analyses of multiple risk factors. The research pointed to a positive relationship between dropping out and multiple risk factors.

However, the research could not determine a causal relationship between the risk factors and dropping out or whether dropping out is caused by a common set of underlying factors (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Discipline issues are an attribute that is often exhibited by alternative learning students. According to research by Rumberger and Lim (2008), deviant behavior can manifest itself in many different behaviors. Research has identified delinquent behaviors in school, delinquent behaviors outside of school, drug and alcohol use, sexual activity, and teen childbearing. These behaviors are strong predictors of struggling students who are at-risk of school failure (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Presence of such predictors by the age of 14 had a significant effect on early drop-out numbers by age 16, while the numbers increased by grade 12 (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

The student's opinions toward one-self is an important factor in students making the decision to drop-out of high school. However, self-worth is hard to identify and is not directly identifiable in student characteristics as grades, test scores, attendance, participation in extracurricular activities, and other visible engagement criteria. In fact, according to Lemon and Watson (2011), school districts cannot force a student to learn something that they do not find personally useful. To be successful, a student must internalize the willingness to finish high school into their personal value system. Basically, the student must align high school graduation with their life goals and purpose (Lemon & Watson, 2011).

**Family characteristics affecting at-risk youth.** Family characteristics aligned with parental background and family environment exerts an immense weight on the student's educational outcomes. Cameron and Heckman (1998) outlined the importance

of family background including socioeconomic status to student success. The transition from early grade levels to upper grade levels showed the strongest correlation between low socioeconomic status and drop-out potential. The research suggests the parent's education level along with the parent's income potential correlates to the student's engagement during high school. Their research indicates that as the student reaches the upper grades, the impact is manifested in the decreasing involvement in extracurricular activities and thus a slow separation from the school environment (Cameron & Heckman, 1998).

The effect of socioeconomic factors on education cannot be understated. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) identified the work status of students as an early predictor of not finishing high school. Students living within the confines of a low socioeconomic lifestyle, often are forced to work to supplement the family income. Working, does not necessarily constitute a drop-out predictor. The study found that working only a few hours per week did not negatively impact the students' school engagement. However, working more than 20 hours per week was a predictor of drop-out risk (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

The educational attainment level and the valuation of education by parents have an effect on the drop-out potential of marginalized students. According to research conducted by Foley, Gallipoli, and Green (2014), parents who have at least a bachelor's degree often hold a high valuation of education. Whereas, parents with less than a bachelor's degree do not hold the same opinion toward education (Foley, Gallipoli, & Green, 2014). However, Foley et al. (2014) found that high cognitive ability students demonstrate a very small chance of dropping out regardless of the parent's education

level or valuation of education. Furthermore, students with low cognitive ability demonstrated a higher chance of dropping out regardless of the parent's education level or valuation of education (Foley et al., 2014).

The influence of stress within the family structure has the potential to create negative consequences for the student. Moore and Vandivere (2000) reports that family stressors can be categorized into six criteria. The six criteria include: (a) difficulty paying the rent, mortgage, or utility bills; (b) overcrowding in the house; (c) food insecurity; (d) lack of health care; (e) a parent in poor mental or physical health; and (f) a child with a physical, learning, or mental health condition. If two or more criteria are present within the family structure, the family is considered to be under stress (Moore & Vandivere, 2000). Moore and Vandivere report that 22% of children under the age of 18 live in a stressful environment. The number increases to 50% for families living below the federal poverty line. Finally, for students age six to 17 living with family stress are nearly twice as likely to experience decreased levels of school engagement (Moore & Vandivere, 2000).

School and/or domicile mobility has a great impact on a student's ability to be successful in school. McGregor and Mills (2012) report that the lack of continuity in their social and academic development is a result of the uncertainty brought on by the mobility. While the mobility is the primary concern, coupling school mobility with the increasing demands on school accountability often creates a conflict with the parents/students and the school, as administrators try to assure the students success and the success of the schools' testing cycle.



As the student transitions from elementary grades to middle and high school, the inflexibility of curriculum coupled with the mobility of students exerts tremendous strain on the students and families of the students. This conflict created from mobility often manifests itself in the form of low self-esteem and eventually leads to disengagement from the school setting (McGregor & Mills, 2012).

Family poverty is one of the hardest challenges for families of students to overcome. Poverty cuts deep and exerts a tremendous weight on students' academic success. Rumberger (2011) found that one in five children lives in poverty. For African-Americans and Hispanics, that number rises to one in three. In fact, the United States has the highest prevalence of child poverty in the industrialized world (Rumberger, 2011).

Furthermore, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) found a strong correlation between poverty and chronic absenteeism. Children that were labeled as chronically absent gained 14% fewer literacy skills in kindergarten and 15% fewer literacy and 12% fewer mathematics skills by the first grade (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Furthermore, chronic absenteeism is among the strongest predictors for dropping out of school.

Data suggests that current practices have been modestly successful in preventing drop-outs. Re-examining school practices to include strategies designed for the difficulties that at-risk students face would improve the overall quality of education delivered to students who experience chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Payne (2005) addressed poverty in terms of 'class rules. For marginalized students, the class rules fit into the fabric of the school setting. Additionally, marginalized students from poverty/low socioeconomic status adhere to other 'rules' of behavior (Payne, 2005). For marginalized students including at-risk alternative learning students,

‘class rules’ dictates the world is defined in local terms. Outside of school, the student rarely gets to see what the world looks like. In fact, the idea of having choices about their life is foreign (Payne, 2005). Discipline is a large force for low socio-economic students. Payne (2005) outlined that a student experiencing poverty often uses physical confrontation to solve problems. Nonverbal communication is often more important than verbal communication with emotions being the deciding behavioral response mechanism. Finally, discipline is about forgiveness and not a behavior change (Payne, 2005).

**School characteristics affecting at-risk youth.** It is universally accepted that schools exhibit a tremendous influence on student outcomes, including drop-out rates. Research has been inconclusive in determining exactly what school characteristics impact student drop-out tendencies. However, an examination of school practices and policies compared to at-risk student characteristics yields a convincing pattern.

At-risk students are often unsuccessful in the regular classroom environment because of academic or behavioral problems that limit their ability to learn and lead to unproductive behaviors and negative interactions with peers and teachers. Recent work by Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, and Tonelson (2006) utilized purposeful sampling to select three urban alternative schools to include 50 students from each program. The researchers used the ESB survey to determine school climate based on a 118 multiple choice and true/false questionnaire. Statistical analysis of the data was completed through the Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U Tests (Quinn et al., 2006). Quinn et al. (2008) identified school climate as a main obstacle for struggling students.

Traditional education is a rigid authoritarian environment that often oppresses the student. The oppression reveals itself in the form of student attitudes toward the school

and faculty as non-caring and showing little to no respect for the student (Quinn et al. (2008). Additionally, Quinn et al. (2008) pointed out that the student often believes the school does not value the student's opinion. Also, the student often characteristics the school as unfair with developing and implementing rules, policies, and discipline. Combined, these feelings toward the school environment create an attitude of apathy in the student that is not conducive to learning (Quinn et al., 2006).

Roderick (1994) outlined that high school drop-outs are often over-age for the grade placement based upon the school's promotion/retention policy. In completing the study, Roderick (1994) used the Logit Coefficients for hazards of leaving school between the ages of 16 and 19 by the number of grade retentions from kindergarten to grade six.

The pendulum swing from social promotion toward tougher standards-based criterion for promotion is rooted in the policy changes stemming from *A Nation at Risk*. Supporting research states that students being retained one grade increases the likelihood that that student will drop-out by 40% to 50%. Additionally, students that are retained in a total of two grades experience a 90% chance of dropping out (Roderick, 1994). Roderick (1994) concludes that the tougher policies enacted following *A Nation at Risk* were based on a legitimate concern that students should not be promoted through the grades without demonstrating certain competencies. However, implementing minimum competencies at the expense of marginalized students has inadvertently created the overage student population (Roderick, 1994).

The structure of the traditional classroom may interfere with learning for at-risk students. Traditional education is often considered formal, hierarchical and structured around the teacher to control the content, pace, and direction of the curriculum and

culture under the discretion of the administration (Munns & Woodward, 2006). Difficulty arises when students that exhibit risk factors for dropping out are subjected to the rules for dress, self-presentation, and social interaction coupled with the absolute compliance to school policy in the adult power spectrum. Most often, youth will avoid environments that they perceive as difficult to adhere to social expectations of mainstream schools. This phenomenon is magnified when students come from unstable backgrounds and/or unsupportive environments (Munns & Woodward, 2006).

According to Fernández-Soria (2013), the increased parameters of accountability placed on schools by the various attempts to legislate student and school success has caused a negative ripple among at-risk students. At-risk students tend to struggle in classes that are focused solely on rigorous academic standards that the at-risk students are not prepared for. This leads the student to fall further behind, ultimately, ending in a sense of alienation that culminates in the student dropping out (Fernández-Soria, 2013). Fernández-Soria (2013), outlines the base problem as one in which the political and ideological approaches to education are being used as a means to legitimize agendas about what and how education should function.

**Community characteristics affecting at-risk youth.** School-derived methodologies are unlikely to solve the drop-out obstacle for students without addressing community communities, especially racial, ethnic, and linguistic factors within the community (Rumberger, 2011). Many students of racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities come from families and communities that experience inadequate economic and social resources to provide a path for school success (Rumberger, 2011).

Neighborhoods characterized by persistent violence, drugs, residential instability, underperforming schools, and crowded housing conditions present daily obstacles for many of America's youth (Clampet-Lundquist, Edin, Kling, & Duncan, 2011). Clampet-Lundquist, Edin, Kling, and Duncan (2011) conducted a qualitative study to determine the effects that gender plays in relationship to community factors of risk.

Participants were placed into two groups based on gender. Interviews were conducted with 86 participants. Themes were coded into NVivo for detailed analytic coding (Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2011). The findings revealed that gender differences in social interactions within the community played a significant role in at-risk behavior. For example, boys tended to frequent ball fields, on street corners, park alleys, or vacant lots in larger groups. Girls did not exhibit the same tendencies. Instead, girls were usually found in smaller groups in more public places (Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2011). These tendencies tended to lead to at-risk behavior through peer interactions and isolation in boys, but less in girls (Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2011). Neighborhoods and schools are microcosms of one another. Clampet-Lundquist et al. (2011) reasoned that the same holds true for school interactions, leading to the same at-risk behaviors.

Community services can play a significant role in student development. Rumberger (2001) found that the quality of communities the students reside in can have an empirical effect on the students. For example, communities that offer playgrounds, parks, and after-school programs will have an increased positive effect on the students, while communities that lack these resources will not have the increased effect on the students. The lack of resources will often lend itself to poor decision making that ultimately leads to discipline problems and deviant behavior (Rumberger, 2001).

Another community variable is employment opportunities. This component can be challenging to understand. Rumberger (2001) found that communities that offered favorable, although low income, employment opportunities for students while attending school and after graduation increases the likelihood of students dropping out. However, communities that offered better opportunities for high school graduates in increased starting wages or opportunities for on-the-job training increased the proportion of students finishing high school (Rumberger, 2001). Lastly, the total time and length of hours that the student worked impacts the likelihood of students dropping out. The longer the daily work schedule having a more significant impact than shorter daily schedules and larger total weekly hours being more impactful on the student than smaller total hours worked during the week (Rumberger, 2001).

**Clustering risk factors.** Risk factors are varied in form and habits of the students ranging from student-centered, family-centered, and community-centered (Nolan et al., 2013). Although the literature review addressed each as a stand-alone factor, the clustering of factors is often present (Finn, 1993). Allensworth and Easton (2007) found that freshman factors of performance often are intertwined into the drop-out response of students. On-track course attempts, course failures, grade point average, course absences, behavior referrals, and engagement are often associated with other at-risk predictors (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Ready (2010) defined the need of interventions for students that suffer from low socioeconomic status and attendance problems. Although low socio-economic status and poor attendance both impact marginalized students, the two factors are linked. Ready (2010) conducted research through the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of

Kindergarten Cohort. Statistical significance of the study was conducted using ANOVA and chi-square analysis. The results point to a significant link between social status and attendance. In fact, children living in poverty are 25% more likely to be absent three or more days of school per month (Ready, 2010). The study also determined that risk factors are often linked. This clustering of factors often in part significantly influence student achievement (Ready, 2010).

The Arkansas Prevention Needs Assessment Survey annually surveys sixth, eighth, tenth, and twelfth grade Arkansas students. The survey was designed to assess youth substance abuse and related behaviors. Table 5 outlines the multiple risk factors associated with the community, family, and school.

Table 5

*Clustering Behaviors of Youth At-Risk*

	Substance Abuse	Delinquency	Teen Pregnancy	School Drop-out	Violence
<b>Community</b>					
Availability of Drugs and Firearms	✓				✓
Community Environment Favorable for Drug Use	✓				
Transitions and Mobility	✓	✓		✓	
Low Neighborhood Attachment	✓	✓			✓
Economic and Social Deprivation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Family</b>					
Family History of Risk Behaviors	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Family Management Problems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Family Conflict	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Favorable Parental Attitudes and Involvement in Problem Behaviors	✓	✓			✓

**School**

Early and Persistent Antisocial Behavior	√	√	√	√	√
Academic Failure in Elementary School	√	√	√	√	√
Lack of School Engagement	√	√	√	√	
Individual / Peer					
Alienation / Defiance	√	√		√	
Friends Engaged in Problem Behavior	√	√	√	√	√
Favorable Attitudes toward Problem Behavior'	√	√	√	√	
Early start to Problem Behavior	√	√	√	√	√

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*Note:* Adapted from 2017 Arkansas Prevention Needs Assessment survey

**Alternative Learning Environments**

Alternative learning environments are an alternate class or school that affords all students an environment that seeks to eliminate barriers to learning for students whose academic and social progress are negatively affected by the student's personal characteristics or situation (Arkansas Code Ann. § 6-48-101, 2016). Alternative learning environments have a role to play in arresting the freefall of at-risk youth struggling in the traditional classroom setting.

Although the traditional education model has been effective in educating students in the United States, Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) opined that traditional education is designed for volume and is a one-size-fits-all approach to education. In contrast, alternative learning programs are designed to operate outside the traditional school environment. Lange and Sletten (2002) reported that alternative learning environments were meant to be a “school within a school.” Specifically, the alternative learning environment was meant to provide students a smaller community of belonging, focusing on the educational needs and interests of the students within a larger high school (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Furthermore, alternative learning programs provide an environment where at-risk students who display antisocial, violent, or aggressive behavior can be educated in a



setting that is removed from the traditional education population (Van Acker, 2007). The antisocial, violent or aggressive behavior can be a reaction to ineffective education setting, feelings of frustration and failure, and student isolation (Van Acker, 2007). Antisocial, violent, or aggressive behavior are typical at-risk factors for alternative placement (Aron, 2006; Caroleo, 2014; Hemmer & Shepperson, 2014; Raywid, 1994).

The Arkansas Bureau for Legislative Research produced a report for the Arkansas House and Senate Committee on Education outlining the alternative learning laws, procedures, and policies from other state education departments. A total of 21 states replied to the request for information. Table 6 shows specific placement factors from the states that participated in the survey and gives the percentage in which the factor may be used or is used for student placement and the criterion percentages reporting states used for alternative placement.

Table 6

*Criterion for Alternative Learning Program Placement*

Factor	May Be Used	Is Used
Possession of Firearms	66%	59%
Possession or use of another weapon	71%	65%
Illegal Drugs	81%	69%
Arrest	95%	75%
Physical Attacks	95%	73%
Disruptive Verbal Assaults	95%	80%
Chronic Truancy	91%	82%
Chronic Academic Failure	83%	67%
Pregnancy	71%	53%
Mental Health Needs	71%	50%
Academic Failure	83%	64%

*Note:* Adapted from Arkansas Bureau of Legislative Research, Adequacy Study Oversight Subcommittee, Senate and House Committee on Education. (2006). Alternative Learning Environment Report (Publication No. 05-112).

**Foundational alternative learning environment research.** Alternative learning environments are not new to the educational field. In fact, Raywid (1994) states that alternative schools date back to the 1960s. Although the schools from the 1960s do not resemble the schools of the 2000s, the common threads of innovation, small size, and implementation of bureaucratic rules and procedures tie two eras of alternative education together (Raywid, 1994).

Raywid (1994) believes that alternative learning environments represent cutting edge educational reform. The alternative schools are a stark departure from the hierarchical structure of education given that current initiatives in educational reform provide an unclear pathway to the end product of reform. However, alternative learning environments offer the chance to see what the end product of educational reform resembles. In fact, Raywid (1994) states that,

Many of the reforms currently pursued in traditional schools—downsizing the high school, pursuing a focus or theme, students and teacher choice, making the school a community, empowering staff, active learner engagement, authentic assessment—are practices that alternative schools pioneered (p. 26).

To make alternative schools successful, Raywid (1994) believed that three essential components must be present. First, the alternative school must generate of community within them. Second, the environment makes engagement paramount. Last, the school is designed to provide the organization and structure to make both a caring community and engaging learning sustainable (Raywid, 1994).

Alternative Learning Environments have a colorful history. Initially established in the 1960s to personalize education and give students more freedom and less adult

supervision (McKee & Conner, 2007; Raywid, 1994). Alternative education evolved and narrowed during the 1980s to its current definition of educating students who are at risk of failure (McKee & Conner, 2007). Alternative Education remained unchanged until the passage of President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which established federal law mandating that all schools focus on performance and meet yearly progress (McKee & Conner, 2007). Table 7 outlines previous research into alternative education.

Table 7

*Previous Research on Effective Components of Alternative Learning Programs*

Component	Related Research
Small Class Size	Arnové & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Morley, 1991; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Young, 1990
One-to-One Interactions between teachers and students	Arnové & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Tobin & Sprague, 1999
Supportive Environment	Arnové & Strout, 1980; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Case, 1981; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Young, 1990
Differentiated Instruction	Arnové & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Natriello, et al., 1990
Academic Support	Arnové & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Natriello, et al., 1990
Relevant Experiences	Arnové & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Natriello, et al., 1990
Flexibility	Barr, 1981; Gold & Mann, 1984; Natriello, et al, 1990

*Note:* Adapted from Lange, C.M.S., Sandra J. (2002). Alternative education: A brief history and research synthesis. National Association of state directors of special education, Alexandria.

**Effective alternative learning environments.** Establishing or improving an alternative learning program requires evaluation of certain criteria. Tissington (2006) and Raywild (1994) identified several key parameters to guide alternative learning development. In reality, the alternative learning environment setting encompasses several components that can be identified as essential or significant in achieving student success. Both Tissington (2006) and Raywild (1994) identified community support, interventions targeted toward a specific student, administrative leadership, and transition support as criteria for effective alternative learning environments. The National Alternative Education Association gave an overview of quality alternative indicators. Table 8 details the components found in exemplary programs as outlined by the National Alternative Education Association.

Table 8

*Indicators of Quality Alternative Programs*

Indicator	Definition of Indicator
Mission and Purpose	The mission is clearly defined through stakeholder (administrators, teachers, staff, parents, community, and student) engagement that guides the operational
Leadership	Passionate, innovative, competent, and experienced leadership that has administrative and bureaucratic autonomy with operational flexibility
Climate and Culture	Maintain a safe, caring, and orderly climate and culture that promotes collegial relationships among stakeholders.
Staffing and Professional Development	Staff is Passionate, innovative, competent, and experienced.
Curriculum and Instruction	High expectations for students in academics, behavioral, life skills, service coordination, transitional and vocational domains

Student Assessment	Includes screenings, progress monitoring, diagnostic and outcome-based measurements and procedures to improve short- and long-term student success.
Student Transition	Clear criteria and procedures for transitioning students from the traditional education setting to the alternative setting, from the alternative setting back to the traditional setting, and from the alternative setting to the workforce/college/Vocational Education.
Parent Involvement	Involves parents/guardians in a non-judgmental, solution focused program.
Collaboration	Established partnerships with community resources, families, and school.

