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At-Risk Students' Self-Determination Through the Lens of Alternate Graduation Programs

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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Programs

by

Donka C. Flaig

MA, Troy State University, 2008

BS, Troy State University, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

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Abstract

The number of alternative graduation programs has increased in the educational system. They are designed for at-risk students who are in danger of not graduating high school or receiving a diploma during their cohort year. Alternative graduation programs can include alternative placement, charter schools, online schools, and credit recovery schools. The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of the at-risk student's perceived self-determination and self-efficacy to complete high school after placement in an alternative graduation program. Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory in conjunction with Bandura's self-efficacy theory was used as the theoretical framework. The perceptions of at-risk students' self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation prior to alternative placement and after their placement were explored. Through semistructured interviews via hermeneutic conversation, six participants provided insight into the perceived self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation to complete high school through the lens of an alternative graduation program or pathway. The participants shared struggles with traditional high school settings for various reasons such as educational instability, lack of credits, attendance, discipline issues, feeling that no one cared about them, and lack of state-mandated testing requirements. Results reflected that alternative graduation programs provided some of the discipline, setting, support, and mentorship needed to obtain a high school diploma. This study may provide positive social and educational changes for at-risk students and how alternative graduation programs may influence their completion of high school. Further studies in this area may give community leaders insight into future educational policies and program implementation.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the most cherished souls in my life, whose unwavering love, strength, support, and inspiration have guided me through this academic journey.

To my beloved husband Joshie, my soldier, my love, my soulmate, you were my rock, my confidant, and my biggest supporter. Your boundless love, patience, and encouragement have been the foundation upon which I built my academic dreams. Your belief in me sustained me through the challenges, and your love has filled my life with joy. Your belief in me fueled my determination to complete this dissertation. You constantly pushed me to work a little longer, giving me your strength when mine was gone. You patiently and sometimes not so patiently waited for dinner while I finished one more thought.

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To my daughter, Athena, your unwavering faith in my abilities and your endless support have meant the world to me. Your intelligence and ambition inspire me to reach for the stars, and I dedicate this work to your future dreams and endeavors.

To my daughter-in-love, Vic, your love, friendship, and understanding have been a source of strength throughout this journey. Your presence in our family brings us joy and warmth, and I am grateful for your unwavering support.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

When a student drops out of high school, there are widespread implications for the community, teachers, and parents, in addition to the student. Students who drop out of high school experience health problems, employment issues, and an overall diminished quality of life compared to students with a high school diploma (Campbell, 2015). Poverty among high school dropouts is 33% higher than students with a high school diploma (Campbell, 2015). During the Obama administration, schools were presented with incentives to increase overall graduation rates, especially for those students considered at risk of not graduating. One result of these initiatives is that school districts have implemented alternative graduation programs, usually defined as any high school completion program implemented outside of the standard diploma acquired in a brick-and-mortar institution (Barnett, 2016). The creation of Alternative graduation programs has occurred as a viable solution for students who do not meet the goals, standards, and requirements of traditional educational settings (Porowski et al., 2014). However, these alternative options have not had the desired effect of improving overall graduation rates, as noted by examining the records of over 13,000 students in alternative graduation programs (Traynor & Chapman, 2015). For instance, Stallings et al. (2016) examined North Carolina's online high school credit recovery program (NCVPS). They found mixed results of program effectiveness and overall positive effect on student perceptions of self.

There is a need to explore and understand how working toward a diploma in a alternative graduation programs is experienced by students (Johnson et al., 2019).

Farrelly and Daniels (2014) asserted that all aspects of alternative graduation programs should be studied with a specific emphasis on student experiences. Although several studies have explored the various types and effectiveness of alternative graduation programs (Nespor & Voithofer, 2016), there are few published studies that have examined the experiences of the at-risk students in these programs and how enrolling in them have influenced the students' self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation towards program completion.

This chapter includes a discussion of the background, problem statement, and purpose of the study. The research questions are presented, followed by an explanation of the nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. This chapter concludes with a summary.