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*Note:* Adapted from the National Alternative Education Association Exemplary Practices in Alternative Education (2014).

An understanding of the purpose of alternative education programs is needed for educational leaders to make data-driven decisions regarding alternative education programs. Poole (2016) studied the characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia in order to define the role of alternative learning in student failure prevention. In completing the research, Poole (2016) used an interpretive methodology to guide interviews with alternative school leaders to answer the research questions. The study involved purposeful sampling to identify the participants. Interviews with the 20 chosen leaders of successful alternative schools, as identified by the executives of the Georgia Association for Alternative Education, were conducted. Coding was then used to analyze the data into themes and sub-themes (Poole, 2016).

Findings from Poole's (2016) research revealed one major theme existed from all participants in the study. The major theme was identified as improved academics. All participants listed this factor as a top priority of their programs. The major sub-theme identified was improved personal development. Students realized through alternative

placement that they had the potential to improve their own character and self-skills (Poole, 2016).

Poole (2016) conducted research looking at the characteristics of effective alternative learning programs in Georgia and found that improved academics and personal development was possible through alternative placement. Likewise, Shirley (2009) argued that “alternative education must be different from traditional in order to sustain the meaning of alternative” (p.133).

For the most part, struggling students are removed from the traditional educational environment and placed in an alternative educational environment but are still required to complete the standard curriculum that they are transitioning from (Tissington, 2006). The research has pointed to several aspects of alternative learning environments that provide the opportunity for the student to be successful (Poole, 2016; Raywid, 1994; Shirley, 2009; Tissington, 2006). These components can be divided into (a) organizational components, (b) instructional components, and (c) interpersonal components (Raywid, 1994). Furthermore, Weir (1996) noted that changing the students’ setting without changing the methodology of instruction is doomed for failure. Adjustments to curriculum, methods, assessments, and demands on the student must be evaluated for each student to ensure success (Weir, 1996).

At-risk youth can be successful. Franklin, Streeter, Kim, and Tripodi (2007) evaluated the effectiveness of alternative schools in preventing at-risk students from dropping out of high school. The research conducted by Franklin et al. (2007) involved 46 alternative students and 39 traditional students. The students were compared as a group on three dependent variables: credits earned, attendance, and graduation rates.

Analysis of the data points was conducted using a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine significance between data points for the two groups (Franklin et al., 2007). Results indicated that students entering the alternative program had either left school or had repeated failures to obtain class credit from the traditional classroom setting. Thus, most alternative students are behind in credit (Franklin et al., 2007). In fact, the research showed that traditional student participants had significantly more credits at the beginning of the study. However, by the end of the study, the alternative participants had caught up on credits and some had passed the traditional participants in credits earned during that time frame (Franklin et al., 2007). The bigger take-away for alternative programs given the ability of at-risk students to regain credit is the possibility of re-examining a modified criterion for alternative placement at early ages (Franklin et al., 2007).

**Organizational components of alternative programs.** For any school to be successful, the students must want to be in that school. This is a simple truth throughout any level of educational attainment, ranging from kindergarten to graduate school. Alternative education programs are not immune to this same phenomenon. Alternative learning students must want to be in the program for the student to be successful and for the program to be sustainable (Raywid, 1994). The organizational components designed into the program factor heavily in achieving this outcome. Two distinct organizational design components are present in alternative learning environments. First, are organizational components allowing students to demonstrate control of their educational outcomes and is intrinsic in design. The second is extrinsic in nature and deals with the structure of the program (Raywid, 1994).

Self-Determination plays into the success of students. Self-Determination is the belief that all individuals have the ability and right to make decisions regarding their own lives (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2004). Alternative programs should provide opportunities for decision-making starting early in the students' educational grades by empowering them to express their interests and make informed decisions (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2004).

To accomplish informed decisions, students should receive instruction on self-determination skills that intensifies as the students get older (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2004). By developing this skill, the student gains an internal locus of control that vests the student in work-based learning, self-directed learning, and career exploration (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2004).

Involvement of parents in their student's education is important for the student to be successful in the traditional educational setting. However, for alternative schools that educate struggling students, it is vital to maximize parental involvement. Hardy (2007) states that families that would benefit the most from a close relationship with the school are the hardest to foster and maintain. For example, students that live in poverty, are English language learners, or marginalized by any number of misfortunes are the group that is most affected by lack of parental involvement (Hardy, 2007). In order to achieve parental involvement that is going to benefit the marginalized student, alternative learning programs must develop multiple outreach programs (Hardy, 2007).

Freudenberg and Ruglis (2007) identified the need for a comprehensive whole child approach to education. Health interventions embedded in alternative education



programs aid the student in engagement and knowledge retention. Types of interventions beneficial to marginalized students include: (a) mental health programs, (b) substance abuse programs, (c) sex and/or pregnancy prevention programs, and (d) violence prevention (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007).

Conclusions and recommendations from the research advocate for the development, implementation, and evaluation of a comprehensive health/health risk screening program to identify and service students experiencing difficulties in school related to (a) sex education, (b) substance abuse, (c) birth control education, (d) pregnancy services, (e) parenting services, and (f) violence prevention (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007).

Flexibility and student choice are a key component to an effective alternative learning environment. According to work by Lange and Sletten (2002), student discipline referrals for students in the alternative learning environment were fewer than their counterparts in the mainstream educational environment. Students believed the key difference between the two learning environments and the reason for the decreased discipline referrals was the inherent flexibility built into the alternative learning program. Additionally, Lange and Sletten (2002) reported that students that choose to be in the alternative learning program instead of being assigned due to academics or discipline issues listed flexibility as the key component for their choice (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

A transition plan is a key instrument in obtaining successful outcomes in alternative learning environments. Daws (2018) noted in her work that all participants in her qualitative study described a need for a transition process to support at-risk students when returning to the traditional classroom from the alternative learning environment.

Students often do not understand the educational opportunities available to them, nor the dialogue and vocabulary to articulate their needs.

Several considerations for the development of the transition plan revolve around the process. Key to these considerations is to include all stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, staff, and administration) utilizing common goals and language to develop the plan. Additionally, the transition plan must start the first day the student is enrolled in the alternative learning environment and include the students' histories, interests, resources available, extracurricular activities, and goals of the student (Daws, 2018).

Transitioning from an alternative program back to a traditional learning environment can be a point of stress for the student. Kelchner et al. (2017) reported that the lack of a transition plan could neutralize the benefits the student received in the alternative program. The research involved 24 participants that had been enrolled in an alternative program. A pre and posttest School Attitude Assessment Survey was completed to generate the data needed for the study (Kelchner et al., 2017).

The results pointed to transition support allowing the student to face the negative behaviors, poor performance, negative peer influences, and possible stigmatization from their previous experiences in a traditional environment (Kelchner et al., 2017). Without these supports, the student has a tendency to fall back into the negative spiral of behaviors that lead to alternative placement.

Often, the student experiences another alternative placement, and in some circumstances, a more restrictive placement, such as juvenile detention centers (Kelchner et al., 2017). In fact, the study revealed that 59% of students in the school year prior to the intervention who were returning to a traditional school setting from an alternative

school dropped out of school. Following the transitional interventions, the number of students who dropped out was reduced to 14% (Kelchner et al., 2017).

Small class size has been identified as a key organizational component of alternative learning programs since *A Nation at Risk* thrust the terminology at-risk into public education (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Morley, 1991; Natriello, et al., 1990; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Young, 1990). Jones (2015) found the smaller class sizes in alternative learning programs offer the student the ability to receive the one-to-one instruction often absent in the traditional classroom setting. Tobin and Sprague (2000), also believed the low student-to-teacher ratio found in alternative learning environments provided the opportunity for the alternative learning student to receive extensive individualized instruction. However, Jones (2015), provided a legitimate concern and warned that smaller class size is not a stand-alone intervention. Quality of teaching and school leadership are underpinnings that guide the smaller class size effectiveness (Jones, 2015). In line with Jones (2015), Kilmer (2013) reported that small class size was a common theme and that students felt teachers were more of an adult role model (de facto parent) in the alternative setting due to the smaller class interactions.

However, small class size is not enough. Brown (2017) continued by theorizing that structure must accompany small class size in order for the student to see a true benefit from the small class size. Structure in alternative learning environments is often seen in reduced classes and fewer transitions between classes, both due to the small class size allows for increased time on subject (Brown, 2017).

Small class size has crossover qualities with intrapersonal skills. Kilmer (2013), found that students in smaller class sizes believed that they were able to better develop a relationship with their teachers because of the limited number of students in the class. In fact, the students in the study attributed the increased maturity they gained in the alternative learning environment to the conversations with their teachers and peers made possible by the smaller class size (Kilmer, 2013).

**Instructional components of alternative programs.** Watson and Gemin (2008) reported that motivating students who have been unsuccessful in the traditional classroom environment is a key component for alternative learning environments. Online learning provided to these students can be a motivation in itself. The flexibility and pacing of online courses can provide motivation to struggling students by removing the psychological /social stigma of being in an alternative learning environment (Watson & Gemin, 2008).

Additionally, online classes provide the student individualized instruction that is paced to the student's abilities, which can be a point of motivation by reducing the stress often associated with poor classroom performance. Furthermore, technology driven coursework allows the student to participate in diagnostic testing (Watson & Gemin, 2008). The ability to test the student on the subject material and eliminate coursework the student has mastered in favor of coursework the student has yet to master keeps him/her engaged (Watson & Gemin, 2008). Finally, online learning has the ability to counterbalance the negative impact on academic performance by mobility issues some students encounter while moving from school to school (Watson & Gemin, 2008).

Online learning holds the ability to offer students a different type of learning platform and can add personalization to the educational experience that challenges students to reach beyond the conventional boundaries of a traditional education and encounter successes that the student is capable of. Susan Patrick, CEO of the North American Council for Online Learning, states:

When students have completed the attendance required in a course, and were unsuccessful, the options for earning credit towards graduation are often limited to using the same book, often the same teacher, within the same seat time approach. Is this really the best way to invest resources of time and money in helping students succeed? One alternative is a well-designed online credit recovery program based on pace and performance (as cited in Watson & Gemin, 2008, p. 16).

Rivera (2017) reported that online course enrollment has grown by 100% in the past several years. Many factors lead to the increase in online learning. Online learning supports many different types of learners from different backgrounds including low socio-economics, English Language Learners, special education, varying ethnic backgrounds, and other diverse students (Rivera, 2017). Also, the ability to work at their own pace in a supportive environment leads the student to express the individuality not present in the traditional setting. The use of online/blended learning requires the student to take ownership of his/her learning through responsibility and motivation (Rivera, 2017; Pettyjohn & LaFrance, 2014).

Dependable instruction is paramount for *all* student success. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) identified several common student-centered instructional practices that

are considered to be effective for fostering student success, both in the traditional classroom and for alternative learning classes. Strategies such as discussions, small group work, and hands-on projects are often used to provide a richer experience for students.

However, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) found that these practices do not always advance knowledge or benefit students. The study involved analysis of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 10,000 students, the Study of Chicago School Reform of 8,000 teachers and principals, and the Longitudinal Study of School Restructuring of 40 high schools in eight school districts over a four-year period. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) discovered that regardless of whether or not the instruction is teacher-centered or student-centered it should be focused on construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Dependable curriculum is not the same for every student. Development and implementation of an individualized curriculum is a cornerstone of alternative learning environments. Individualized curriculum that is designed around the student in conjunction with an individualized learning plan develops a vested interest from the student and provides the student with a value-added approach to education that ultimately leads to success within the program (Powell, 2003). The process is a scaffold to build success. Powell (2003) reported that adjusting the academic pace of the curriculum to match the appropriate academic level of each student assists the student in successful assignment completion. By completing assignments correctly and on-time aids the students to believe in their academic ability (Powell, 2006). Believing in their academic ability allows the student to realize daily successes which will develop self-confidence of the student (Powell, 2006).

McGregor and Mills (2012) outlined the importance of adding work-based programs to the alternative learning curriculum. Students gain valuable real-life skills in certificate-based course programs in areas of high demand including automotive, diesel, HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning). Additionally, programs of study for personal development should also be offered. Examples could include photography, graphic design, music production, and cooking, sports, or personal fitness (McGregor and Mills, 2012). The opportunity to take courses that offer students the ability to reconnect to learning in an environment that is designed for their interests and built on supportiveness and respect offer the student the ability to take ownership in the educational process (McGregor & Mills, 2012). The sense of community built around alternative learning environments encompasses a wide spectrum of support for students to hone skills in vocational trades that provides a pathway to success in the present and the future (McGregor & Mills, 2012).

**Interpersonal components of alternative programs.** The responsibility of public education to address the whole child has its foundational underpinnings ranging from Maslow's hierarchy of needs to Ruby Payne's recent work with poverty. Through this lens, public educators have sought to develop and implement programs to help students become part of the school. Smith and Thomson (2014) believed that alternative programs must create an atmosphere that the student feels relevant and important. In order to create such an environment of relevance and importance hinges on three aspects of relationships within the alternative learning environment, student-student interactions and student to teacher interactions, and student-administrator interactions.

The development of social and emotional competence is a cornerstone of success in life and school. Raskauskas, Rubiano, Offen, and Wayland (2015), Zins and Elias (2007), Zins, Bloodworth, Walberg, and Weissberg (2007) reported that emotions affect what we learn and how we learn. Also, caring relationships provide the support and encouragement for life-long learning. Finally, social and emotional skills can be taught (Raskauskas et al., 2015; Zins et al., 2007; Zins & Elias, 2007).

Five key components of social and emotional learning programs involve self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship skills. Self-awareness is the student's ability to identify the student's own emotions and recognition of strengths and weaknesses in one's social and emotional cue processing. Social awareness involves the student showing empathy and respect for other students, faculty, and staff (Raskauskas et al., 2015; Zins et al., 2007; Zins & Elias, 2007). Responsible decision-making facilitates the student's capacity to act within his/her personal and ethical beliefs, which involves both evaluation and reflection. Self-management is the student's adeptness at controlling impulsive behavior while understanding stress management. Finally, relationship skills encompass cooperation, ability to ask for help, and communicating (Raskauskas et al., 2015; Zins et al., 2007; Zins & Elias, 2007).

These competencies are often lacking in alternative students, explaining the lack of academic success among students who do not possess adequate understanding and skills in social and emotional management (Lemon & Watson, 2011). However, the competencies can be taught in a caring, supportive, and well-managed learning environment (Zins et al., 2007; Zins & Elias, 2007).



The social, emotional, and behavioral growth of students are critical factors in the success of the students and need to be adequately addressed in the alternative learning environment. Work by Hamachek (1995) and Hughes and Adera (2006) indicate that intelligence and academic functioning alone does not guarantee that a student will be successful in society, outside of school.

Deficits in the social and emotional realm have been linked to substance abuse, mental health issues, and low self-concept (Hamachek, 1995; Hughes & Adera, 2006). However, this does not doom the student to poor academic performance. Low self-concept manifests itself in unhappy and fearful reactions/interactions, not just signs of academic struggles (Hamachek, 1995).

Whole child education is important in effective alternative learning environments. School districts continue to focus primarily on students' academic development and do not see the need to target the deficiencies in their social-emotional development (Johnson & Lampley, 2010). The study involved 57 middle school students grades six through eight that were identified and placed into a district-sponsored, school-based mentoring program. Archival data including grade point average, discipline referrals, and attendance were used to place students in the program. A paired sample t-test with 95% confidence was used to evaluate the archival data to the same data points following the start of the mentoring program (Johnson & Lampley, 2010). Johnson and Lampley (2010) found that 51 of the 54 participants demonstrated improved grades following completion of the mentoring program. Additionally, 51 and the 54 students acquired fewer discipline referrals during the mentoring program. Finally, 52 of the 54 students displayed improved attendance following the start of the mentoring program (Johnson & Lampley, 2010).

Johnson and Lampley (2010) concluded that mentoring that shares real-life experiences and knowledge proved to be an effective intervention tool for at-risk youth.

Mentoring at-risk students requires many skills from the educator. Quinn and Poirier (2006) identified one major component of being an effective teacher within an alternative learning LAE environment is cultural competency. Teachers must understand the culture and the background of the students they are teaching and mentoring. However, to accomplish cultural competency requires more than a generalized overview of racism and prejudice. Cultural competency must address the language and ideology of the student's culture. When a complete cultural picture is drawn, the teacher becomes more knowledgeable of the cultural variables and is able to address each component to ensure empathy and not reactionary answers to student behavior (Quinn and Poirier, 2006).

Alternative learning environments generate success. Nichols and Steffy (1999) conducted research that examines the motivational impact of success in alternative learning environments to completion of the program. Participants for the research were 32 students that were assigned to an alternative learning environment for the 1995-1996 school year. A 66 question Likert survey was used for the project: a) learning goals, b) performance goals, c) intrinsic motivation, d) extrinsic motivation, e) self-efficacy, f) persistence, g) self-regulation, h) peer self-esteem, i) school self-esteem, and j) home self-esteem. The survey given to the students entering the program and was also given to the students transitioning out of the program. Reliability indexes were established and correlated. Nichols and Steffy (1999) found that self-efficacy, goal orientation, and self-esteem are central to motivation. Students' self-efficacy relates to their personal

confidence in their actual performance or their perceived performance. The increased gains in self-efficacy relate directly to improved learning goals and self-regulation (Nichols & Steffy, 1999).

Self-regulation is a key component to success. Nichols and Steffy (1999) reported that students placed in alternative learning environments may show confidence in their academic knowledge and skills in certain content areas, but lack the social skills in an academic setting to demonstrate appropriate behavior. Small class size and low teacher to student ratios may be an effective component in improving student's self-efficacy through self-regulation of behavior (Nichols & Steffy, 1999).

Developing a sense of belonging in students is a cornerstone of alternative education. Pendergast, Allen, McGregor, and Ronksley-Pavia (2018) explored the relationship between marginalized students and the importance of developing a sense of belonging at school. Pendergast et al. (2018) conducted research involving 89 stakeholders from five school districts. Interviews were conducted with each participant with follow-up visits to the school to witness interactions of participants within the school environment. Themes from the interviews and observations were then coded to produce the results of the research (Pendergast et al., 2018). The theme of school belonging played significantly within the responses from the participants. The conclusion points to relationships built and maintained in the school environment. A number of participants in the study conducted by Pendergast et al. (2018) believed that building school community is vital in creating a vested connection among students and the school. Participants reported a sense of belonging through activities that created opportunities to connect with peers and teachers (Pendergast et al., 2018)

Wells, Miller, Tobacyk, and Clanton (2002) researched the effects of an eight-week summer program involving academic, vocational, and social curriculum. Eighty participants from a low socio-economic background were chosen for the program. The Coopersmith Self-Esteem inventory was given to the participants before and after the program (Wells, et al.,2002).

Wells et al. (2002) discovered that the program had a positive effect on reducing the drop-out rate of the participating students. Retention rates for the following two years were added to the study. The first year the drop-out rate for participants was zero. The following year, the drop-out rate rose to 6% (Wells et al., 2002). However, the increase was only slight and much lower than a similar group of students not receiving interventions. In fact, students not receiving interventions for the same time period had a drop-out rate of 21.2 % (Wells et al., 2002).