Background

The last 2 decades have seen changes in public education that have implications for student dropout rates. For instance, the 2001 initiation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the subsequent 2010 legislation of the Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA) placed accountability for student academic performance in the hands of districts and individual schools (Mathis et al., 2016). Increased course requirements and more challenging exit examinations have raised the cost of obtaining a high school diploma for students with weak academic preparation, leading to the need for more individualized pathways to high school graduation to decrease the number of students who drop out (Murnane & Hoffman, 2013). According to Stetser et al. (2014), the number of students dropping out of school should be considered a national crisis since one in five of at-risk

students leave before earning a diploma. This number may be higher for at-risk students,

given that low academic performance is one of the leading causes of leaving school

before obtaining a high school diploma (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). The educational focus

on high-stakes testing, high school diploma mandates, and increasing dropout rates called

for educational reforms to help students become career and college ready. These reforms

and the need to improve graduation rates in high school prompted a new type of

alternative graduation program to assist at-risk students in receiving a high school

diploma while increasing graduation rates (Office of Planning et al., 2016).

Alternative graduation programs or pathways vary by format, depending on which

organization may be offering the alternative program. Graduation program

implementation varies but can operate through individual school districts, independent

companies, or computer programs designed for education. Each program can be

individualized depending on the state and can even vary from county to county.

Depending on the district, options can include online schools, credit recovery options,

and cybercharters (Nespor & Voithofer, 2016). Although general equivalency diploma

(GED) programs are considered an alternative graduation program, they are not the main

focus of this study because GEDs negatively impact high schools. More specifically,

according to the National Governors Association (NGA) assessment rates, GED diploma

recipients are also classified as adult education transfers. GED recipients count towards

dropout rates and are classified as nongraduates; they are also removed from the high

school student cohort (Fennoy et al., 2018). Murnane and Hoffman (2013) argued that the

availability of the GED credential has a negative impact on program completion, which

leads some teenagers to drop out of high school rather than persisting to graduation; therefore, school districts use GED alternative programs as a last resort. Problems also arise when schools hold different types of diplomas. Tuck (2012) and the Florida Department of Education (2016) provided statistical evidence on the GED, its lack of usage in most school districts, and the negative impact it had on many students preceding the implementation of alternative graduation programs and programs. Tuck postulated that GEDs are deemed subpar compared to standard diplomas. This mindset has led several organizations, including the military and colleges, to no longer accept the GED as a means of admission to their programs. Horne et al. (2012) conducted a study on students placed in alternative graduation programs, primarily the GED, and found that students who entered these programs felt they were receiving substandard diplomas. Researchers believe that 65% of future employers will require a standard diploma or more (Alliance for Excellent, 2018). According to Finn et al. (2015), high school diplomas could be offered depending on a student's performance on state assessments; this would provide at-risk students the incentives and opportunity to earn a diploma that will lead to career or college readiness.

Although several studies have explored the various types and effectiveness of alternative graduation programs (Nespor & Voithofer, 2016), there are few published studies that have examined the experiences of the at-risk students in these programs and how enrolling in them has affected their self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation towards program completion (Hemmer et al., 2013).

My study was a narrative inquiry implemented through a qualitative research approach. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the purpose of qualitative research is to be able to retell the experiences through the participants' narratives. It is the reflections of the participants' narratives of their life events that allow insight into their experiences. A qualitative study focuses on interviews and observations, allowing for descriptive findings that can be categorized by themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research is compatible with several methods, including the use of narrative analysis and inquiry (Robinson, 2014). Narrative inquiry is the story of an educational experience and a method that may lead to educational reform (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989). According to Huber et al. (2013), narrative inquiry is the living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories of experiences from the voices of the participants. The stories and interviews conducted through narrative inquiry may change the thinking of education and may establish policy changes in education (Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Huber et al., 2013). Qualitative research combined with narrative inquiry may provide further insight into the at-risk student through the lens of alternative graduation programs. This study could supplement existing research on self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation providing new awareness that may influence further educational research. The use of a theoretical foundation that can be applied to educational settings and narrative inquiry is paramount in qualitative research design.

With the widespread implementation of high-stakes testing and dropout rates, researchers have developed studies based on perceptions of motivation, self-determination, and self-efficacy. Researchers (e.g., Holme & Heilig, 2012; McFarland et

al., 2018) have studied the effects of high-stakes testing on school leaders and at-risk students. They found that at-risk population students are the ones likely to drop out of school due to an inability to pass tests or end-of-course exams. Kern (2013) conducted research on high stakes testing and graduation policies influencing high school graduation retention and rates. He found that the at-risk population is still struggling to pass mandated tests causing them to be marginalized and placed in alternate programs. High-stakes testing, motivation, and perception of success influenced the probability of not completing high school or moving on to college (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Rodriguez & Arellano, 2016). The dropout rate for students who are struggling in education courses that require exit exams is higher for the at-risk student than other populations. (Corry et al., 2017; Heppen et al., 2017). The influence of student perceptions, motivation, and high-stakes testing has been linked to success and academic achievement (Wu & Lee, 2017).

Statistics indicated that over 1 million students are dropping out of school annually and a large percentage of those students are from at-risk populations (Dahir & Cinotti, 2018). Although Florida graduation rates have increased to 85%, the at-risk population struggles to graduate on time or at all (Balfanz et al., 2018). Students who drop out of high are more likely to have encounters with the legal system, inability to work, poor health, and lack or struggle with financial independence (Annie E. Casey Foundation

, 2019). At-risk students without a high school diploma have a higher chance experiencing poverty or becoming incarcerated, especially since 95% of current

employment opportunities require a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Education studies continue to provide statistical evidence regarding the fragility of the dropout numbers. Although graduation rates are on the rise and dropout rates are lower than ever before, it is the at-risk population that is being left behind (Dahir & Cinotti, 2018; DePaoli et al., 2018; Fennoy et al., 2018; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2018). In actuality, the dropout rates are not improving for at-risk students prompting states to implement new mandates to close the gap and achieve higher graduation rates. A significant factor for the dropout rate of at-risk students is academic failures, such as incomplete courses or the inability to pass end of course exams (EOC's) or exit exams (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Florida Department of Education, 2016; Gaustad & Eric Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1991; Lund et al., 2017). In a longitudinal study completed in 2011, almost 23,000 seniors had not passed the required exams to receive a high school diploma (Jakee & Keller, 2017). In a study of economically disadvantaged at-risk students, 75% of these at-risk populations were ineligible for graduation due to lack of testing requirements. Future research on characteristics of at-risk students and graduation was recommended (Uretsky & Stone, 2016). The growing number of at-risk students' failure to adequately pass EOC's or core courses has spurred districts to explore alternative solutions to improve dropout rates while improving at-risk student achievements (Maillet, 2017). Alternative solutions include a variety of programs designed to achieve higher graduation rates among at-risk students while lowering the dropout rate for this population. (Kenneth et al., 2019; McGee & Lin, 2017; Plummer, 2012).

In response to high-stakes testing and dropout rates, further studies were conducted regarding program placement. Johnson et al. (2007) found that alternative options were being implemented for students who could not pass high-stakes exit exams. Carr (2014) researched the link between the growth of online course options and the increase in graduation rates since alternative graduation programs offer a way for students who are in danger of dropping out a chance to earn a diploma. These programs are a benefit for most schools since funding is linked to testing, graduation rates, and per-pupil finances (Carr, 2014). Some of the limitations of the study were the lack of regulation of the programs and the lack of knowledge of the student's experiences of their time in the program. High-stakes testing affects the at-risk English language learners (ELL), specifically the Hispanic community. The Hispanic community is already deemed at risk, has a higher dropout rate, and is less likely to continue their educational pursuits. The ELL population is often placed in an alternative graduation programs to ensure they receive high school credits and ultimately their diploma. The limitations of the study were the limited research on student perceptions of program placement.