Murray's (2004) research involved a phenomenological study that included interviews, observations, and journal articles. Participants were 12 alternative program students, eight parents of those students, and 10 staff members of the alternative program. The data analysis and representation process were completed through the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of coding (Murray, 2004). Key findings from the research paint self-concept as an important piece to solving the riddle to student success. Murray (2004) found that a belief by the student that they are incapable of learning or completing the coursework is the biggest obstacle that the student must overcome. To combat this, the development of an individualized learning plan is effective in developing confidence within the student (Murray, 2004).

**Alternative learning program concerns/disadvantages.** Alternative learning programs can be effective if used correctly. Research has outlined the benefits of Alternative Learning Environments (Raywid, 1994; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). However, concerns and disadvantages do still exist when discussing alternative learning program implementation and organization.

According to recent work by Curley (2016b), disciplinary policies in public schools are designed to allow the teacher to maintain control and provide a positive educational environment. However, disciplinary practices found in public education cannot continue to ostracize students in an attempt to deter negative classroom behavior. Such policies restrict the student's right to an education and could have serious long-term consequences for the student, community, and society (Curley, 2016b).

Further research on the effectiveness of alternative learning programs by Washington (2015) found that Project Success (alternative learning program) that was implemented in Liberty County High School in Georgia did not have a significant effect on twelfth grade students' academic performance, attendance, or grade retention. The study conducted in 2015 involved 72 high school seniors over a four-year period. Thirty-seven at-risk students in group A and 35 at-risk students in Group B that was not part of Project Success. Statistical analysis using independent sample t-tests revealed that the mean differences between academic performance, attendance, and high school retention were statistically significant (Washington, 2015).

Alternative education programs often suffer from a stereotype problem. Raywid (1994) pointed to the lack of institutional legitimacy of alternative learning programs. The prevailing stereotype of alternative learning programs as schools for losers stemming

from the multiple variations in alternative learning components. Alternative learning environments pose some fundamental challenges to the way districts organize and coordinate education. Alternative learning programs require diversity in instructional materials, as well as in the methods of instruction compared to common standards and uniformity (Raywid, 1994).

Alternative schools are often accused of watering down the curriculum. Balingit (2017) reported that the Obama administration touted the rise in graduation rates as one of its greatest accomplishments. However, experts have argued that the increasing graduation rate does not point to students being ready to compete in the workforce or prepared for higher education. The reason for the skepticism stems from grade inflation and a relaxed standard for rigor for at-risk students in alternative learning programs (Balingit, 2017).

Often, alternative schools view students with emotional or behavior problems as broken, requiring the staff to fix the students' behavior and attitudes. Valore, Cantrell, and Cantrell (2006) believe that this approach is often detrimental to the student. Focusing on the problems of the students instead of the students creates this detrimental scenario. Instead, the alternative learning program must focus on the student (Valore et al., 2006).

Alternative education can be effective in closing the opportunity gap between traditional and non-traditional students. Farrelly and Daniels (2014) believe that alternative education that is centered on personalized instruction with integrated opportunities to utilize technology should be on the forefront of educational reform for struggling students.

Farrelly and Daniels' (2014) research focused on student experiences within an alternative school setting. Three hundred and thirty-six alternative students from 22 school districts were involved in the research. The study involved a quantitative approach in which the quantitative phase one component identified a target population through student records and the completion of a Basic Psychological Needs Scale Survey. Phase two involved the identification of two participants from each question cluster on the survey. Interviews were then conducted with the identified population.

The study found that academic rigor provides the foundation for establishing and maintaining high expectations for struggling students. However, alternative schools can also provide low expectations (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). This low expectation paradigm within alternative programs are a result of identifying struggling students from an academic weakness rather than an academic strength perspective, resulting in less rigorous instruction (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). Additionally, the study identified teacher expectations of students, whether verbal and/or nonverbal, has the ability to influence student performance. Furthermore, instructional practices and feedback have an influence on student performance (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014).

As Farrelly and Daniels (2014) outlined, alternative education can be very successful for struggling students. However, caution must be exercised when placing students into alternative learning programs. Tissington (2006) found that a contributing factor to several alternative learning placements is poor teaching and learning strategies that act as enablers for student discipline issues. Students that experience a lack of academic success have the potential to find a more personally satisfying behavior that ultimately becomes a disciplinary distraction, facilitating their placement in alternative

learning environment. For these students, the alternative learning environment becomes a destination, not an intervention. The result is often that the student is never transitioned back to the traditional classroom environment (Tissington, 2006).

Alternative learning programs must guard against one track diversity issues. Hemmer and Shepperson (2014) conducted research concerning the college readiness of alternative school students in Texas. Independent t-tests were used to evaluate the cumulative scores of traditional versus alternative school students for college readiness.

Hemmer and Shepperson (2014) found that a majority of students who were placed into alternative learning programs were not college prepared. Although, it is unclear whether or not this lack of progress academically of alternative learning students was a sign of slow progress brought upon by the alternative environment or the result of the remediation level the students placed into the program required to gain college readiness (Hemmer & Shepperson, 2014).

Alternative education does not equate to isolation. Caroleo (2014) conducted a synthesis of literature reviews into alternative education to determine the risks and benefits for students attending alternative learning environments. Traditional schools commonly operate by classifying children into groups by age and ability, while simultaneously advocating for inclusion into mainstream education for all students (Caroleo, 2014). Additionally, mainstream education is often allowed to develop programs (alternative schools) that withdraw struggling disengaged students from the mainstream educational environment (Caroleo, 2014).

The result would lead to the conclusion that this withdrawal would lead to increased social and emotional isolation from society. However, the review of research



found that the majority of students felt overwhelmed and isolated in the traditional educational setting, but were able to communicate with peers and staff within the alternative setting (Caroleo, 2014).

It is often believed that students who show attributes of high risk (students most often placed in alternative environments) have low self-esteem. However, this conclusion is inaccurate. Work by Hassan, Jami, and Aqeel (2016) found that low self-esteem does not lead to academic difficulties. Hassan et al. (2016) conducted research on self-concept, self-esteem, and academic achievement. The research involved a total of 200 sixth-grade to tenth-grade students from both public and private schools. A five-point Likert scale consisting of 40 statements was given to each participant. Analysis of data was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 18 (SPSS 18) for each response (Hassan et al., 2016).

The conclusion from the research points to various other factors contributing to truancy including peer influence, parental factors, and environmental factors. However, as predictors in relationship to self-esteem for academic self-concept, proficiency concerns of schools are more pronounced for students who are frequently truant (Hassan et al., 2016).

Staffing alternative schools with quality teachers is paramount to successful alternative programs. However, Lehr and Lange (2003) believe that the availability of quality alternative learning environment teachers is a challenge. Research by Lehr and Lange (2003) suggests that the majority of teachers in an alternative learning program are licensed, most are not certified in particular subject areas being taught. Additionally, most are not equipped in social-emotional interventions and special education protocols

(Lehr & Lange, 2003). The result is often the educational needs of the student become secondary to pragmatic issues of the whole child. Districts can be quick to send students to the alternative learning program, but much slower in providing resources to the teachers and students of the alternative program (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Alternative education does fit neatly into one theory or conceptual framework. The main reason for the inability to accurately fit alternative learning environments into a single theoretical framework alternative programs experience a wide variance in student referral procedures, program components, staffing, student placement criteria, curriculum, and exit criteria due to the extreme variance in student abilities and demographic characteristics.

In fact, alternative program guidelines are loosely mandated by states. However, the implementation is left to the individual school districts. Given this variance, in most states, the program guidelines are largely defined by the specific state or school district (White & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006). Understanding the need to address the variance of theories into a multi-faceted examination of the theoretical frameworks for alternative learning environments lends a credible replicable foundation for the study.

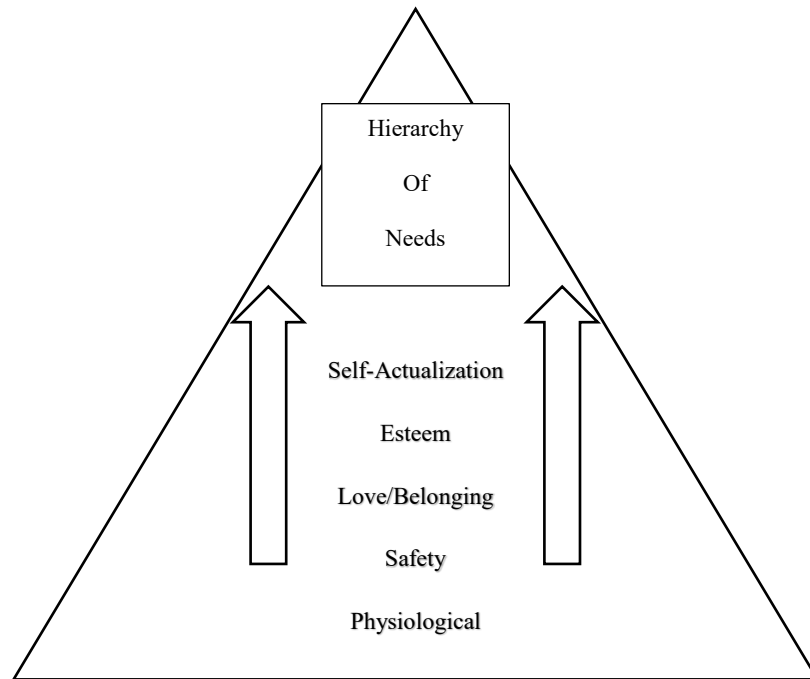


Figure 1. Visual Interpretation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Adapted from Abraham Maslow's A Theory of Human Motivation.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs aligns well when viewed through the lens of alternative learning programs. Alternative learning students often exhibit unmet necessities ranging throughout the deficiency needs of the hierarchy theory. For example, low socio-economic directly impacts the physiological needs of the student while negative peer pressure relates to the safety and esteem needs of the student (Jones, 2017).

In fact, Jones' (2017) outline of all of Maslow's needs can often be visualized within the realm of at-risk students in terms of motivational behavior. Table 9 outlines the differences between Maslow's Theory as it is generally applied to individual motivation compared to school motivation.

Table 9

*Hierarchy of Needs Applied to Schools*

Hierarchy of Needs Applied to Individuals	Hierarchy of Needs Applied to Schools
Self-Actualization	Students given the opportunity to reach their full social and academic potential
Esteem	All students are valued and respected
Belonging	School culture and climate is warm, responsive, and inviting
Safety	School is safe and secure for students, both physically and emotionally
Physiological	School provides food, clean restrooms, and safe drinking water.

*Note.* Adapted from “Applying Maslow to Schools: A New Approach to School Equity,” by D. Jones, 2017, Retrieved from <https://www.deyprojects.org/denishas-blog/applying-maslow-to-schools-a-new-approach-to-school-equity>

Work by Pennie, Lertora, Crews, and Hicks (2016) identified several components that schools implement to meet the needs of their students. Free and reduced lunch programs, thermostats in each classroom, the ability of students to use bathrooms on an as-needed basis, water available throughout the day, and fresh fruits programs directly address the physiological needs of students (Pennie et al., 2017).

Examining the safety needs of students, Pennie et al. (2016) found that an orderly controlled classroom with emergency procedures that are well planned and practiced are key elements to creating an environment conducive to learning. Additionally, discipline must be fair and equal. In addition, the school must maintain consistent expectations with appropriate acknowledgment for both positive and negative outcomes (Pennie et al., 2017).

Belonging involves both teacher-student and student-student parameters. Observing the belonging needs of the teacher-student relationship of needs, Pennie et al.

(2016) found that school faculty must be empathetic, considerate, and show a genuine interest in the student. The faculty of the school must also be supportive and show that they value the students' thoughts, opinions, and judgements.

Pennie et al. (2017), concluded that communication is the key component to developing the belonging need of the students. In order to foster this parameter, the faculty must provide positive feedback instead of negative and be able to listen to the students, and show trust in the students (Pennie et al., 2017).

While both teacher-student and student-student parameters follow the same guidelines of trust and understanding, the teacher-student belonging needs revolve mainly around the classroom or structured school activities. The student-student portion should revolve around times outside the structured classroom and school activities to include activities such as class meetings, classroom discussions, peer tutoring, passing times, and lunch times (Pennie et al., 2017).

When identifying the responsibilities of the school in meeting the esteem needs of the students, Pennie et al. (2017), outlined instructional and respect components. The work addressed the instructional aspect by stating that instruction must be paced to the individual student, while, taking into account the needs and abilities of the student. Additionally, the instruction must focus on the strengths and assets of each individual student, while involving all students in the instructional piece (Pennie et al., 2017).

The respect component involves developing a school environment encompassing a climate of positive nonjudgmental behaviors. Incorporating recognition programs for academic and social achievements, along with developing and organizing activities of

importance to the student, community, or school (food drives, community clean-ups, etc.) extenuate the student's esteem (Pennie et al., 2017).

Self-Actualization is the last of Maslow's needs to be addressed. Pennie et al. (2017) identified effective school components for maximizing the student's journey to self-actualization. Providing time for students to explore areas of curiosity, use inquiry when designing lessons, involve students in academically challenging programs can provide a sense of self-actualization. One component that impacts self-actualization is expectations. Teachers should expect the best academically and socially from students. (Pennie et al., 2017)

Overall, under Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, education aligns more closely with the needs of esteem and self-actualization than the deficiency needs of physiological, safety, and being needs. Thus, a lack of adequate deficiency needs affects the educational outcomes of students. Maslow (1943), stated that "If all the needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is then dominated by the physiological needs, all other needs may become simply non-existent or be pushed into the background (Maslow, 1943, p. 375). However, under Maslow's theory, education cannot be automatically tied to motivation. Maslow (1943) states that motivation is only one aspect of determining factors that impact behavior. Instead, behavior is mostly motivated by biological, cultural, or situational in nature. Maslow (1943), stated that safety needs can completely dominate the behavior of the student if left unsatisfied.

## **Chapter 2 Summary**

Lange and Sletten (2002) discovered that education has experienced an increase in educational research to reach the common goal of educating *all* of America's youth.

To this end, Raywid (1994) outlined that alternative learning environments represent educational reform designed to bridge the gap between deficiencies found in mainstream education for the groups of marginalized students. The main failing in mainstream education for this group of students lie in the hierarchical structure that does not provide the flexibility, one-to-one or differentiated instruction, academic supports, or supportive environment for the student to overcome the risk factors experienced by the student (Aron, 2006; Brown, 2017; Bullock, 2006; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Hemmer & Shepperson, 2014; Raywid, 1994).

Research by Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), Tyler and Lofstrom (2009), and Rumberger (2011) point to the effect of socioeconomic factors on education as a foundational risk factor that connects other risk factors together. Rumberger (2011) found that one in five children lives in poverty with the United States experiencing the highest child poverty rate in the industrialized world. Furthermore, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) discovered a strong correlation between poverty and chronic absenteeism. Children that were labeled as chronically absent gained 14 percent fewer literacy skills in kindergarten and 15 percent fewer literacy and 12 percent fewer mathematics skills by the first grade (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Furthermore, chronic absenteeism is among the strongest predictors for dropping out of school. Finally, Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) identified the work status of students as an early predictor of not finishing high school. Students living within the confines of a low socioeconomic lifestyle, often are forced to work to supplement the family income (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Alternative learning environments have developed as a way to keep students engaged in the educational process when mainstream educational avenues have been

unsuccessful for this population of students. Discovering solutions to reduce the approximate 1.2 million annual drop-outs is a key to sustaining successful outcomes for education (Joseph, 2014). Alternative education has a role in addressing the issue of drop-out prevention (Aron, 2006; Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009; Curley, 2016a; Raywid, 1994).

The literature review revealed that alternative learning environments are effective in addressing marginalized students in jeopardy of dropping out. Alternative education targets three specific areas to be successful. Organizational, instructional, and intrapersonal components of alternative learning environments simultaneously coexist to form the foundational structure of the program.

Upon review of the literature it is clear that educators must examine the needs of at-risk youth and decide what goals are attainable for that student and how alternative programs fit the learning needs of the individual student. To ensure success for at-risk youth, today's educational system must be proactive in examining the current practices in place, remove those practices that are not successful, and replace the unsuccessful policies and procedures with evidence-based policies and procedures. Alternative education has a place in that equation to ensure that the at-risk student receives the best possible outcome.



### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the overall quality of student experiences while enrolled in alternative education programs in Northwest Arkansas. The study attempted to establish an outline of alternative learning best practices that were considered effective. An application to the Arkansas Tech University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was submitted and approved before beginning the study. All ethical policies and procedures concerning human research participants were followed.

#### **Participants**

This quantitative study attempted to identify the effectiveness of alternative learning environments through analysis of students' perceptions compared to the perceptions of alternative learning teachers. McLeod (2019) wrote that "quantitative researchers aim to establish general laws of behavior and phenomenon across different settings/contexts" (Quantitative Research section, para. 1). Lester (1999) identified quantitative phenomenon as experiences from the perspective of the individual based on personal knowledge and subjectivity. Both personal knowledge and subjectivity provide strong foundation knowledge to understanding subjective experience providing insight into the subject's motivations and actions while minimizing taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom (Lester, 1999).

In this research study, all participants were currently placed in an alternative learning environment in the high school setting, while all teacher participants were teaching in an alternative learning environment. The study included 47 student respondents and five teacher respondents, respectively.

## **Context of the Study.**

A practical definition of an alternative learning environment is elusive in that the variance in student referral procedures, program components, staffing, student placement criteria, curriculum, and exit criteria are largely defined by the specific state or school district (White & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006). However, despite the differences in structure, alternative learning programs do share several similarities from state to state and school district to school district. For example, small class sizes, increased monitoring of student progress, enhanced relationship building between students and staff, and flexible learning strategies (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Quinn & Poirier, 2006).

Given the Arkansas-related parameters of this study and the varied similarities and differences when defining alternative learning environments, it is important for the validity of the methodology to clearly outline the working definition of an alternative learning environment to be that of the Arkansas Department of Education's Rules and Regulations. "An alternative learning environment is an educational setting which offers nontraditional or flexible instructional methods that enable all students to participate in the educational process" (Arkansas Code Ann. § 6-48-101, 2016).

Education is a tool that will allow *all students* to reach their potential. The study focuses on the marginalized student as an individual within the alternative learning program.

McMurrey (2014) summarized the context of alternative learning:

All too often in our public schools, at-risk students are seen as numbers that count toward meeting or failing to meet mandated Adequate Yearly Progress targets.

Year after year, many of these students become negative statistics, which schools

and states unfairly point to as the source of problems for the system as a whole.

What sets good programs and schools apart from the mediocre is their commitment to serving the needs of the individual. The exceptional programs are those that put people first, pay attention to the human element that is often lacking, and take the time needed to produce meaningful long-term results. (p. 32)

Marginalized students are often tagged with the factor that is the causal agent for the student being marginalized, often ignoring the student that the marginalizing factor is attached too.

However, Hoge and Rubinstein-Avila (2014) found that a majority of individuals interviewed stated that the interventions (alternative learning environments) experienced low expectations. In fact, many reported that the program was under-prepared and under-supported by the district (Hoge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014). During the interview process, interviewees struggled answering the questions: How is success defined for this school; and how do you know if you did a good job at the end of the day? (Hoge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014).

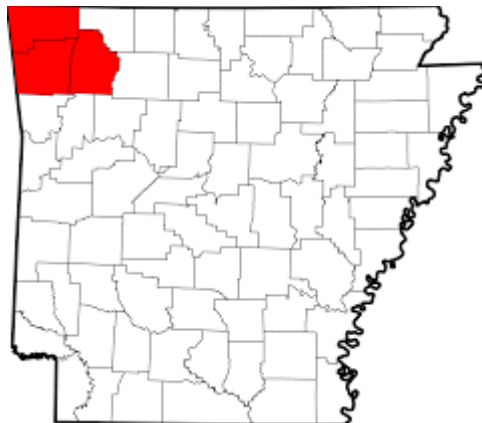
## **Sampling**

This study of student alternative learning experiences utilized five school districts through a combination of purposeful sampling and convenience sampling. The study utilized purposeful sampling to narrow the research participants to current alternative learning students. Walston, Redford, and Bhat (2017) illustrated that purposeful sampling involves the researcher selecting participants that represent the desired characteristics for the study. Additionally, purposeful sampling exhibits high levels of participation aiding in the completion of the study and removing the probability of limitations of the study

resulting in low participation (McMillian & Shumaker, 1997). Convenience sampling was utilized in choosing the geographical region of Northwest Arkansas for the study. The five Northwest Arkansas districts chosen to participate in the study included Lincoln, Gentry, Gravette, Greenland, and Prairie Grove.

### **Northwest Arkansas regional demographics.**

The importance of addressing the demographics of Northwest Arkansas in the methodology strengthens the study and provides future researchers the tools to understand the background of the study and the impact that geographical differences have on the statistical outcomes. For the purpose of this study, all participating schools reside in Northwest Arkansas.



*Figure 2.* Northwest Arkansas Geographical Representation highlighting Benton, Washington, and Madison counties in relationship to the remaining counties of Arkansas.

. Adapted from: <https://enacademic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/11832867>

Table 10 lists the socioeconomic and cultural percentages for the state compared to the research area of Northwest Arkansas.

Table 10

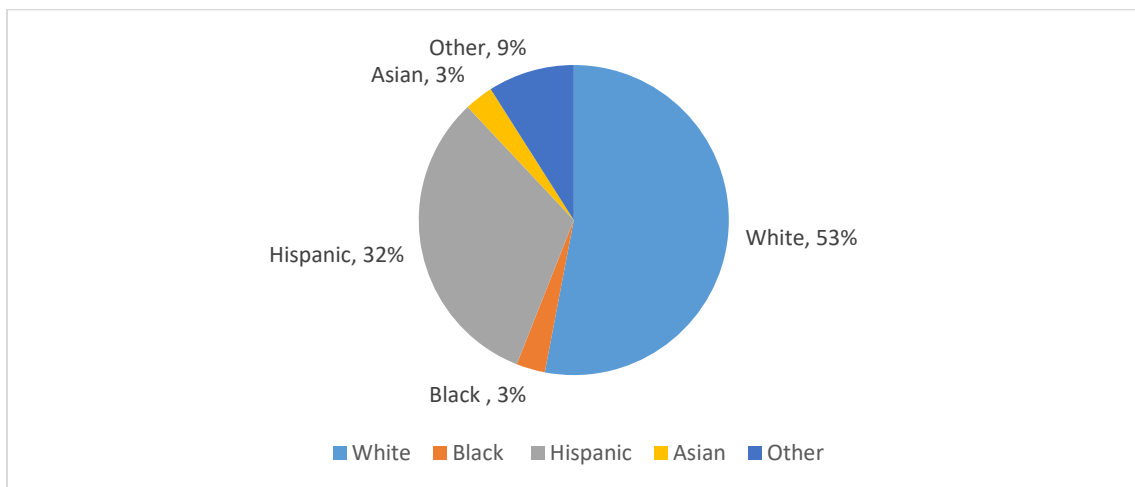
#### *State (Arkansas) and Regional (Northwest Arkansas) Student Characteristics*

Geographical Determination	Free/Reduced Lunch	Limited Language Learners
Arkansas	60%	9%

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*Note:* Adapted University of Arkansas, Office for Education Policy (2017). Northwest Arkansas Education Report Card.

Ethnic background plays a role in determining the at-risk criteria faced by today's student. In order to develop a study that is conclusive of the ethnic demographics of the participant, the researcher must determine the ethnic demographics of the region.



*Figure 3.* Northwest Arkansas Regional Demographics. Adapted University of Arkansas, Office for Education Policy (2017). Northwest Arkansas Education Report Card.

### **Participant school demographics.**

The five schools chosen for the research project shared similar demographic information in gender, age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Table 11 provides a review of the statistical demographic data for the five schools during the 2017 school year.

Table 11

#### *Participant School Demographics*

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School	Enrollment	Free/Reduced Lunch	Limited Language Learner	Graduation Rate
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Lincoln	1169	70%	7%	86%
Gentry	1462	63%	11%	92%
Gravette	1909	46%	5%	91%
Prairie Grove	1918	42%	3%	86%
Greenland	793	65%	2%	88%

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*Note:* Adapted from University of Arkansas, Office for Education Policy (2017). Northwest Arkansas Education Report Card.

## Research Questions

The research questions for this study of student and teacher perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of the alternative learning environment were designed to examine the individual student and the individual teachers' experiences. The hypotheses for each question examined whether a statistical difference exists between how students and teachers perceive the alternative learning environment experience. The research questions used for the study were adapted with permission from Youth Truth (Youth Truth, 2018). Permission was granted through Youth Truth for the adaptation of the research questions to include alternative education environments (Appendix C).

- RQ – 1: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with student engagement while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 2: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with academic rigor while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 3: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with teacher relationships while attending the alternative learning environment?

- RQ – 4: What are the differences in the perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with peer relationships while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 5: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with school culture while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 6: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with academic interventions while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 7: What are the differences perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with behavior interventions while attending the alternative learning environment?

### **Research Hypothesis**

- H<sub>0</sub>-1: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view student engagement while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-2: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view academic rigor while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-3: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view teacher relationships while attending alternative learning environment.

- H<sub>0</sub>-4: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view peer relationships while attending environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-5: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view school culture while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-6: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view academic interventions while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-7: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view behavior interventions while attending alternative learning environment.

### **Research Design / Method**

The study is a quantitative analysis of effective components of alternative learning programs viewed through the lens of high school alternative learning students and teachers. Dowd (2018) defined quantitative research through the process of forming a hypothesis that is subsequently tested. Through the use of controlled objective texting criteria, the hypothesis is either accepted or rejected. Each step of the research is standardized to reduce bias when collecting and analyzing data. Due to this characteristic, the findings from quantitative research is valid, reliable, and generalizable to larger populations (Dowd, 2018).

McLeod (2019) stated that a major strength of quantitative research involves scientific objectivity. Quantitative data is evaluated using statistical analysis, thus,



providing the quantitative research design to be rational and valid. Another strength of quantitative research is the ease of replication (McLeod, 2019).

### **Development of survey.**

The survey was designed to gather extensive data on student and teacher perceptions of alternative learning components. The first step in developing the study was to generate the survey questions for the quantitative component of the student survey. The review of the literature outlined themes that tied closely to effective alternative learning programs in terms of student success. The survey questions for the quantitative Likert survey of the research were designed around the common themes outlined in the literature review. The themes were then analyzed to determine what specific questions needed to be asked to accurately judge the effectiveness of the alternative learning program in providing an overall positive experience for the student. Table 12 outlines the student themes and provides a working justification for each theme, while Table 13 outlines the teacher themes and provides a working justification for each theme.

Table 12

#### *Student Survey Themes*

Theme	Definition/Justification
Student Engagement	Evaluates the student perceptions about their engagement in the educational process.
Academic Rigor	Tests the degree the student feels that the coursework challenges the student.
Teacher Relationships	The value the student when interacting with the faculty and staff.
Peer Relationships	The value the student when interacting with the student's peers.

School Culture	Students' belief that their school develops and maintains a culture of respect and fairness.
Academic Interventions	Students' belief that their school develops and maintains high academic rigor for all students.
Behavior Interventions	Students' belief that their school develops and maintains policies and procedures for behaviors that are fair and consistent.

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*Note.* Adapted from Youth Truth Overall School Experience Student Survey

Table 13

*Teacher Survey Themes*

Theme	Definition / Justification
Student Engagement	Evaluates the teacher perceptions about student engagement in the educational process.
Teacher Relationships	The value the teacher believes the student benefits when interacting with the faculty and staff.
Academic Rigor	Evaluates the perception the teacher feels that the coursework challenges the student.
Peer Relationships	The value the teacher believes the student benefits when interacting with the student's peers.
School Culture	Teacher belief that their school develops and maintains a culture of respect and fairness.
Academic Interventions	Teacher belief that their school develops and maintains high academic rigor for all students.
Behavior Interventions	Teacher belief that their school develops and maintains policies and procedures for behaviors that are fair and consistent.

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*Note:* Adapted from Youth Truth Overall School Experience Student Survey

Youth Truth is a national non-profit. Youth Truth uses validated survey instruments and advisory services of professionals, school partners, districts, states, and educational organizations to develop accurate reliable and valid tools to understand

perceptions of stakeholders. Focus on school experience and teacher practice are the focus of the survey instruments. Youth Truth utilized the Chicago Consortium on School Research's My School, My Voice survey and the Survey of Engagement by Indiana University's School of Education as benchmarks for the development of their survey.

Youth Truth surveys are not designed for alternative learning programs; however, the themes and general format align to alternative learning programs. The questions and themes found in the Youth Truth surveys were adapted to alternative learning environments by the researcher. Permission was granted by Youth Truth to adapt questions for the purpose of this study (Appendix C).

### **Treatment / Procedures**

The researcher emailed (Appendix D) the superintendents of the five schools districts to obtain permission for the district to participate in the study. The researcher obtained a signed school consent form (Appendix E) from each participating school district. Following contact and consent with the superintendent or designee, the researcher visited each school district's alternative learning director to judge interest in participation. Upon gaining consent from the superintendent, the researcher scheduled a time to visit the alternative learning classroom to distribute the parent and student information sheets with the parent and student consent form (Appendix F and Appendix G). The consent forms were collected by the classroom teacher and collected by the researcher at the time of the survey.

#### **Administering survey to alternative learning students.**

A common timeframe was developed with each participating alternative learning director and the principal researcher. The principal researcher will visit each alternative

learning program at the scheduled time to administer the survey (Appendix H) to the participating students.

#### **Administering survey to alternative learning teachers.**

A common timeframe was developed with each participating alternative learning director and the principal researcher. The principal researcher visited each alternative learning program at the scheduled time to administer the survey (Appendix I) to the teacher. Both student and teacher surveys were given at the same time.

#### **Measurement**

The research component involving the surveys were completed during normal class time in the participating districts. Research questions in a quantitative study are evaluated using statistics that removes researcher bias and presents the data in an unbiased format that allows the researcher the ability to make conclusions and hypotheses based upon accurate and detailed data (Creswell, 2003). Student surveys consisted of seven themes with corresponding questions examining the components of alternative learning programs related to the research questions of effectiveness. Table 14 outlines the number of questions associated with each student and teacher theme.

Table 14

#### *Questions Related to Themes*

Theme	Student Questions	Teacher Questions
Student Engagement	7	7
Teacher Relationships	7	7
Academic Rigor	8	8
Peer Relationships	6	6

School Culture	6	6
Academic Interventions	7	7
Behavior Interventions	5	5

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*Note:* Themes adapted from Youth Truth Overall School Experience Student Survey.

The survey questions were designed around a 7-point Likert scale. Table 15 displays the Likert scale numerical and expression designations for the survey component of the research.

Table 15

*Alternative Learning Environment Student/Teacher Likert Scale*

Numerical	Description
1	Disagree Strongly
2	Disagree Somewhat
3	Disagree a Little
4	Neither Agree or Disagree
5	Agree a Little
6	Agree Somewhat
7	Agree Strongly

Each question is rated on the Likert responses from disagree strongly to agree strongly. Individual questions were designed from the Youth Truth High School Overall School Experience Likert Survey. Following the students completing the Likert responses, the scores were converted to numerical data points to allow a quantitative evaluation of the theme scores using descriptive statistics.

## **Statistical Analysis**

Several initial analyses were conducted using version 25.0 of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 2006) on the data set. Demographic information was analyzed in order to describe the participants and the sample. The statistics that were reported include frequencies, means, and standard deviations on all demographic data.

An independent t-test was used to identify statistical differences or non-differences between student and teacher mean scores responses. An alpha level of  $p < .05$  will be used to accept or reject the hypotheses. Additionally, student and teacher responses were evaluated using Effect Size or Cohen's  $d$  (Cohen J, 1984) due to the small sample size. The Effect Size enables researchers to identify the actual magnitude of differences between two groups' mean scores to provide additional interpretations of the inferential mentioned above.

## **Validity**

It was paramount in designing and analyzing the research that validity was addressed throughout the study. Validity directly addresses the accuracy and credibility of the study. For the quantitative component, validity focuses on the ability of the study to be duplicated. For the purpose of this study, to ensure validity, the themes aligned and were verified by examining the non-profit organization Youth Truth frameworks for school improvement. For qualitative validity, triangulation of multiple sources of data was collected.

## **Research Ethics**

A school district consent form was completed by the five superintendents or designees before the study began. Appendix E contains the superintendent consent form.

To ensure ethical considerations were examined and addressed, a participant consent form was required for each participant in the survey. The form was distributed to all alternative learning students enrolled in the alternative learning program at the five participating school districts. Participation in the study was solely dependent upon the returned and signed consent form. The consent form detailed the purpose, scope, content, and confidentiality parameters of the study. Both parent, student, and faculty participation remained voluntary at all times.

### **Chapter 3 Summary**

At-risk in the realm of education is rooted in *A Nation at Risk*. The report commissioned by Ronald Reagan painted a dark portrait of education. *A Nation at Risk* cleverly outlined the steady decline of American education in the face of other developing nations. The resulting shock wave penetrated legislators who then began a campaign of educational reform to stem the tide of perceived eroded standards and enact a remedy to the perceived decline in public education. However, legislative intervention did not have the intended results. In fact, Roderick (1994) attributed *A Nation at Risk* for increasing drop-out rates under the assumption that social promotion as lenient and lead to the dilution of standards in schools. Resulting legislative solutions to increasing standards coupled with increased graduation rates, including George Bush's 2001 No Child Left Behind and Barack Obama's 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act have been largely unsuccessful in their respective intents.

Education has worked in conjunction with and under the guidelines of legislative reform to address drop-out rates. Alternative learning environments has been the predominant route that educators have utilized. Research has distinctly outlined the

positive attributes of the alternative learning environment for at-risk students (Aron, 2006; Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009; Curley, 2016a; Raywid, 1994). However, research has also outlined that alternative learning placement as a means to control disciplinary issues within mainstream education has the potential to disrupt the positive attributes of alternative placement (Curley, 2016a).

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the overall quality of student experiences while enrolled in alternative education programs in Northwest Arkansas.

Students that drop-out often report that they would have given more effort in school and had a more serious attitude if teachers had demanded it from them (Bridgeland et al., 2009). Coincidentally, teachers unanimously reported they would support educational reforms to guide drop-out prevention (Bridgeland et al., 2009). With students believing that student expectations are often too low and teachers agreeing that drop-out prevention is necessary, it would logically lead to solutions. However, the solutions are few and most often predestined to failure. The reason is hidden in the fact that the basic expectation that *all* students should be held to the same high academic expectations and receive the support needed to reach that level of academic attainment is not universally practiced in the educational field (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

Identifying drop-out factors is straight forward. Bowers, Spratt, and Taff (2013) identified 110 drop-out predictors or risk factors exhibited by students. Bowers et al. (2013) found that the majority of the students that exhibit that indicator drop-out. Additionally, Grayson (2002) researched at-risk youth behaviors. The research attempted to answer why some students are successful, while other students are not (Grayson,



2002). To answer this question, Grayson (2002) qualitatively compiled research on 100 youth resiliency studies. Findings from the research found a direct correlation of at-risk behavior with social skills, problem solving skills, a sense of control and self-esteem, and a future sense of hope (Grayson, 2002).

Tissington (2006) and Raywild (1994) identified several key parameters to guide effective alternative learning environments. The results of their work identified community support, interventions targeted toward a specific student, administrative leadership, and transition support as essential for alternative learning environments to be successful. In fact, research has pointed to several aspects of alternative learning environments that allow at-risk youth to overcome the risk factors that place them in jeopardy of dropping out (Poole, 2016; Raywid, 1994; Shirley, 2009; Tissington, 2006). These components can be organized into: (a) organizational components, (b) instructional components, and (c) interpersonal components (Raywid, 1994). Organizational components include both intrinsic (student choice) and extrinsic (structure). Self-determination is vital to student success and should start early in the student's educational career (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2004). Instructional components most often revolve around online/digital learning but always include dependable curriculum and instruction. Finally, interpersonal components would include mentoring focused on social and emotional learning.

The phenomenological study was a quantitative study involving quantitative based Likert based surveys. Participants will be selected from five Northwest Arkansas (Lincoln, Gentry, Gravette, Greenland, and Prairie Grove) school districts. All participation was voluntary with no data containing individual identifiable information.

All data collected was confidential and was securely housed on the primary researcher's flash drive and destroyed once the research was complete.

Analysis of the data was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 25 (SPSS, 2006). An independent t-test was used to evaluate student and teacher mean score responses with an alpha level of  $p < .05$  used to accept or reject the hypotheses. Due to the limited number of participants, responses were evaluated using effect size.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the overall quality of student experiences while enrolled in alternative education programs in Northwest Arkansas. The researcher utilized a Likert-based survey to identify if a statistical significance existed between student and teacher perceptions among seven themes (engagement, academic rigor, relationship with teachers, relationships with peers, school culture, academic interventions, and behavior interventions) represented in the survey.

Alternative education has underpinnings derived from politics and education (Dworkin, 2005; Gagnon & Bottge, 2006; Roderick, 1994; Shirley, 2009). Although alternative education is not new, it is still evolving, “educators and policymakers have contended that, if an alternate education option is provided for students at risk of school failure, they will be able to succeed” (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Since alternative learning environments are considered relatively new, the evolution and the attributes of effective alternative learning environments are fluid (Raywid, 1994).

Addressing the evolution, Curley (2016a) identified shortcomings in determining characteristics of effective alternative learning programs partly because measurement of success in these programs is often ambiguous and inconsistent. Alternative learning programs can be effective in providing support to at-risk students, alternative learning environments designed to increase the academic and behavioral outcomes of the student along with actively re-engaging the student in their education are most successful (Aron, 2006; Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009; Curley, 2016a; Raywid, 1994). Conversely, alternative learning program that removes the student but does not sufficiently address

the needs of students has the potential to cause *irreparable* academic and behavioral harm (Curley, 2016a). This study attempted to address the questions regarding perceptions of effective versus ineffective characteristics, by evaluating Likert-scaled responses and open-ended discussion questions of teachers and students. The views and perceptions of the students compared to the views and perceptions of the teachers regarding what is considered effective may identify gaps and misconceptions between teachers and students in an attempt to avoid creating an ineffective opportunity for at-risk students.

In this chapter, the principal researcher will outline the results from data analysis conducted on the Likert based surveys of students and teacher perceptions of effective components of alternative learning environments. The data sample included both students and teachers. The student participants were current high school students that were placed in an alternative learning environment. Additionally, the teacher participants were teaching in an alternative learning environment at the time of the study. To analysis the data, the principal researcher used Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 25 (SPSS25). Both descriptive (mean, standard deviation, and standard error mean) and inferential (independent t-test and Cohen's *d* for effect size) statistics were computed for each question contained in the 7 survey categories (engagement, academic rigor, relationships with teachers, relationship with peers, school culture academic interventions, and behavior interventions).

### **Research Questions**

- RQ – 1: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with student engagement while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 2: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with academic rigor while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 3: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with teacher relationships while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 4: What are the differences in the perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with peer relationships while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 5: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with school culture while attending the alternative learning environment?
- RQ – 6: What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with academic interventions while attending the alternative learning environment?

RQ – 7: What are the differences perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with behavior interventions while attending the alternative learning environment?