Further interviews would benefit a future study supporting a gap in the literature and understanding how the at-risk students perceive these policies. (Rodriguez & Arellano, 2016). According to Hemmer et al. (2013), who researched alternative placement programs and the policies to assist at-risk students, successful programs look at the students' experiences and their cognitive abilities. They focused on the leaders of the schools and the implementation of online programs and curriculum. In their discussion of future research implications, Hemmer et al. noted the importance of

studying more than just the programs offered and focusing on the characteristics and achievements of the at-risk students. Studies on successful nontraditional graduation programs emphasized students' perceptions, relationships, determination, efficacy, and motivation. A limitation noted in the study was the researcher's inability to interview students regarding their attitudes and perceptions of the graduation program (Hoops & Kutrybala, 2015). Further qualitative research is needed on the experiences and perceptions of the students placed in programs and the development and implementation of alternative graduation options, and their influence on academic success (Jones et al., 2017).

A multitude of studies exploring experiences, feelings, motivation, and determination of at-risk students placed in alternative graduation programs recommend further research to better understand the influences of alternative graduation programs through the experiences of at-risk students (Murray & Holt, 2014; Pitzer & Skinner, 2017; Stallings et al., 2016; Tas et al., 2013). Studies are needed that include student contributions to the alternative graduation programs offered, based on their individual learning experiences (Murray & Holt, 2014). Students who are successful in alternate programs often have predetermined negative or positive motivational tendencies that have allowed them to successfully transition to alternate programs. These tendencies should be further explored through in-depth student interviews (Pitzer & Skinner, 2017). Past studies have included the need to further explore how students perceive themselves through the lens of alternative graduation programs. Farrelly and Daniels (2014) focused on the educational outcomes and whether students perceived that their educational needs

were met. The researchers conducted student interviews and found that self-determination and motivation are essential to student outcomes and success but felt further student interviews were needed to gain a deeper insight into their experiences (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). The need for further research of student experiences, perceptions, and alternative graduation programs is supported since the research in this area is continually evolving and the future implications of these programs is still unclear (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2013; Hoops & Kutrybala, 2015; Murray & Holt, 2014; Pitzer & Skinner, 2017; Stallings et al., 2016). Their research conclusions emphasized the need to listen to the voice of the student. Listening to the voices of students through the lens of alternative graduation programs allows the researcher to understand their experiences better. Conducting further research may become relevant to educational policies and increased educational successes, especially since this is an area that has yet to be explored in great detail.

Murray and Holt (2014) conducted a phenomenological study on alternative graduation programs and found that perceptions and self-efficacy are a critical component of success and program completion. However, not part of their original research, a connection to self-efficacy, motivation, self-confidence, and perception of belief was found during the study. Research studying alternate educational settings found that further studies should be conducted to explore student experiences in alternative programs, improving the implementation of alternative settings to better serve the at-risk student (Iachini et al., 2013). The existing body of research points to the need for the proposed study to acquire further knowledge on this topic.

There has been continued research demonstrating how schools continue to alter policies due to pressures and demands of high-stakes testing in high school and the effects on the at-risk populations' graduation rates. Several schools have implemented remediation and credit recovery programs to track the at-risk population and circumvent the testing procedures (Kern, 2013). According to Hughes et al. (2015), several alternative graduation programs are offered. However, to have continuous program success, further research is needed on the students' experiences in these programs. These changes in graduation options have created a new experience for students and how they perceive graduation and diploma programs. Eastin and LaRose (2000) found a link between prior perceptions of achievement and success and real success in online education programs. The online alternative graduation program is a newer format available to at-risk students who are missing crucial graduation credits or having a difficult time in a traditional school setting. Existing research on online alternative graduation programs has focused on the content, implementation, and how it can positively impact graduation rates while lowering dropout rates. Research continues on the implementation and content of this alternative graduation program format, which is still unregulated by the Department of Education, and the curriculum and rigor do not always align to the state standards (Saiger, 2016). The research conducted by Saiger (2016) does not delve into the experiences and perceptions of the students, nor does the research provide information on the impact these programs had on the students. This lack of research further demonstrates a gap in the research and the need to conduct this narrative inquiry. Prior studies investigated different alternative graduation options for at-

risk students and the various diploma options offered. Their lack of findings on the experiences of the at-risk student demonstrates a need to research further how student perceptions and different programs impact the at-risk student. Currently, alternative graduation programs only account for 1% of the student population. However, there has been a steady increase in those numbers due to testing requirements and socioeconomic factors of at-risk students (McGee & Lin, 2017).