### **Research Hypothesis**

- H<sub>0</sub>-1: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view student engagement while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-2: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view academic rigor while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-3: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view teacher relationships while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-4: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view peer relationships while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-5: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view school culture while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-6: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view academic interventions while attending alternative learning environment.
- H<sub>0</sub>-7: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view behavior interventions while attending alternative learning environment.

### **Description of Sample**

The researcher identified five rural schools within the Northwest Arkansas region for the study. Each school was selected in relationship to student enrollment, free/reduced lunch percentage, English language learner percentage, and graduation rate percentage. Average enrollment for the five schools was 1450 students with a minimum enrollment of 793 and a maximum enrollment of 1,918 corresponding to a range of 1,125 students. Average Free/Reduced lunch percentage for the participating schools was 57% with a minimum of 42% and a maximum of 70% corresponding to a range of 28%. Additionally, the average English language learner percentage for the five schools was 5.6% with a minimum of 2% and a maximum of 11% corresponding to a range of 9%. Finally, the average graduation rate for the five participating school districts was 89% with a minimum of 86% and a maximum of 92% corresponding to a 6% range.

The principal researcher obtained permission from each school district superintendent to include their school in the research. Following superintendent approval, contact was made with the alternative learning director/teacher representing the five school districts to distribute participant and parent consent forms. A 37-question Likert based survey was administered to both students and teachers in the alternative learning environment.

Total alternative learning program enrollment for the five participating school districts at the time of the survey was 80 students and five teachers. Total participant response for the survey was 47 student respondents and five teacher respondents. The student respondents represent 58% of the available sample size for the participating school districts with the teacher respondents representing 100% of the available sample

size for the participating school districts. Table 16 outlines the demographic components of the student participants that completed the survey.

Table 16

<i>Student Demographics</i>		Total Sample Size ( <i>N</i> =47)	
Age		<i>M</i> = 16.2	
		Variable Sample Size ( <i>N</i> = 47)	Percentage of Sample Size (% = 100)
Gender	Male	34	72.3
	Female	13	27.7
Ethnicity	White	37	78.7
	Black / African American	4	8.5
	Hispanic / Latino	2	4.3
	Asian	0	0
	American Indian	1	2.1
	Other	3	6.4
Grade Classification			
	Freshman	10	21.3
	Sophomore	12	25.5
	Junior	16	34.0
	Senior	9	19.1
English Language Learner (ELL)			
	Yes	10	21.3
	No	37	78.7
Free / Reduced Lunch (NSLA)			
	Yes	41	87.2
	No	6	12.8

Note: Variables are defined as gender, ethnicity, grade classification, English Language Learner, and Free/Reduced Lunch status. Variable sample size represents the total number of respondents for that specific variable.



Data collected from the 47 student participants revealed that the average age for the sample group was 16.2 years. The sample contained 34 male respondents representing 72.3% of the sample size and 13 female respondents representing 27.7% of the sample size. Thirty-seven student respondents representing 78.7% of the survey sample listed their ethnicity as Caucasian, while four respondents representing 8.5% of the sample size reported an ethnicity of Black / African American. The sample contained two Hispanic/Latino respondents that comprised 4.3% of the sample and one Native American respondent that represented 2.1% of the sample. There were no Asian students represented in the sample, while three respondents listed other under ethnicity comprising the remaining 6.4% of the sample size. The sample contained 10 respondents representing 21.3% of the sample who listed their current grade as ninth, while 12 respondents representing 25.5% of the sample size reported tenth grade as their current placement. Sixteen respondents comprising 34.0% of the sample reported eleventh grade as their current placement, while nine respondents comprising the remaining 19.1% of the sample reported twelfth grade as their current grade placement. The student sample was composed of 41 students representing 87.2% of the sample that reported eligibility for free and reduced lunch. Students who reported English Language Learner placement totaled 10 students representing 21.3% of the sample.

Table 17 outlines the demographic components of the teacher participants that completed the survey.

Table 17

*Teacher Demographics*

Total Sample Size (N=5)	

Age (10 yr. range)			
	20-30	0	0
	31-40	4	80
	41-50	0	0
	51-60	1	20
	61-70	0	0
		Variable Sample Size ( <i>N</i> = 5)	Percentage of Sample Size (% = 100)
Gender			
	Male	3	60
	Female	2	40
Ethnicity			
	White	5	100
	Black /African American	0	0
	Hispanic / Latino	0	0
	Asian	0	0
	American Indian	0	0
	Other	0	0
ALE Experience (Years)			
	0-5	4	80
	6-10	1	20
	11-15	0	0
	16-20	0	0
	21-25	0	0
	>26	0	0
Teaching Experience			
	0-5	0	0
	6-10	1	20
	11-15	2	40
	16-20	1	20
	21-25	0	0
	>26	1	20
Education Attainment			
	Bachelor	2	40
	Master	3	60
	Specialist or Higher	0	0

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Note: Variables are defined as gender, ethnicity, ALE Teaching Experience, Overall Teaching Experience, Education Attainment. Age range 20-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70.

Data collected from the five teacher respondents determined that the majority of teachers are between the ages of 31-40 years old. The sample contained three male respondents representing 60.0 percent of the sample size and two female respondents representing 40.0 percent of the sample size. All five teacher respondents representing 100.0 percent of the survey sample listed their ethnicity as Caucasian. No Black / African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, or Asian teacher respondents were represented in the sample. The sample contained four respondents representing 80.0 percent of the sample who listed their alternative learning environment teaching experience at 0-5 years, while one respondent representing 20.0 percent of the sample size reported 6-10 years of alternative learning program experience. The teacher sample was composed of no respondents that listed 0-5 years of total teaching experience. One respondent representing 20.0 percent of the sample size listed 6-10 years of total teaching experience, while two respondents representing 40.0 percent of the population reported 11-15 years of total teaching experience.

Finally, one respondent representing 20.0 percent of the sample size listed 16-20 years of total experience, while one respondent representing 20.0 percent of the sample size listed more than 26 years of total teaching experience. Two of the teacher respondents representing 40.0 percent of the sample size reported having earned a bachelor's degree, while the remaining three respondents representing 60.0 percent reported earning a master's degree. No respondents reported having attained a specialist or higher degree.

### **Results of the Study**

The principal researcher studied the difference between alternative learning environment student and teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of seven components of alternative learning programs. The research questions were designed to examine the individual student and the individual teachers' experiences in the alternative learning environment. The hypotheses examine whether a significant statistical difference exists between how students and teachers perceive the alternative learning environment experience. The survey measured student and teacher responses to engagement, academic rigor, teacher relationships, peer relationships, culture, academic interventions, and behavior interventions. The questions used for the study were adapted from Youth Truth (Youth Truth, 2018).

To understand the parameters of the research, the principal researcher conducted descriptive statistics analysis for each question of the seven-component student survey. Table 18 reports the descriptive summaries for the student and teacher surveys. Each question from the seven-components (engagement, academic rigor, teacher relationships, peer relationships, culture, academic interventions, and behavior interventions) were independently reported outlining the sample, mean, standard error mean, and standard deviation. Concluding each component section, the individual component sample, mean, standard error mean, and standard deviation for purposes of reporting and inferential statistical analysis.

Table 18

*Student / Teacher Descriptive Data*

Survey Variable	( <i>N</i> )	( <i>M</i> )	( <i>SD</i> )	Standard Error Mean
Engagement				
Q1 – Engagement				

Student	47	6.1702	.89246	.13018
Teacher	5	4.8000	1.30384	.58310
Q2 – Engagement				
Student	47	5.7872	1.64100	.23936
Teacher	5	5.4000	.89443	.40000
Q3 – Engagement				
Student	47	5.5319	1.44239	.21039
Teacher	5	4.8000	.44721	.20000
Q4 – Engagement				
Student	47	6.3191	.98038	.14300
Teacher	5	4.6000	1.14018	.50990
Q5 - Engagement				
Student	47	6.0638	1.40503	.20494
Teacher	5	6.4000	.89443	.40000
Engagement Avg.				
Student	47	5.9745	.31465	.14072
Teacher	5	5.200	.73485	.32863
Academic Rigor				
Q1 – Aca. Rigor				
Student	47	5.8511	1.17914	.17200
Teacher	5	5.2000	1.30384	.58310
Q2 – Aca. Rigor				
Student	47	6.3404	.96181	.140029
Teacher	5	5.4000	1.34164	.60000
Q3 – Aca. Rigor				
Student	47	6.2979	1.14046	.16635
Teacher	5	6.2000	.83666	.37417
Q4 – Aca. Rigor				
Student	47	6.0426	1.44399	.21063
Teacher	5	5.6000	1.51658	.67823
Q5 - Aca. Rigor				
Student	47	5.9362	1.20514	.17579
Teacher	5	6.0000	1.22474	.54772
Q6 – Aca. Rigor				
Student	47	6.0851	1.39611	.20364
Teacher	5	6.0000	1.22474	.54772
Q7 – Aca. Rigor				
Student	47	6.1277	1.52682	.22271
Teacher	5	6.0000	1.22474	.54772
Aca. Rigor Avg.				
Student	47	6.0973	.17795	.06726
Teacher	5	5.7714	.37289	.14094
Relationship w/ Teachers				
Q1 – Rel. w/ Teach				

Student	47	6.5745	.90277	.13168
Teacher	5	7.0000	.00000	.00000
Q2 – Rel. w/ Teach				
Student	47	6.5745	.74439	.10858
Teacher	5	7.0000	.00000	.00000
Q3 – Rel. w/ Teach				
Student	47	6.5106	1.03991	.15169
Teacher	5	6.8000	.44721	.20000
Q4 – Rel. w/ Teach				
Student	47	6.7021	.68888	.10048
Teacher	5	6.6000	.54772	.24495
Q5 – Rel. w/ Teach				
Student	47	5.9574	1.44399	.21063
Teacher	5	5.6000	1.14018	.50990
Q6 – Rel. w/ Teach				
Student	47	6.4043	1.03545	.15104
Teacher	5	6.6000	.54772	.24495
Rel. w/ Teach Avg.				
Student	47	6.4500	.26359	.10761
Teacher	5	6.6000	.52154	.21292
Relationship w/ Peers				
Q1 – Rel. w/ Peers				
Student	47	5.9362	1.64719	.24027
Teacher	5	6.8000	.44721	.20000
Q2 – Rel. w/ Peers				
Student	47	5.6809	1.65643	.24161
Teacher	5	6.2000	.44721	.20000
Q3 – Rel. w/ Peers				
Student	47	5.7872	1.64100	.23936
Teacher	5	6.2000	.44721	.20000
Q4 – Rel. w/ Peers				
Student	47	5.6383	1.67365	.24413
Teacher	5	6.2000	.44721	.20000
Q5 – Rel. w/ Peers				
Student	47	4.6383	2.32590	.33927
Teacher	5	5.8000	.83666	.37417
Rel. w/ Peers Avg.				
Student	47	5.5300	.51599	.23076
Teacher	5	6.2400	.35777	.16000
School Culture				
Q1 – School Culture				
Student	47	6.0851	1.42691	.20814
Teacher	5	6.8000	.44721	.20000
Q2 - School Culture				

Student	47	6.1915	1.05580	.15400
Teacher	5	6.4000	1.34164	.60000
Q3 – School Culture				
Student	47	5.9362	1.32541	.19333
Teacher	5	6.8000	.44721	.20000
Q4 – School Culture				
Student	47	6.2766	1.09747	.16008
Teacher	5	7.0000	.00000	.00000
School Culture Avg.				
Student	47	6.1175	.14728	.07364
Teacher	5	6.7500	.25166	.12583
Academic Interventions				
Q1 – Aca. Int.				
Student	47	6.0426	1.33445	.19465
Teacher	5	5.6000	.89443	.40000
Q2 – Aca. Int.				
Student	47	6.2128	1.21470	.17718
Teacher	5	5.8000	1.30384	.58310
Q3 – Aca. Int.				
Student	47	6.2340	1.10754	.16155
Teacher	5	6.8000	.44721	.20000
Q4 – Aca. Int.				
Student	47	6.0000	1.16096	.16934
Teacher	5	6.0000	1.0000	.44721
Q5 – Aca. Int.				
Student	47	5.4255	1.76616	.25762
Teacher	5	6.0000	1.41421	.63246
Q6 – Aca. Int.				
Student	47	5.9362	1.59352	.23244
Teacher	5	6.4000	1.34164	.60000
Aca. Int. Avg.				
Student	47	5.9717	.29499	.12043
Teacher	5	6.1000	.43359	.17701
Behavior Interventions				
Q1 – Be. Int.				
Student	47	6.1915	1.13517	.16558
Teacher	5	6.6000	.54772	.24495
Q2 – Be. Int.				
Student	47	5.8936	1.32261	.19292
Teacher	5	5.8000	1.30384	.58310
Q3 – Be. Int.				
Student	47	5.7660	1.64466	.23990
Teacher	5	5.8000	1.64317	.73485
Q4 – Be. Int.				

Student	47	6.2553	1.11254	.16228
Teacher	5	6.4000	.89443	.40000
Be. Int. Avg.				
Student	47	6.0225	.23543	.11771
Teacher	5	6.1500	.41231	.20616

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Note: Aca = Academic, Rel. = Relationship, teach = Teacher, w/ = with, Int. = Intervention, Be. = Behavior, *N* sample, *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation

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The principal researcher conducted an independent sample *t*-test utilizing SPSS25 software on the survey data comparing the means of the student responses to that of the teacher responses. A *p* value of .05 was utilized to determine if a statistically significant difference between student and teacher mean perception scores existed. Table 19 presents a summary of the *t*-test analysis. The results reported for the seven-component survey consist of sample, mean, standard deviation, *t*-statistic, degrees of freedom, and significance.



Table 19

*A Comparison between the Perceptions of Students and Teachers Regarding Important Elements of the Alternative Learning Environment.*

Survey Variable		(N)	(M)	(SD)	(t)	p	Cohen's d
Engagement							
	Student	47	5.9745	.31465	2.166	.078	1.37
	Teacher	5	5.2000	.73485			
Academic Rigor							
	Student	47	6.0973	.17795	2.086	.068	1.12
	Teacher	5	5.7714	.37289			
Teacher Relationships							
	Student	47	6.4500	.26359	-.629	.548	.36
	Teacher	5	6.6000	.52154			
Peer Relationships							
	Student	47	5.5300	.51599	-2.528	*.039	1.59
	Teacher	5	6.2400	.35777			
Culture							
	Student	47	6.1175	.14728	-4.338	*.008	3.07
	Teacher	5	6.7500	.25166			
Academic Interventions							
	Student	47	5.9717	.29499	-.599	.564	.35
	Teacher	5	6.1000	.43359			
Behavior Interventions							
	Student	47	6.0225	.23543	-.537	.615	.38
	Teacher	5	6.1500	.41231			

\* $p < .05$  (two-tailed test)

### Research Questions 1.

*What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with student engagement while attending the alternative learning environment?*

***Student Engagement.*** The data indicate differences in the perceptions of students ( $M = 5.97$ ) compared to their teachers ( $M = 5.20$ ) regarding student engagement, but were not statistically significant. The first research question has been addressed.

## **Research Questions 2.**

*What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with academic rigor while attending the alternative learning environment?*

***Academic Rigor.*** The data indicated differences in the perceptions of students ( $M = 6.09$ ) compared to their teachers ( $M = 5.77$ ) were not statistically significant. The second research question has been addressed.

## **Research Questions 3.**

*What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with teacher relationships while attending the alternative learning environment?*

***Teacher Relationships.*** The data indicates a student mean teacher relationship score of ( $M = 6.45$ ) compared to their teachers ( $M = 6.60$ ). This difference was not statistically significant. The third research question have been addressed.

## **Research Questions 4.**

*What are the differences in the perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with peer relationships while attending the alternative learning environment?*

**Peer Relationship.** The data indicates a student mean peer relationship score of ( $M = 5.53$ ) compared to their teachers ( $M = 6.24$ ). The differences in these mean scores were statistically significant ( $p = .039$ ). The fourth research question has been addressed.

#### **Research Questions 5.**

*What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with school culture while attending the alternative learning environment?*

**School Culture.** The data indicates a student mean school culture score of ( $M = 6.11$ ) compared to their teachers ( $M = 5.75$ ). This difference was statistically significant ( $p = .008$ ). The fifth research questions have been addressed.

#### **Research Questions 6.**

*What are the differences in perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with academic interventions while attending the alternative learning environment?*

**Academic Interventions.** The data indicates a student mean academic intervention score of ( $M = 5.97$ ) compared to their teachers ( $M = 6.10$ ). The difference between these two mean scores are not statistically significant. The sixth research question has been addressed.

#### **Research Questions 7.**

*What are the differences perceptions between alternative learning students and their teachers regarding their experiences with behavior interventions while attending the alternative learning environment?*

**Behavior Interventions.** The data indicates a student mean behavior intervention score of ( $M = 6.02$ ) compared to their teachers ( $M = 6.15$ ). The difference between these two mean scores is not statistically significant.

### **Research Hypothesis 1.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-1: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view student engagement while attending alternative learning environment.*

**Student Engagement.** The data indicates a mean student engagement score of ( $M = 5.97$ ), and their teachers reported a mean student engagement score of ( $M = 5.20$ ). An independent  $t$ -test calculated for student and teacher engagement responses did not indicate a statistically significant difference at an alpha level of  $p < .05$  with students' ( $M = 5.97$ ,  $SD = .31$ ) and teachers' ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = .73$ ),  $t(5.41) = 2.16$ ,  $p = .07$ ) perceptions regarding student engagement in the alternative learning environment. A Cohen's  $d$  computed for the sample size reported a  $d$  value of 1.37, indicating a large effect size for the student and teacher mean scores. Although the differences were not statistically significant, the Effect Size (ES = Cohen's  $d$ ) indicate the magnitude of differences (Cohen's  $d = 1.37$ ) between these two groups indicate over a full standard deviation difference. The size of this magnitude could probably be attributed to the differences in the sample sizes. The first null hypothesis is retained.

### **Research Hypothesis 2.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-2: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view academic rigor while attending alternative learning environment.*

**Academic Rigor.** The data indicates a mean student academic rigor score of ( $M = 6.09$ ) with a corresponding standard deviation of ( $SD = .17$ ). Teachers reported a mean academic rigor score of ( $M = 5.77$ ) with a corresponding standard deviation of ( $SD = .37$ ). An independent  $t$ -test calculated for student and teacher academic rigor responses did not indicate a statistically significant difference at an alpha level of  $p < .05$  for student ( $M = 6.09, SD = .17$ ) and teacher ( $M = 5.77, SD = .37$ ), ( $t(8.59) = 2.08, p = .06$ ) perceptions regarding academic rigor in the alternative learning environment. A Cohen's  $d$  computed for the sample size reported a  $d$  value of 1.12, indicating a large effect size for the student and teacher mean scores. This ES indicates the differences between the two groups as more than one standard deviation differences between them. These large differences could be attributed to the differences in the sample sizes (teachers'  $n = 5$  compared to students'  $n = 47$ ). The second null hypothesis is retained.

### **Research Hypothesis 3.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-3: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view teacher relationships while attending alternative learning environment.*

**Teacher Relationships.** The data indicates a mean student teacher relationship score of ( $M = 6.45$ ), and their teachers reported a mean teacher relationship score of ( $M = 6.60$ ). An independent  $t$ -test calculated for student and teacher responses for teacher relationships did not indicate a statistically significant difference at an alpha level of  $p < .05$  for student's ( $M = 6.45, SD = .26$ ) and teacher's ( $M = 6.60, SD = .52$ ), ( $t(7.39) = -.62, p = .54$ ) perceptions regarding teacher relationships in the alternative learning environment. A Cohen's  $d$  computed for the sample size reported a  $d$  value of .36,

indicating a medium effect size for the student and teacher mean scores. The third null hypothesis is retained.

#### **Research Hypothesis 4.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-4: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view peer relationships while attending alternative learning environment.*

**Peer Relationships.** The data indicates a mean student peer relationship score of ( $M = 5.53$ ) with a corresponding standard deviation of ( $SD = .51$ ). Teachers reported a mean peer relationship score of ( $M = 6.24$ ) with a corresponding standard deviation of ( $SD = .35$ ). An independent  $t$ -test calculated for student and teacher peer relationship responses indicated a statistically significant difference at an alpha level of  $p < .05$  for student's ( $M = 5.53$ ,  $SD = .51$ ) and teacher's ( $M = 6.24$ ,  $SD = .35$ ), ( $t(7.12) = -2.52$ ,  $p = .03$ ) perceptions regarding peer relationships in the alternative learning environment. A Cohen's  $d$  computed for the sample size reported a  $d$  value of 1.59, indicating a large effect size for the student and teacher mean scores. This ES indicates the differences between the two groups is more than one standard deviation difference. This large ES could be attributed to the differences in the sample sizes between the teachers and the students. The fourth hypothesis is rejected.

#### **Research Hypothesis 5.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-5: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view school culture while attending alternative learning environment.*

**School Culture.** The data indicates a mean student school culture score of ( $M = 6.11$ ) with a corresponding standard deviation of ( $SD = .14$ ). Teachers reported a mean school culture score of ( $M = 6.75$ ) with a corresponding standard deviation of ( $SD = .25$ ). An independent  $t$ -test calculated for student and teacher school culture responses indicated a statistically significant difference at an alpha level of  $p < .05$  for student ( $M = 6.11$ ,  $SD = .14$ ) and teacher ( $M = 6.75$ ,  $SD = .25$ ), ( $t(4.83) = -4.33$ ,  $p = .008$ ) perceptions regarding school culture in the alternative learning environment. A Cohen's  $d$  computed for the sample size reported a  $d$  value of 3.07, indicating a large effect size between the student and teacher mean scores. This large EF (effect size = Cohen's  $d$ ) indicates the differences between the two groups to be more than three standard deviations differences between them. This large EF could be attributed to the differences in the two sample sizes. The fifth hypothesis is rejected.

#### **Research Hypothesis 6.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-6: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view academic interventions while attending alternative learning environment.*

**Academic Interventions.** The data indicates a mean student academic intervention score of ( $M = 5.97$ ) with a corresponding standard deviation of ( $SD = .29$ ). Teachers reported a mean academic intervention score of ( $M = 6.10$ ) with a corresponding standard deviation of ( $SD = .43$ ). An independent  $t$ -test calculated for student and teacher academic intervention responses did not indicate a statistically significant difference at an alpha level of  $p < .05$  for student ( $M = 5.97$ ,  $SD = .29$ ) and teacher ( $M = 6.10$ ,  $SD = .43$ ), ( $t(8.81) = -.599$ ,  $p = .56$ ) perceptions regarding academic interventions in the alternative

learning environment. A Cohen's  $d$  computed for the sample size reported a  $d$  value of .35, indicating a medium effect size for the student and teacher mean scores. The sixth null hypothesis is retained.

#### **Research Hypothesis 7.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-7: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view behavior interventions while attending alternative learning environment.*

**Behavior Interventions.** The data indicates a mean student behavior intervention score of ( $M = 6.02$ ) with a corresponding standard deviation of ( $SD = .23$ ). Teachers reported a mean behavior intervention score of ( $M = 6.15$ ) with a corresponding standard deviation of ( $SD = .41$ ). An independent  $t$ -test calculated for student and teacher behavior intervention responses did not indicate a statistically significant difference at an alpha level of  $p < .05$  for student ( $M = 6.02$ ,  $SD = .23$ ) and teacher ( $M = 6.15$ ,  $SD = .41$ ), ( $t(4.76) = -.53$ ,  $p = .61$ ) perceptions regarding behavior interventions in the alternative learning environment. A Cohen's  $d$  computed for the sample size reported a  $d$  value of .38, indicating a medium effect size for the student and teacher mean scores.

#### **Brief summary of the findings**

There were only two areas measured by the survey that generated statistically significant differences between the students and their teachers: Peer relations and culture. In both instances the teachers had higher mean scores: Peer relationship (Teacher  $M = 6.24$  vs. Student  $M = 5.53$ ), Culture (Teacher  $M = 6.75$  vs. Students  $M = 6.11$ ). There were two other areas of the survey where the differences in perceptions (as generated by the mean scores) were quite different: Engagement. The students' mean



scores generated a more positive perception ( $M = 5.97$ ) than the teachers ( $M = 5.20$ ).

Although these differences did not quite reach the threshold of statistical significance, the fact that the students' perception were considerably higher than the teachers is of interest.

The second area of the survey was Academic Rigor. Again, the students' mean scores generated a more positive response ( $M = 6.09$ ) than the teachers ( $M = 5.77$ ).

Although these differences did not achieve the threshold of statistical significance, the fact that the students' perceptions were higher than the teachers are of interest for this study and future studies.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the overall quality of student experiences while enrolled in alternative education programs in Northwest Arkansas. Work by numerous researchers indicates that alternative learning environments are often successful in providing an opportunity for the at-risk learner to realize success in school (Aron, 2006; Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009; Finn, 1993; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Powell, 2003; Raywid, 1994).

Alternative education has evolved and is still evolving from legislation and discipline specific research (Dworkin, 2005; Gagnon & Bottge, 2006; Roderick, 1994; Shirley, 2009). Alternative education was conceived beginning in 1983 with the introduction of the term at-risk from the controversial *A Nation at Risk*, which is credited with increasing the dropout rates in an attempt to increase standards (Roderick, 1994). In fact, *A Nation at Risk* condemned social promotion as lenient and was directly responsible for the decreased rigor in the American classroom (Roderick, 1994). The question facing schools under the legislative spotlight was how to educate the at-risk youth. The answer that was frequently given was alternative education (Aron, 2006; Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009; Finn, 1993; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Powell, 2003; Raywid, 1994).

Alternative learning environments are an alternate class or school that affords all students an environment that seeks to eliminate barriers to learning for students whose academic and social progress are negatively affected by the student's personal characteristics or situation (Arkansas Code Ann. § 6-48-101, 2016).

Research has suggested that alternative education has been identified as a vessel to improve student academics. In fact, students have also reported that placement in alternative learning has improved their behavior and attitudes toward school through gains in social and emotional learning (Poole, 2016). However, Tissington (2006) reported that struggling learners are often removed from the traditional school setting and placed into an alternative setting but are still required to complete the same curriculum. Weir (1996) noted that changing the students' placement without changing the curriculum and delivery of instruction makes the alternative placement moot. Modifications to the curriculum, method of instruction, formal/informal assessments, and demands on the student must be evaluated for each student to ensure success (Weir, 1996).

Research has identified components of alternative learning environments that allow at-risk students to succeed in school (Poole, 2016; Raywid, 1994; Shirley, 2009; Tissington, 2006). The components can be divided into (a) organizational components, (b) instructional components, and (c) interpersonal components (Raywid, 1994). Organizational components involve flexibility, transition assistance, small class size, and components of whole child education. Instructional considerations involve online learning opportunities, dependable curriculum, dependable instruction, vocational opportunities, and extra-curricular opportunities. Finally, intrapersonal components often include social and emotional learning, mentoring, and developing self-concept in students.

Although alternative education can be successful, it does suffer from criticism. Raywid (1994) reported that alternative education programs often suffer from a

stereotype problem stemming from a lack of institutional legitimacy. A second narrative about alternative learning environments revolves around curriculum. The reason for the skepticism in alternative education lies in the potential for grade inflation and a relaxing of rigor (Balingit, 2017). Outside influences are not the only concern for alternative programs, self-inflicted perceptions can be damaging to student success. Valore, Cantrell, and Cantrell (2006) reported that alternative faculty and staff can fall prey to negative perceptions of the students. A common misconception of students from the faculty standpoint is that students with emotional or behavior problems are broken. As a result, this conclusion requires the faculty and staff to correct the students' behavior and attitudes in order to repair them (Valore et al., 2006). This approach is often detrimental to the student. Focusing on the social or behavioral challenges of the students instead of the student creates this detrimental scenario. Instead, the faculty and staff of the alternative program must focus on the student (Valore et al., 2006).

The research was designed to address the potential for differing perceptions of students and teachers along seven components (engagement, academic rigor, teacher relationships, peer relationships, culture, academic interventions, behavioral interventions) of alternative learning environments. An illustration of a perception gap comes from the work of Bridgeland et al. (2009) when their research reported that most principals and teachers reported that they believed that students not completing high school was indeed a "major problem". However, only a small number of principal and teachers believed the problem reaches a "crisis" level. Furthermore, a similar number believed that high school drop-outs only represented a "minor" problem (Bridgeland et al., 2009). Bridgeland et al. (2009) discovered an "expectation gap" exists in today's

educational setting between teachers and students. In fact, research has indicated that high school drop-outs often report that they would have worked harder if it were demanded from them by teachers and administrators in their schools. Additionally, teachers unanimously reported they would support educational reforms to guide drop-out prevention (Bridgeland et al., 2009). This apparent disconnect has the ability to carry over into the classroom and affect the overall learning environment (Raywid, 1994).

Chapter 4 revealed the findings of this study which focused on identifying the numerical significance of student and teacher perceptions to the seven parameters of alternative learning environments. Those findings serve as the foundation for the summary of results discussing the seven-research hypotheses.

### **Limitations**

The key limitation discovered during the research and data collection was gaining the required participation level to provide an adequate sample size for the research. This study confined itself to high school alternative learning programs in rural school districts of Northwest Arkansas. An adequate “sample size is the minimum number of participants required to identify a statistically significant difference truly exists” (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012, p. 2).

Due to the very nature of quantitative research, the sample size is important to ensure generalizability and repeatability of the study (Delice, 2010). Although an adequate sample size is vital to research, no steadfast rules apply to what size that should be (Bullen, 2014).

Arkansas rules and regulations governing alternative learning environments sets a maximum class for alternative learning environments. High school programs can have a

maximum teacher to student ratio of 15:1 with only the teacher and 18:1 with the teacher and a paraprofessional (Arkansas Code Ann. § 6-48-101, 2016). Given the five participating districts are single teacher programs with each having a paraprofessional, the projected maximum student sample size for this research project would be 90 students ( $18 \times 5 = 90$ ). Additionally, the maximum teacher sample size would be five teacher respondents.

The total anticipated number of participants for this project was 60 student respondents. However, after the surveys were complete the actual number of participants was 47 student respondents and five teacher respondents. The student respondents represent 52% of the available sample size for the participating school districts with the teacher respondents representing 100% of the available sample size for the participating school districts.

The surveys used for data collection contained only quantitative Likert-based response options. No quantitative feedback from students or teachers was generated during data collection. A student and teacher narrative regarding feedback to survey questions in the form of open response questions could have provided the principal researcher with a deeper understanding of perceptions regarding the components of alternative learning environments. Finally, the survey responses were self-reported, resulting in the principal researcher making the assumption that the student and teacher respondents understood all the questions and answered them honestly.

### **Summary of Results**

The goal of this research project was to expand on limited empirical data on the effectiveness of alternative learning environments. The study utilized a quantitative

methodology with 47 student participants and five teacher participants completing a Likert survey. The survey focused on identifying the numerical significance of student and teacher perceptions to seven distinct parameters (student engagement, academic rigor, teacher relationships, peer relationships, school culture, academic interventions, and behavior interventions) within the alternative learning environment. In reporting low, moderate, and high levels of perception, the principal researcher utilized a self-developed scale ( $< 5.50$  = Low,  $5.50 - 6.50$  = Moderate, and  $> 6.50$  = High).

### **Research Hypothesis 1.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-1: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view student engagement while attending alternative learning environment.*

***Student Engagement.*** Using analysis of the student Likert based survey for engagement, the data indicates moderate levels ( $M = 5.97$ ) of engagement across the five engagement questions. Additionally, analysis of the teacher Likert based survey for engagement indicates a low level ( $M = 5.20$ ) of perceived student engagement across the paired engagement questions. The resulting independent t-test ( $p = .078 > .05$ ) confirmed that the difference was not significantly different, thus the researcher fails to reject the null hypothesis. However, a Cohen's  $d$  analysis (1.37) revealed a large effect size, indicating a high level of practical significance. The researcher concludes that a gap does not exist between student and teacher perceptions of engagement in the alternative learning environment for the overall engagement component, although the results could be affected by the small teacher sample size.

### **Research Hypothesis 2.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-2: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view academic rigor while attending alternative learning environment.*

**Academic Rigor.** Using analysis of the student Likert based survey for academic rigor, the data indicates high levels ( $M = 6.09$ ) of perceived academic rigor across the seven academic rigor questions. Additionally, analysis of the teacher Likert based survey for academic rigor indicates a moderate level ( $M = 5.77$ ) of perceived academic rigor across the paired academic rigor questions. The resulting independent t-test ( $p = .068 > .05$ ) confirmed that the difference was not significantly different, thus the researcher fails to reject the null hypothesis. However, a Cohen's  $d$  analysis (1.12) revealed a large effect size, indicating a high level of practical significance. The researcher concludes that a gap does not exist between student and teacher perceptions of academic rigor in the alternative learning environment for the overall academic rigor component, although the results could be affected by the small teacher sample size.

### **Research Hypothesis 3.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-3: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view teacher relationships while attending alternative learning environment.*

**Teacher Relationships.** Using analysis of the student Likert based survey for teacher relationships, the data indicates high levels ( $M = 6.45$ ) of perceived teacher relationships across the six teacher relationship questions. Additionally, analysis of the teacher Likert based survey for teacher relationships indicates a high level ( $M = 6.60$ ) of perceived teacher relationships across the paired teacher relationship questions. The



resulting independent t-test ( $p = .548 > .05$ ) confirmed that the difference was not significantly different, thus the researcher fails to reject the null hypothesis. Additionally, a Cohen's  $d$  analysis (.36) revealed a medium effect size, indicating a moderate level of practical significance. The researcher concludes that a gap does not exist between student and teacher perceptions of teacher relationships in the alternative learning environment for the overall teacher relationship component, although the results could be affected by the small teacher sample size.

#### **Research Hypothesis 4.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-4: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view peer relationships while attending alternative learning environment.*

**Peer Relationships.** Using analysis of the student Likert based survey for peer relationships, the data indicates moderate levels ( $M = 5.53$ ) of perceived peer relationships across the five peer relationship questions. Additionally, analysis of the teacher Likert based survey for peer relationships indicates a high level ( $M = 6.24$ ) of perceived peer relationships across the paired peer relationship questions. The resulting independent t-test ( $p = .039 < .05$ ) confirmed that the difference was significantly different, thus the researcher rejects the null hypothesis. Additionally, a Cohen's  $d$  analysis (1.59) revealed a high level of practical significance. The researcher concludes that a gap does exist between student and teacher perceptions of peer relationships in the alternative learning environment for the overall peer relationship component.

#### **Research Hypothesis 5.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-5: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view school culture while attending alternative learning environment.*

**School Culture.** Using analysis of the student Likert based survey for school culture, the data indicates high levels ( $M = 6.11$ ) of perceived school culture across the four school culture questions. Additionally, analysis of the teacher Likert based survey for school culture indicates a high level ( $M = 6.75$ ) of perceived views of school culture across the paired school culture questions. The resulting independent t-test ( $p = .008 < .05$ ) confirmed that the difference was significantly different, thus the researcher rejects the null hypothesis. Additionally, a Cohen's  $d$  analysis (3.07) revealed a very high level of practical significance. The researcher concludes that a gap does exist between student and teacher perceptions of school culture in the alternative learning environment for the overall school culture component.

#### **Research Hypothesis 6.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-6: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view academic interventions while attending alternative learning environment.*

**Academic Interventions.** Using analysis of the student Likert based survey for academic interventions, the data indicates moderate levels ( $M = 5.97$ ) of perceived academic interventions across the six academic intervention questions. Additionally, analysis of the teacher Likert based survey for academic interventions indicates a high level ( $M = 6.10$ ) of perceived academic interventions across the paired academic intervention questions. The resulting independent t-test ( $p = .564 > .05$ ) confirmed that

the difference was not significantly different, thus the researcher fails to reject the null hypothesis. However, a Cohen's  $d$  analysis (.35) revealed a moderate level of practical significance. The researcher concludes that a gap does not exist between student and teacher perceptions of academic interventions in the alternative learning environment for the overall academic intervention's component, although the results could be affected by the small teacher sample size.

#### **Research Hypothesis 7.**

*H<sub>0</sub>-7: There is no significant difference between how students in alternative learning environments and teachers in alternative learning environments view behavior interventions while attending alternative learning environment.*

**Behavior Interventions.** Using analysis of the student Likert based survey for behavior interventions, the data indicates high levels ( $M = 6.02$ ) of perceived behavior interventions across the four behavior intervention questions. Additionally, analysis of the teacher Likert based survey for behavior interventions indicates a high level ( $M = 6.15$ ) of perceived behavior interventions across the paired behavior intervention questions. The resulting independent t-test ( $p = .615 > .05$ ) confirmed that the difference was not significantly different, thus the researcher fails to reject the null hypothesis. However, a Cohen's  $d$  analysis (.38) revealed a moderate level of practical significance. The researcher concludes that a gap does not exist between student and teacher perceptions of behavior interventions in the alternative learning environment for the overall behavior interventions component, although the results could be affected by the small teacher sample size.

#### **Interpretations**

Interpretations are based upon review of all available data. The research questions and hypothesis analysis were completed using SPSS 25 to configure descriptive statistics and independent t-tests for the given variables. Although base t-test data on significance is given along with ranges of scores, the principal researcher specifically analyzed individual questions within the seven component (engagement, academic rigor, relationship with teachers, relationships with peers, school culture, academic interventions, and behavioral interventions) Likert survey for the interpretation section.

### **Student Engagement.**

According to the data analysis, there was no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of students and teachers regarding the engagement component of the research. The engagement component was examined through a five-question battery that focused on student and teacher responses to Likert based questions grounded in student responsibility and expectations for participation in the alternative learning environment. Student data aligned closely with the range of scores being .79, while teachers scores experienced a larger range of 1.80 for engagement. Of note, students consistently ranked engagement higher than teachers across all five questions. Questions one, three, and five indicated a larger gap. Question one (I try to do my best) is the defining question and demonstrated the largest gap.

It can be inferred that teachers believe engagement is a behavior and follows Finn (1993) findings. Finn (1993) compiled information for eighth-grade students using the U.S. Department of Education's NELS:88 survey. The study examined 15,737 responses of student, parent, and teacher surveys concerning student attendance, participation in classroom, and participation in school related activities. Finn (1993) formulated three

major conclusions from the study: a) behavioral engagement is related to school outcomes for at-risk students as a whole after controlling factors such as racial/ethnic make-up, socioeconomic status, and/or language groups, b) that the risk behaviors have a strong tendency to appear in the early years of formal education, and c) the behaviors of both students that are considered “successful” and students that are termed “marginalized” are often very close in actions. Finn (1993) went on to propose a) engagement is more tangible for educators to address than the traditional (racial/ethnic make-up, socioeconomic status, and language groups) barriers and should be the focus of the school, b) identification of risk factors should begin early in the child’s formal education, and c) all accomplishments should be recognized (Finn, 1993). Given no significant statistical difference does not necessarily allow for an interpretation that students and teachers see engagement in the same context. In conclusion, maintaining high expectations and celebrating successes in the alternative learning environment is key to student engagement.