Varying graduation options are currently implemented throughout school districts, such as for credit charters and online academies. However, the requirements to be successfully implemented by the students and staff are often based on financial decisions and not the need of the student (Nespor & Voithofer, 2016). Further knowledge into the narratives of at-risk students placed in alternate graduation is needed to further understand how they perceive themselves and what these programs have on their self-determination, self-efficacy, motivation, and ultimately program completion.

Problem Statement

It is not known how at-risk students' placement in alternative graduation programs influences the perception of self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation to succeed with program completion. Although several studies have explored the implementation of alternative graduation programs, few have interviewed the at-risk students placed in these programs. For example, one study of an alternative graduation program designed to recover course credit deficiencies while improving graduation rates found that only 67% of at-risk students were able to recover the credits needed for graduation. Student reflections and interviews were not included in the study (Carrie &

Julia, 2016). The focus of another study was on different implementations of the alternative graduation program, but not the students placed in the program (McKee & Conner, 2007). There are limited published studies that have examined the experiences of the at-risk students in these programs and how enrolling in them has affected their perception of self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation towards program completion. For example, a study of graduation rates and alternative graduation programs found that schools are implementing new programs to assist with graduation rates and diploma attainment. Texas has implemented Apex Learning within its school district, enrolling over 60% of at-risk high school seniors lacking credits to graduate (Florida Department of Education, 2016). Apex Learning is just one of the many alternative graduation programs offered. These programs are varied depending on individual districts. They include but are not limited to online schools, blended curriculum, credit recovery options, and cybercharters (Nespor & Voithofer 2016). A study was conducted on a newer type of alternative graduation program -massive open online courses (MOOC). MOOCs are rapidly gaining popularity in high schools with low-performing seniors. Researchers found a contributing factor for low completion rates of at-risk high school seniors is low motivation and low perceived self-efficacy (Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018). Yet, the influence of placement in alternative graduation programs on students' perception of self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation towards program completion was not examined.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to investigate how placement in an alternative graduation program affects students' perception of self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation towards program completion. A review of the existing research literature has indicated a need for further exploration into the understanding of at-risk students and their self-perceptions when placed in alternative graduation programs vis-à-vis their self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation. I attempted to address the gap in this area and the need for this research. I examined the themes that emerge from the data through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT; Deci et al., 1991). SDT was used as the framework to explore at-risk students' perception of their self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation toward program completion.

Research Questions

The following are the research questions to be addressed in this study:

RQ1: What are at-risk students' perceptions of being placed in alternative graduation programs?

RQ2: What affect does placement in an alternative graduation program have on students' attitudes towards self-determination and program completion?

RQ3: What affect does placement in an alternative graduation program have on students' attitudes towards self-efficacy and program completion?

Theoretical Framework

SDT was the theoretical foundation I used in this study. SDT is often used in educational settings and is optimal for a qualitative narrative study. Seminal work on

motivation, self-efficacy, and education through the lens of self-determination theory guide the inquiry into student perceptions (Deci, 1996; Deci et al., 1991. 2001; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Self-efficacy is an integral part of self-determination, and one can postulate that one cannot exist without the other, not including self-efficacy may limit the results of the study. Bandura (1977, 1982), and Bandura and Barbaranelli's (1996) self-efficacy theory is the foundational theoretical framework of SDT. Previous research (Lind et al., 2017) examined students' self-determination, hope, motivation, self-perception, and self-efficacy within an educational setting. Self-determination research on at-risk students found higher levels of academic success when students have or are taught self-determination skills and student self-efficacy (Lind et al., 2017). Studies of self-determination, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy suggest a relationship between academic success and high school completion. Students who have high levels of perception of motivation and self-efficacy is high they persist in their academic goals, perform better in school, and are more likely to graduate on time (Gannouni & Ramboarison-Lalao, 2018). Researchers found that self-determination, perception of success, and motivation were paramount to a successful educational experience and higher education attainment (Deci, 1996; Deci et al., 1991, 2001).

Further studies of student motivation and high school course completion (Ball et al., 2016) found that students who are challenged at a younger age and perceived success were able to change their motivation and goals to achieve graduation. One of the limitations of Ball et al.'s (2016) study was the age of the students, and the authors suggested a survey of older students and their perceived motivation towards success.

While motivation influences self-determination and self-efficacy, population and culture can be considered influences as well. Urdan and Bruchmann (2018) discovered that students in at-risk populations view motivation and success differently. The implications of the research were that underserved populations often have more self-efficacy and motivation in academic settings but often find their perception and self-determination hinder them from continuing to higher education institutions.

According to Guiffrida et al. (2013), self-determination has broader implications after high school and changes the perception of college attendance and success. Students who had higher levels of self-determination and motivation were more likely to attend and complete college. Students with negative self-perceptions and self-determination struggle to overcome school stressors, failures and lack the required motivational skills needed for academic success (Wilding, 2015). Pitzer and Skinner (2017) found that self-determination may lead to motivation depending on the students' perception of the learning environment and perceived educational support. According to Bandura (1993), self-efficacy is about the choices made and the amount of effort and motivation given to those decisions, especially in an educational setting. Bandura researched the self-efficacy of students and successful educational experiences and their correlation with self-determination and motivation. Research on the complex relationship between perception, self-determination, motivation, and self-efficacy continues and is not limited to the United States. Researchers studying at-risk Indonesian students found a positive correlation between motivation, self-efficacy, and successful academic completion (Hidayat Rafiola et al., 2020). The way a student perceives their abilities and their

environment can be detrimental to a positive educational experience. Students' perceptions and beliefs can have a negative or positive influence on academic motivation and future career aspirations (Bandura, 2012; Bandura & Locke, 2003; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Hidayat Rafiola et al., 2020; Stajkovic et al., 2018). Researchers studying self-efficacy, motivation, and future career aspirations found that students with high motivation and self-efficacy demonstrated increased levels of self-determination and believed that they could continue to higher levels of career or college (Gaylor & Nicol, 2016).

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was a qualitative approach using narrative inquiry through hermeneutic conversations. According to Crowther et al. (2017), hermeneutic analysis requires that the researcher dwells within the data, awaiting glimpses of the phenomenon. Narrative inquiry allowed for the retelling of student experiences and life stories through the interview process. According to Clandinin and Huber (2010), narrative inquiry enables collaboration between researchers and participants, over time, in a place where events take place, allowing maximum input from the population I am studying. The scope of this research is to investigate how alternative graduation programs affect students' attitudes towards their sense of self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation. According to Creswell (1994), researcher uses a narrative inquiry to seek to value and understand the meanings of the respondents' experiences because these are the primary sources of knowledge. Axiological belief was imperative in understanding the influences and experiences of these students. Axiological views are beliefs, needs,

objectives, motives, ideals, affirmations, and values (Liubomyra & Vitaliia, 2019). Collection of information occurred by implementing semistructured interviews allowing participants to explore self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation through their experiences in alternative graduation programss.

Definitions

This section includes definitions of the terms used throughout this study.

At-risk students: Students at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students living in poverty, homeless, in foster care, have been incarcerated, have disabilities, are considered ELLs, and are further below grade level when compared to their peers. These students may be in danger of retention or dropping out of school, therefore not receiving a standard high school diploma (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2018).