### **Academic rigor.**

Corresponding to the data analysis, there was no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the academic rigor component of the research. The academic rigor component was examined through a seven-question battery that focused on the student and teacher responses to Likert-based questions concentrated on instructional materials and assignments. Student data aligned closely with the range of scores being .49, while teachers scored experienced a larger range of 1.00 seven-question battery. Of note, students’ and teachers’ perceptions were equally split on individual rigor questions. Overall, students ranked academic rigor higher than teachers across all seven

questions. Question one (The classroom assignments I complete in ALE makes me really think) indicated a larger gap with the student mean determined to be 5.40, while the teachers reported a 6.34 mean score for the question. Even though the data analysis points to no significant difference, the disparity in question one points to a perception gap in core instructional material. Data supports the conclusion that students do not feel that the coursework is challenging enough. Again, high standards and expectations are intertwined with the success of the student.

Data from Hemmer and Shepperson (2014) point to alternative schools' rigor and expectations as a key component in producing successful outcomes for students.

Rigorous coursework, access to advanced classes, and vocational opportunities create a viable pathway for the student (Hemmer & Shepperson, 2014). Alternative schools are growing and should strive to provide equitable access although most alternative students are from low socio-economic and minority households. This alone is not a concern of alternative learning programs. However, it does project concern into equality of access and the ability of the school district to ensure parity of the alternative learning program compared to mainstream education (Hemmer & Shepperson, 2014).

### **Relationships with teachers.**

According to the data analysis, there was no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of teacher and students regarding the relationships with teacher's component of the research. The relationship with teacher's component was examined through a six-question battery that focused on the student and teacher responses to Likert based questions framed on consistent personalized interactions with students. Student data aligned closely with the range of scores being .75, while teachers' scores

experienced a larger range of 1.40 for relationships with teachers. Among both student and teachers' respondents, relationships with teacher's component ranked the highest of the seven categories with mean scores of 6.45 for students and 6.60 for teachers. However, question five (My ALE teachers make assignments relevant to each student) ranked lower than the category as a whole, with mean scores computed at 5.95 for students and 5.90 for teachers. Question five has relevance when examining alternative learning programs as it has significance in each component. Placing it in relationships with teachers could be misleading, given the higher results generated from participant responses for this component. Removing the question and recomputing the category averages yields mean scores of 6.55 for student respondents and 6.80 for teachers. The recomputed mean scores are in all likelihood a more accurate measurement of the importance that students and teachers place on the relationships among the two groups in the alternative learning environment. Regardless of the placement, relevant assignment's does impact teacher relationships as it deals with the individualized interaction between student and teacher.

Research points to teachers and administrators play an integral part in the interpersonal components of effective student teacher relationships in alternative learning environments. Quinn and Poirier (2006) wrote about teacher perceptions regarding effective student teacher relationships in 11 alternative learning schools to establish the base for their writing.

The authors surveyed 50 students from each of the 11 alternative programs during the study. Quinn and Poirier used the Effective School Battery (ESB) instrument to qualify each participants' response to student and teacher characteristics within the 11

programs. Each component of the ESB included psychosocial school climate responses to identify the relationship piece discussed within the interpersonal components of alternative learning environments (Quinn & Poirier, 2006).

Findings from the ESB concerning the psychosocial school climate responses of students toward teachers identified high to very high perceptions in (a) belief in students, (b) fairness of rules, (c) planning and action, and (d) respect for students. Furthermore, the findings from the teacher battery aligned with the student findings. The teacher battery found that 90% of participating teachers viewed the other teachers within the program as enthusiastic, well-motivated, fair, respectful, innovative, and adaptable (Quinn & Poirier, 2006).

#### **Relationships with peers.**

Corresponding to the data analysis, there was a statistically significant difference in the perceptions of teacher and students regarding the relationships with peer's component of the research. The relationships with peers' component was examined through a five-question battery that focused on the student and teacher responses to Likert based questions grounded in acceptance and level of peer involvement.

The analysis revealed that students' scores had a larger range than teachers for peer relationships with the range of scores computed at 1.30 and 1.00, respectively. Research agrees about the importance of peer relationships to student social and emotional development. Relationships built on trust, whether at home, school, or social media act as a protective buffer that allows the student a safe platform to grow and the foundation of well-being (Drolet & Arcand, 2012). Work by Drolet and Arcand (2012) outlined the importance of peer relationships to the developing student. The research



suggests that peers have the ability to exert significantly more influence than school staff and often more than parents. In fact, students reported the importance of peer interactions by repeatedly emphasizing the importance of having reliable peers that are welcoming and accepting as crucial in the social context of a school setting (Drolet & Arcand, 2012). When looking at the importance of peer relationships through the lens of at-risk students, it can be inferred that the feeling of acceptance and belonging in your peer group would be amplified. If the support and feeling of belonging is present, the student can flourish. However, if the support and feeling of belonging is not present, the student will not flourish and often will avoid peer interactions.

Question five of the Likert survey (I am comfortable working in groups in ALE) specifically looks at the peer interactions. The question received a mean score of 4.63 from student respondents. It was the only question out of the 47 questions that received a mean score in the four percent range. Conversely, teachers reported a mean score of 5.80 for question five. The analysis lends itself to the conclusion that students overwhelmingly view collaborative course work (group work) as a source of concern in the alternative learning environment. In fact, the findings point to a conflict in two main criteria of successful alternative programs outlined by the National Alternative Education Association which states to maintain an environment in which the students feel safe while also providing high expectations for social and behavioral learning (NAEA, 2014). Additionally, given research that states collaborative work is a component of successful alternative programs (Lange & Sletten, 2002), alternative schools would be well served to remain vigilant of student social clues and when needed, scaffold the student to inclusion in collaborative work.

### **School culture.**

Corresponding to the data analysis, there was a statistically significant difference in the perceptions of teacher and students regarding the school culture component of the research. The school culture component was examined through a four-question battery that focused on the student and teacher responses to Likert based questions framed around discipline, respect, and a sense of belonging. Both student and teacher data aligned closely with the range of scores computed at .34 and .60, respectively. Of note, students consistently ranked school culture lower than teachers across all four questions. However, question three (Most students treat the ALE faculty/staff with respect) received the lowest score among students with a mean score of 5.93, while simultaneously receiving the second highest score among teachers with a mean of 6.80.

A possible explanation is that students are developing a vested interest in the alternative program and showing ownership of their behavior as well as their peers' behavior. Being critical and policing the collective groups behavior can be inferred as a step to developing a sustainable alternative program. In fact, the National Alternative Education Association's school climate and culture exemplary practices list the ability of the school too actively promote opportunities for the student to shape the learning environment to facilitate feelings of connectedness (ownership) to and in the learning environment (NAEA, 2014).

Additionally, a conclusion could also be made from analysis of the teacher's high response that high expectations for student and staff performance and behavior are adhered to. Research has identified practices that develop a positive school culture. The Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance report (2018) outlines listening,

humility, respect, trust, and voice as a set of actions that impact school culture. Each set of skills relate to the school culture component, specifically when viewed through the lens of question three. Respect (trusting the integrity of others) and voice (speaking the truth related to identity, power, and justice) speaks directly to students view of how faculty/staff, and by extension their peers and themselves should be treated.

#### **Academic interventions.**

Corresponding to the data analysis, there was no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of teacher and students regarding the relationships with peer's component of the research. The relationships with peer's component was examined through a six-question battery that focused on the student and teacher responses to Likert based questions grounded in identified components of effective alternative programs (small class size, online learning, peer tutoring, one-to-one teacher interactions). Student data was moderately aligned with the range of scores being .81, while teachers' scores experienced a larger range of 1.20 across six-question battery.

However, some discrepancies among individual questions appeared in the analysis. Peer tutoring ranked lowest among students with a mean score of 5.42, while teachers ranked mean score was 6.00 for peer tutoring. This outcome mirrors the results found in the relationship with peers' component in which students ranked peer group work significantly lower than teachers. Both results lead to the inference that peer interactions are a point of perception difference between students and teachers. As a whole, it would prove beneficial for alternative schools to address the success of students against concerns regarding peer centered academic interventions. The conclusions align with work by Hemmer (2014) which found that measuring academic interventions in

alternative schools is often more difficult than the traditional formal standardized measurements of success (state assessments, curriculum monitoring assessments, etc.) and the informal measurements of success (group projects, teacher evaluations, etc.). Hemmer (2014) noted that students who overcame social and/or personal challenges (i.e. working in/or interacting with peers) did not immediately translate to academic success.

Alternative schools must adapt the curriculum, structure, and organization of the school to meet the needs of the individual student (Hemmer, 2014). Small size was predominantly ranked highest among all academic intervention questions for students and teachers, with mean scores tallied at 6.23 and 6.80, respectively. The results concerning small class is echoed in previous alternative program research. According to work by Brown (2017), small class size was viewed by many participants as the primary catalyst in reducing “drama” while providing a learning environment with fewer distractions.

### **Behavior interventions.**

Corresponding to the data analysis, there was no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of teacher and students regarding the behavior intervention component of the research. The behavior intervention component was examined through a four-question battery that focused on the student and teacher responses to Likert based questions framed around personal growth and social skills attainment. Student data aligned closely with the range of scores being .49, while teachers scored experienced a slightly larger range of .80 for behavior interventions. Question three (What I learn in school aids me outside of school) ranked lowest among student respondents reporting a mean score of 5.76. The question relates to the relevance of the social and emotional curriculum taught in alternative placements. The student score appears to point to

students not valuing the benefit of the social and emotional curriculum. Additionally, teachers reported a mean score of 5.80 for the teacher related question. Again, the low score seems to lead to a conclusion that teachers believe that adequate relevance in the social and emotional curriculum is not being achieved.

Behavior interventions are a cornerstone of effective interventions for at-risk youth. Slaten, Irby, Tate, and Rivera (2015) echoed this conclusion while conducting research on the social and emotional learning component of alternative education. Slaten et al. (2015) found that social-emotional learning must be approached from a critically conscious and culturally relevant vantage point. Culturally relevant implementation takes into account a comprehensive and ecological delivery that integrates neighborhood culture, youth popular culture familial culture, race/ethnicity, culture, and social/political culture. The result is the ability of the school to meet the students on common ground (Slaten, Irby, Tate, & Rivera, 2015).

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Alternative learning programs have the ability to arrest the educational freefall that at-risk students often experience when traditional forms of education can't or won't allow the student to be successful (Poole, 2016; Raywid, 1994; Shirley, 2009; Tissington, 2006).

Recommendations for practice stemming from this research revolves around the core structure and curriculum of alternative learning programs including basic literacy skills attainment, basic social/emotional skills attainment, flexible scheduling including student choice, and differentiated instruction. The principal researcher developed recommendations based upon the three components (organizational, instructional, and

intrapersonal) outlined in the literature review for effective alternative programs. The recommendations are based upon gaps and/or deficiencies that the researcher believed existed in alternative education practices as outlined in the literature review.

### **Organizational recommendations.**

***Recruit quality teachers.*** The majority of teacher respondents in this research project reported zero to five years of experience in the alternative learning environment even though most respondents had more than 11 years of teaching experience. It is the recommendation of this researcher that a priority to be placed on recruiting quality teachers for the alternative learning programs. This recommendation aligns with current research in alternative education. Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldyke (2009) found that alternative learning environments often operated autonomously with regards to teacher qualifications.

The research conducted by Lehr et al. (1999) involved developing a synthesis of information from all 50 states and the District of Columbia to gather information on legislation and policies regulating alternative schools. Surveys were sent to each key alternative education leader in each state and the District of Columbia. The survey included 37 questions concerning policies and regulations within each state with a varying response format including open response, yes-no, and short answer questions (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009). Although, the findings included an early autonomous control of alternative schools within individual districts, as the spotlight has shifted to education as a legislative tool, states have shifted to uniform standards for teacher preparation and training for positions in alternative learning. Lehr et al. (1999) point to the need for qualified staff equipped to effect positive behavior in disruptive students,

effective leadership, mentoring skills, content knowledge, and experience within alternative settings. Success within the alternative environments depends on districts finding the teacher that can both deliver content curriculum and a focus on intrapersonal skills (Lehr et al., 1999). Additionally, Lehr and Lange (2003) believe that the availability of quality alternative learning environment teachers is creating a deficit for schools when measuring the success of alternative programs. Research by Lehr and Lange (2003) reported that the majority of teachers placed in an alternative learning program are licensed; however, most are not certified in the specific curriculum discipline being taught.

*Explore and develop partnerships with outside agencies.* It is the recommendation of this researcher that alternative programs develop partnerships with multiple entities to address the whole child needs of at-risk students placed in alternative learning programs. This recommendation aligns with current research in alternative education.

Leone and Weinberg (2012) found that schools alone are not enough. Schools must develop partnerships with outside agencies to address all needs. Students have many outside influences including single family homes, foster care, family mobility, special education needs, socio-economic disadvantages, and legal system involvement (Leone & Weinberg, 2012). Partnerships should be developed with the court system, Department of Human Services, independent counseling services, independent health and dental services, as well as local civic groups need to be developed and fostered by the school to ensure the whole child needs of the student are met (Leone & Weinberg, 2012).

#### **Instructional recommendations.**

***Develop Career and Technical Education curriculum for alternative programs.*** It is the recommendation of this researcher that career and technical education (CTE) programs be offered to alternative learning students. It is the primary recommendation that the programs be integrated into the alternative learning curriculum. If integration of the CTE programs is not possible, the alternative program should evaluate the possibility of students attending both alternative learning and CTE programs. This recommendation aligns with current research in alternative education. CTE programs have the ability to build value within the alternative program, thus making it a viable option for at-risk students to gain career training while simultaneously honing skills needed for college.

Gewertz (2018, July 31) reported that previous vocational programs often represented a dumping ground for students that did not experience success in traditional forms of education. Often the students placed represented minorities and/or students from low socio-economic conditions. The pendulum has shifted with vocational programs being a value-added component of successful educational programs (Gewertz, 2018). In fact, students that complete two or three vocational related courses are more likely to graduate from high school on time. Bringing that opportunity to students in alternative education would create a win-win scenario for alternative education programs and the students they serve.

***Improved flexibility to enhance academics.*** Alternative programs need to be allowed to address individual student needs within the realm of state or district standards. It is the recommendation of this researcher that state and district legislators, along with state and district educational leadership focus on rules and regulations for alternative programs that allow for uniform standards but also operational flexibility in meeting



those standards. This recommendation aligns with current research in alternative education.

Almeida, Le, Steinberg, and Cervantes (2010) reported alternative schools need to be held accountable for results but need to be offered organizational, instructional, and interpersonal freedom to accelerate learning for students behind on credits or skills. Twenty-two states allow school districts to grant credit based upon demonstration of proficiency (Almeida et al., 2010). In addition, some states have proficiency-based programs specific to alternative education. Proficiency based programs are only one flexibility option for schools to reengage students in the educational process (Almeida et al., 2010). In connection with proficiency-based flexibility, states have the ability to define their accountability systems to clearly define achievable goals and expectations for alternative students and programs (Almeida et al., 2010).

### **Intrapersonal Recommendations.**

*Provide quality social-emotional professional development.* This recommendation aligns from the analysis of teacher demographics, specifically looking at the teacher's alternative program experience versus total teaching experience. It is the recommendation of this researcher that state and district leadership prioritize social-emotional professional development for alternative program faculty and staff. This recommendation aligns with current research in alternative education.

Arif and Mirza (2017) found that behavior interventions can be taught in the alternative classroom that provide the at-risk student with resiliency needed to be successful. In order to accomplish this, teachers should adopt the role of mentor, role model, and/or facilitator. To prepare teachers for this expanded role outside of the

traditional teaching role, schools should develop a professional development program that focuses on a mentoring strategies that provide teachers with professional development that focuses on supporting students self-confidence, esteem, self-efficacy, autonomy, and internal locus of control (Arif & Mirza, 2017).

Teachers have no formal training in social-emotional interventions and special education protocols beyond the introductory courses required in teacher preparation programs (Lehr & Lange, 2003). This lack of training in curricula, specifically within the social-emotional spectrum, is holding back the teachers from providing the whole child education at-risk students require for success. Districts have the ability to quickly place students in alternative education, but do not have the ability to quickly train the faculty and staff to manage the myriad of social-emotional struggles facing the at-risk student (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

***Implement a role model program.*** Whole child education is important. At-risk students are coming to alternative programs with clustering risk factors (Finn, 1993). Social-emotional concerns factor heavily into the whole child education approach needed for at-risk youth to be successful. It is the recommendation of this researcher that a role model program be developed and implemented to provide at-risk students interactions with a positive, caring, and knowledgeable adult. This is not a mentoring program as would be found under the recommendation to develop structured partnerships with outside agencies, such as formal counseling.

A role model is someone who has achieved success that the student wants to imitate. This recommendation aligns with current research in alternative education. Students placed in alternative programs often lack adequate parental support, adult role

models, and/or positive peer support (Lampley & Johnson, 2010). Classrooms often have several at-risk students in each period, forcing the teacher into a triage approach instead of being able to focus on one student. Connecting these students with an adult who has the ability to be a confidant guide and support base for students when they are experiencing difficulties is a useful tool for alternative programs to employ (Drolet & Arcand, 2012).

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

Previous research into alternative schools established a conclusion that the programs are able to benefit at-risk students by providing a pathway to success (Poole, 2016; Raywid, 1994; Shirley, 2009; Tissington, 2006). This study of the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the overall quality of student experiences while enrolled in alternative education programs in Northwest Arkansas across seven categorical components (engagement, academic rigor, teacher relationships, peer relationships, school culture, academic interventions, and behavior interventions) found perception gaps existed across the components.

The principal researcher encourages other educational professionals to build upon this research to improve the outcomes for at-risk students placed into alternative learning programs. The recommendations are based upon known limitations of the sample and gaps in current research found during the completion of the literature review. Each recommendation will add validity to alternative education and provide educators a foundation in developing programs that are truly impactful for at-risk students. In conclusion, the principal researcher suggests the following future research projects.

1. Replicated to include a qualitative approach utilizing interviews. A seven-point Likert based survey was utilized to collect the quantitative data for this project.
2. Replicated with a larger number of teacher and student participants. This study was confined to 47 student respondents and 5 teacher respondents.
3. Replicated across varying geographical locations. The geographical region for this study encompassed Northwest Arkansas.
4. Replicated with a larger number of schools. The study was confined to 5 school districts.
5. Replicated to include paraprofessionals. Only licensed teachers were surveyed for this study.
6. Replicated to include special education designation in demographics. Special education services were not included in the demographic data collection.
7. Replicated to include gender differences. This study was completed without looking at the differences in perceptions based upon gender.
8. Expanded to evaluate successful transitions from alternative learning back to a traditional education format.
9. Expanded to evaluate the addition of extracurricular activities to student success in alternative learning programs.
10. Expanded to evaluate the addition of Career and Technical Education to student success in alternative learning programs.
11. Expanded to evaluate placement criteria. The literature review for this project revealed that placement criteria is not uniform from state to state or district to district. Additionally, the placement criteria maybe considered too loose.

12. Expanded to evaluate success rates of alternative learning students post program.
13. Accounting for the wide range of risk factors that could be related to community and family factors, it is important for future alternative learning program-based research that regional and state demographic information be provided for validity and interpretation of the study. All five districts in the study have a 7-12 alternative learning program.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the overall quality of student experiences while enrolled in alternative education programs in Northwest Arkansas.

The first two chapters of this research project framed the drop-out *epidemic* in terms of the academic and monetary shortfalls experienced by the individual student, as well as, the monetary and employment losses felt by society. The principal researcher reported that a primary challenge facing education is how to educate *every* student given the variance in learning styles and personal backgrounds. Alternative Learning Environments have transitioned to an interventional approach focused on providing a learning environment designed around the at-risk student (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Nibbelink, 2011). However, placement in alternative learning programs does not automatically result in success. Research outlined that students placed in the programs still face time constraints and challenges encompassed in skill attainment for eventual employment or continued education (Sugai, 1998).

Research by Raywid (1994) summarized that alternative learning programs are an educational reform designed to scaffold the student between their current skills and the

skills needed to be successful in college and career readiness. At-risk students often face diverse obstacles in traditional educational environments from the very structure and organization of the traditional environmental setting. Alternative learning students are most successful when they participate in a learning environment that provides the flexibility, one-to-one or differentiated instruction, academic supports, and a supportive environment conducive to each student (Aron, 2006; Brown, 2017; Bullock, 2006; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Hemmer & Shepperson, 2014; Raywid, 1994).

Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), Tyler and Lofstrom (2009), and Rumberger (2011) opined that varied socioeconomic factors act as a foundational risk factor that other risk factors build upon setting the stage for a clustering effect for all risk factors. Furthermore, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) discovered a strong correlation between poverty and chronic absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism is among the strongest predictors for dropping out of school. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) identified a clustering effect of work status of students as an early predictor of not finishing high school, given that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, often are forced to work to supplement the family income (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Alternative learning programs provide an avenue to keep at-risk students engaged in the educational process when traditional educational settings have not. Reducing the approximate 1.2 million annual drop-outs is a vital component to ensuring the validity and sustainability of education (Joseph, 2014). Alternative education can form the foundation for addressing drop-out prevention of at-risk youth (Aron, 2006; Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009; Curley, 2016a; Raywid, 1994). Three areas of the alternative

program (Organizational, Instructional, and Intrapersonal) concurrently operate in unison to establish the foundational structure of the program.

This study utilized a seven-point, Likert-based survey to determine raw data on students' and teachers' perceptions along the seven categories of engagement, academic rigor, teacher relationships, peer relationships, school culture, academic interventions, and behavior interventions. The raw data was analyzed using SPSS 25 software to determine descriptive and inferential data outcomes. An independent t-test was utilized to determine if the perceptions of students and teachers was statistically significant. Effect size for the sample population means was examined using Cohen's *d* scores.

The seven components each presented a different lens to view alternative programs through. The results indicate that students' and teachers' perceptions do differ. However, the gap may not be as pronounced as one might think. Mean scores indicated that students ranked engagement and academic rigor higher than teachers, while teachers ranked relationships with teachers, relationships with peers, school culture, academic interventions, and behavioral interventions higher than students.

Relationship with Peers and School Culture was statistically significant, while engagement, academic rigor, relationship with teachers, academic interventions, and behavioral interventions was not statistically significant within the independent t-test. Results were dependent upon the category. One notable result identified during the research was the perceptions of peer relationships between the student and teacher groups. In today's classroom, peer relationships form the foundation of the educational philosophy. Cappella, Kim, Neal, and Jackson (2013) found that students in programs that maintained equitable peer relationships were much more likely to be actively

engaged in academics than students experiencing an environment that was not equitable. Additionally, students often relate more closely to an organized classroom and in response, provide a positive resource for other students.

The need to understand and develop a positive peer relationship structure will pay dividends to overall student success for at-risk students (Cappella, Kim, Neal, & Jackson, 2013). However, it was clearly the lowest ranked student component. Also, it could be inferred that peer relationships were a point of concern to the student in the overall climate and culture of the school.

It is recommended that educators view peer relationships from the lens of the student. In doing so, scaffolding social and emotional education strategies to address peer relationship concerns would most likely create a positive fear free environment that offers the students the greatest chance for success in college and career readiness.

In conclusion, research has clearly outlined a cause and effect relationship between dropping out of high school to students' earnings, the economy, and life expectancy (Joseph, 2014; Kliff 2012). Additionally, this research has identified perception gaps among student and teachers in alternative learning environments. To address the dropout crisis educators must take a four-step approach.

First, educators must identify the unique circumstances experienced by at-risk youth and determine what measures of success are attainable for the student. Second, the educators must identify which alternative program components are beneficial to the student. Next, the educator must implement the interventions with fidelity, taking into account perceptions. Finally, educators must monitor progress of the student and make adjustments when and where needed.



Education is charged with the success of *every* student. President Barack Obama (2010) delineated the importance of educating *every* student:

Our kids get only one chance at an education, and we need to get it right. Of course, getting it right requires more than just transforming our lowest-performing schools. It requires giving students who are behind in a school a chance to catch up and a path to a diploma. (Obama, 2010, para 20)

President Obama continued:

This is a problem we cannot afford to accept and we cannot afford to ignore. The stakes are too high -- for our children, for our economy, and for our country. It's time for all of us to come together -- parents, students, principals and teachers, business leaders and elected officials from across the political spectrum -- to end America's dropout crisis. (Obama, 2010, para 14)

Stakeholders must be committed to reversing the troubling dropout eventualities of our at-risk youth. To do this requires each stakeholder to take an active role and cast away the passiveness of past attempts at a solution. If we can commit to this partnership, it will ensure a brighter future for *all* of America's students.

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## Appendix A

### CITI Certification



Completion Date 17-Sep-2018  
Expiration Date 16-Sep-2021  
Record ID 28707115



This is to certify that:

**Steve Watkins**

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

**Social & Behavioral Research** (Curriculum Group)  
**Social & Behavioral Research** (Course Learner Group)  
**1 - Basic Course** (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

**Arkansas Tech University**



Verify at [www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w579bae0f-779d-4b74-81d4-6f5343f58229-28707115](http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w579bae0f-779d-4b74-81d4-6f5343f58229-28707115)

## Appendix B

### International Review Board Approval



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Office of  
Sponsored  
Programs and  
University  
Initiatives

Administration Building, Room 207

1509 North Boulder Avenue

Russellville, Arkansas 72801

Office: 479-880-4327  
[www.atu.edu](http://www.atu.edu)

December 9, 2019

To Whom It May Concern:

The Arkansas Tech University Institutional Review Board has the IRB application for Steven Watkins' proposed research, entitled "Alternative Learning Environments as a Tool for Student Success for Struggling Learners in Northwest Arkansas School Districts."

This approval is valid until December 8, 2021, at which time the research may apply for an extension if the data collection process for this research project is not yet completed.

The IRB approval code for this study is Watkins 120919.

Sincerely,

Gabriel L. Adkins, Ph.D.

Institutional Review Board Chair

Arkansas Tech University

## Appendix C

### Youth Truth Permission

Decatur Public Schools Mail - Follow-Up from Youth Truth



**Steven Watkins** <swatkins@decatursd.com>

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Follow-Up from Youth Truth

1 message

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Jimmy Simpson <jimmys@youthtruthsurvey.org> Wed, May 8, 2019 at 5:21 PM To:

"swatkins@decatursd.com" <swatkins@decatursd.com>

Hello Steve,

Thank you for your call today and congratulations on what sounds like an exciting and important focus for your research! As I said on the phone, our survey instrument is not available for use outside of contracted engagements with our partners. There are several free climate instruments that are open-source and available for use including the National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments, Panorama's Climate Survey, and Positive Behavioral Interventions & Support School Climate Surveys. However, if you are wanting to use our survey questions as a reference for how to conduct and create your own surveys for your research, you have our permission to do so. We just ask that you site our organization and our surveys as your source.

Thank you for your time and please let me know if you have any questions!

Sincerely,

Jimmy

Jimmy Simpson, Jr.



## Appendix D

### Superintendent Email

*SUPERINTENDENT NAME,*

I would like to include *SCHOOL DISTRICT NAME* in my dissertation research. I have enclosed a permission form that needs to be signed and dated that allows me to include *SCHOOL DISTRICT NAME* in my research. All data will be strictly confidential. The survey for the ALE students will be low impact on the class and should take no more than 15 minutes to complete. I will coordinate with your ALE teacher/director to obtain parental consent and to administer the survey. Please sign and return to enclosed permission form if you would allow *SCHOOL DISTRICT NAME* to participate.

Thank you,

*Steve Watkins*

Appendix E

School Participation Form (Superintendent Approval)

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS  
(School District Letterhead)

*DATE*

Steven L. Watkins  
Doctoral Student – Arkansas Tech University  
Arkansas Tech University  
Russellville, AR 72801

*SUPERINTENDENT NAME*  
Superintendent – *SCHOOL DISTRICT NAME*  
*SCHOOL DISTRICT ADDRESS*

Dear *SUPERINTENDENT NAME*,

My name is Steve Watkins, and I am a doctoral student at Arkansas Tech University in Russellville, Arkansas. The research that I wish to conduct for my doctoral thesis involves is to explore the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the overall effectiveness of alternative education programs in Northwest Arkansas. Given the parameters of this study of alternative learning environments, the literature review is designed to strengthen the understanding behind the primary question posed by this study. Specifically, to investigate the perceptions of both alternative learning environment teachers and students toward the effectiveness of the program's organizational, instructional, and interpersonal components.

This project will be conducted under the supervision of dissertation chair Dr. Wayne Williams (Arkansas Tech University, 479 964-3236) and Dr. Steve Bounds (Arkansas Tech University, 479 964-3236)

I am hereby seeking your permission to coordinate with your alternative learning program director and/or teacher(s) to administer a Likert based survey of 46 questions to both alternative learning students and teachers. I have provided you with a copy of my methodology outlining the exact procedures for the research and a copy of my CITI program course completion. If you require additional information or questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at (479) 737-4172 or email [swatkins8@atu.com](mailto:swatkins8@atu.com).

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Steve Watkins*

*SUPERINTENDENT NAME*, Superintendent:

Date:

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## Appendix F

### Parent Consent Form

September 17, 2019

Steven L. Watkins  
Arkansas Tech University  
Center for Leadership and Learning  
Russellville, AR 72801

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am from the College of Education at Arkansas Tech University, Russellville, and I would like to include your child, along with his or her classmates, in a research project on alternative learning programs. The study will examine students who were "at risk" for academic failure, but have been placed in an alternative learning environment and are now academically successful. Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. Only those children who have parental permission and who want to participate will do so, and any child may stop taking part at any time. You are free to withdraw your permission for your child's participation at any time and for any reason without penalty. These decisions will have no effect on your future relationship with the school, the school district, or your child's status or grades there.

If your child decides to participate in this research project, your child will be asked to complete a survey that should take no more than 15-20 minutes. The survey will be completed at their school in the alternative learning classroom.

The data collected during the research project will be used to improve educational outcomes for other children in similar academic situations. The risks include volunteering the approximate 15 minutes required to complete the survey. The data collected during this research project will be kept strictly confidential and no identifiable information will be collected. The data will be locked in a file cabinet while not in use. This project will be conducted under the supervision of dissertation chair Dr. Wayne Williams (Arkansas Tech University, 479 964-3236) and Dr. Steve Bounds (Arkansas Tech University, 479 964-3236). If you have any questions about this project, please contact the principal investigator, Steve Watkins, at [swatkins8@atu.edu](mailto:swatkins8@atu.edu).

Sincerely,

Steve Watkins

Steven L. Watkins - Researcher/Doctorate Student

I DO \_\_\_\_\_ (check) / DO NOT \_\_\_\_\_ (check) give permission for my child to participate in the research project described above.

Please print your child's name here: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G

### Participant Consent Form

DATE

Steven L. Watkins  
Arkansas Tech University  
Center for Leadership and Learning  
Russellville, AR 72801

Dear Student,

I am from the College of Education at Arkansas Tech University, Russellville, and I would like to include you, along with your classmates, in a research project on alternative learning programs. The study will examine students who were "at risk" for academic failure, but have been placed in an alternative learning environment and are now academically successful.

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. Only students that have signed student and parent permission will participate. You may stop taking part at any time. You are free to withdraw your permission at any time and for any reason without penalty. These decisions will have no effect on your future relationship with the school, the school district, or your status or grades there.

If you decide to participate in this research project, you will be asked to complete a survey that should take no more than 15-20 minutes. The survey will be completed at your school in the alternative learning classroom.

The data collected during the research project will be used to improve educational outcomes for other children in similar academic situations. The risks include volunteering the approximate 15 minutes required to complete the survey. The data collected during this research project will be kept strictly confidential and no identifiable information will be collected. The data will be locked in a file cabinet while not in use. This project will be conducted under the supervision of dissertation chair Dr. Wayne Williams (Arkansas Tech University, 479 964-3236) and Dr. Steve Bounds (Arkansas Tech University, 479 964-3236). If you have any questions about this project, please contact the principal investigator, Steve Watkins, at [swatkins8@atu.edu](mailto:swatkins8@atu.edu).

Sincerely,

*Steve Watkins*

Steven L. Watkins - Researcher/Doctorate Student

I DO \_\_\_\_\_ (check) / DO NOT \_\_\_\_\_ (check) give my permission to participate in the research project described above.

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix H

### Student Alternative Learning Environment Survey

**Please circle your responses**

#### **Demographics**

<b>Age</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>			
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male</b>					<b>Female</b>						
<b>Race / Ethnicity</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black / African-American</b>	<b>Hispanic / Latino</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>American Indian</b>	<b>Other</b>						
<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>						
<b>English Language Learner</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>										
<b>Free / Reduced Lunch Status</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>										



### **Engagement**

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements

	<b>Disagree Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree Somewhat</b>	<b>Disagree a Little</b>	<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	<b>Agree a Little</b>	<b>Agree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Strongly</b>
<b>I try to do my best in ALE.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>My teachers' expectations make me want to accomplish my goals.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>I take pride in my school work.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>I take responsibility for my school work.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>My needs are being meet while attending the ALE classes.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>

### **Academic Rigor**

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements

	<b>Disagree Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree Somewhat</b>	<b>Disagree a Little</b>	<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	<b>Agree a Little</b>	<b>Agree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Strongly</b>
<b>The classroom assignments I complete in ALE makes me really think.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>In order to receive a good grade, I must really work on my assignments.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>In order to pass my class, I must really work on my assignments.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>In ALE, I can't give up on my assignments when they are difficult.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>In ALE, the teacher wants me to use thinking skills instead of just memorizing material.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>In ALE, we learn every day.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>In ALE, we learn to correct our mistakes.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>

### **Relationships with Teachers**

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with  
the following statements

	Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree a Little	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree a Little	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
<b>My ALE teachers, try to be fair and consistent.</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>My ALE teachers are willing to give extra help on assignments.</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>My ALE teachers want me to really learn and grow.</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>My ALE teachers believe that you can get a good grade if you try.</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>My ALE teachers make assignments relevant to each student.</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>My ALE teachers make connections to each student.</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

### **Relationships with Peers**

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with  
the following statements

	Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree a Little	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree a Little	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
I like being involved in the ALE environment.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Most students are accepting of me as a person.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Most students are accepting of me as a student.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Most ALE students treat other ALE students with respect.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am comfortable working in groups in ALE.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

### School Culture

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with  
the following statements

	Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree a Little	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree a Little	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
I enjoy coming to ALE most of the time.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Most students want to be successful in ALE.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Most students in ALE treat the ALE faculty/staff with respect.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Discipline is fair and consistent in ALE.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

### **Academic Interventions**

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements

	<b>Disagree Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree Somewhat</b>	<b>Disagree a Little</b>	<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	<b>Agree a Little</b>	<b>Agree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Strongly</b>
<b>My ALE teacher gives assignments that are relevant to me.</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>ALE has helped me develop the skills needed to be successful.</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>The Small Class Size in ALE have helped me to learn.</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>Online Learning in ALE has helped me to learn.</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>Peer Tutoring in ALE has helped me learn.</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>One-to-One with ALE faculty staff has helped me learn.</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

### **Behavior Interventions**

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements

	<b>Disagree Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree Somewhat</b>	<b>Disagree a Little</b>	<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	<b>Agree a Little</b>	<b>Agree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Strongly</b>
<b>Help students with personal growth and development.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ALE has addressed my social needs.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>What I learn in school aids me outside of school.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ALE has helped me develop the skills needed to be successful.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>

## Appendix I

### Teacher Alternative Learning Environment Survey

**Please circle your responses**

#### **Demographics**

<b>Age</b>	<b>20 - 30</b>	<b>31 - 40</b>	<b>41 - 50</b>	<b>51 - 60</b>	<b>61 - 70</b>	
<b>Gender</b>		<b>Male</b>		<b>Female</b>		
<b>Race / Ethnicity</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black / African - American</b>	<b>Hispanic / Latino</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>American Indian</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Years Taught in an Alternative Learning Environment</b>	<b>0 – 5</b>	<b>6 – 10</b>	<b>11 – 15</b>	<b>16 – 20</b>	<b>21 – 25</b>	<b>&gt;26</b>
<b>Years Taught (Cumulative)</b>	<b>0 – 5</b>	<b>6 – 10</b>	<b>11 – 15</b>	<b>16 – 20</b>	<b>21 – 25</b>	<b>&gt;26</b>
<b>Education Attainment</b>	<b>Bachelor's</b>		<b>Master's</b>		<b>Specialist or Higher</b>	



### Engagement

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements

	Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree a Little	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree a Little	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
Students try their best in ALE.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teachers' expectations make students want to accomplish their goals.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Students take pride in their school work.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Students take responsibility for their school work.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Students needs are being meet while attending the ALE classes.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

### **Academic Rigor**

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements

	<b>Disagree Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree Somewhat</b>	<b>Disagree a Little</b>	<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	<b>Agree a Little</b>	<b>Agree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Strongly</b>
<b>The classroom assignments students complete in ALE makes them really think.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>In order to receive a good grade, students must really work on their assignments.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>In order to pass my class, students must really work on their assignments.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>In ALE, students can't give up on my assignments when they are difficult.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>In ALE, the student must use thinking skills instead of just memorizing material.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>In ALE, students learn every day.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>In ALE, students learn to correct our mistakes.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>

### **Relationships with Teachers**

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with  
the following statements

	Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree a Little	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree a Little	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
ALE teachers, try to be fair and consistent.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ALE teachers are willing to give extra help on assignments.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ALE teachers want me to really learn and grow.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ALE teachers believe that you can get a good grade if you try.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ALE teachers make assignments relevant to each student.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ALE teachers make connections to each student.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

### **Relationships with Peers**

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with  
the following statements

	Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree a Little	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree a Little	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
Students like being involved in the ALE environment.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Students are accepting of other students as people.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Students are accepting of other students as a student.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Most ALE students treat other ALE students with respect.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Students are comfortable working in groups in ALE.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

### School Culture

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with  
the following statements

	Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree a Little	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree a Little	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
Students enjoy coming to ALE most of the time.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Most students want to be successful in ALE.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Most students in ALE treat the ALE faculty/staff with respect.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Discipline is fair and consistent in ALE.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

### **Academic Interventions**

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements

	<b>Disagree Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree Somewhat</b>	<b>Disagree a Little</b>	<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	<b>Agree a Little</b>	<b>Agree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Strongly</b>
<b>ALE teachers give assignments that are relevant to the students.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ALE has helped the students develop the skills needed to be successful.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>The Small Class Size in ALE helps students to learn.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Online Learning in ALE helps students to learn.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Peer Tutoring in ALE has helped students learn.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>One-to-One with ALE faculty staff has helps students to learn.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>

### **Behavior Interventions**

Please circle how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements

	<b>Disagree Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree Somewhat</b>	<b>Disagree a Little</b>	<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	<b>Agree a Little</b>	<b>Agree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Strongly</b>
<b>ALE helps students with personal growth and development.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ALE addresses the student's social needs.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>What students learn in school aids them outside of school.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ALE helps students to develop the skills needed to be successful.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>