Alternative graduation programs or pathways: Alternative graduation programs lack a single definition and vary from state to state and even from school district to school district. Alternative graduation programs are a public, private, or charter elementary /secondary school that addresses the needs of at-risk students whose educational needs cannot be met in a general education setting. alternative graduation programs provide nontraditional education such as blended, online, or program-based, can function within the traditional school, or can fall outside the categories of regular, special, or vocational education (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017) .

Cohort Drop-out: Dropouts are students who have voluntarily removed themselves from the school system before graduation. These students did not meet the

relevant attendance requirements of the school district or were expected to attend a school but did not enter as expected for unknown reasons. These are the students who have withdrawn from school and have not transferred to another public or private school. Cohort dropouts have not enrolled in any career, adult, or alternative educational program. Cohort dropouts are students who have withdrawn from school due to court action, expulsion, medical reasons, or pregnancy or are students who are not eligible to attend school because of reaching the maximum age for an exceptional student program in accordance with the district's policy (Florida Department of Education, 2019, Mokher, 2020).

Concordant Scores: Score's students can earn to offset not passing state mandates exams. Scores can come from any nationally recognized test such as SAT or ACT.

End of course exams: EOC's are computer/paper-based criterion-referenced assessments that measure state standards for specific graduation courses (Florida Department of Education, 2019).

High Stakes Testing: According to the Florida Department of Education (2019), state-mandated testing is part of the graduation requirements to receive a standard diploma. Testing may include, but not limited to, high school testing, state-mandated tests, and end-of-course exams.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this study, I assumed that the selected participants were all from alternative graduation programs. As part of the narrative inquiry process, I assumed all participants were forthcoming and honest in their recollection of their experiences.

There are the assumptions that, as the researcher, I was the primary source of data collection and that my own perspectives were part of rather than separate from the data collection and ultimate conclusions (Locke et al., 2007).

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study included 6 participants that received high school diplomas after enrolled in an alternative graduation program. The interview process was narrative with questions related to the research study conducted with individual participants. The interviews were a semistructured series of questions that I recorded to guarantee accurate recollection of the conversations.

Limitations

According to Locke et al. (2007), limitations are factors that cannot be controlled, but if valid and noted, the researcher can proceed. Due to the nature of this qualitative research, a limitation may be the recollection of the participants' experiences in an alternative graduation program. According to Goes and Simon (2017), limitations are factors that affect the study but are entirely out of the control of the researcher. Personal bias is one such limitation; steps were taken to ensure that my personal beliefs, experiences, and biases did not influence the outcome of the study. This was accomplished through member checking, bracketing, field notes, and audit trails. The data was limited to students who were placed or enrolled in any type of alternative graduation program.

Significance

Exploring student self-efficacy and motivation via self-determination is essential to understanding student success (Deci & Ryan, 2000). I examined how at-risk students experience placement in alternative graduation programs regarding their self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation using a qualitative methodology. Murray and Holt (2014) recommended extensive research to identify the critical elements of academic success and alternative program completion. By seeking input from students in alternative graduation programs, I yielded information that can speak to these critical elements and thereby inform such programs, possibly leading to positive changes in policy and increasing program completion rates.

My research explored at-risk students' perceptions of participating in alternative graduation programs and their sense of self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation towards program completion. The results provided a foundation on which continuing research can continue to address program accessibility, professional development for teachers in such programs, and community awareness, and create more significant opportunities for students to successfully complete alternative graduation programs (Murray & Holt, 2014). According to Cook-Sather (2020), for genuine social change and education reform, the voices of students must be heard.

Summary

This chapter contained background information on alternative graduation programs and at-risk students. I presented the theoretical foundation, the gap in the literature, as well as assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations. Chapter 2

includes a review of the current literature on high-stakes testing, at-risk students,

alternative graduation programs, self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Graduation rates may be rising, (Florida Department of Education, 2016),but these numbers may not include students in the at-risk population who are placed in alternative graduation programs to achieve a standard high school diploma. Several school officials have been directed to place failing students in Alternative graduation programs to ensure graduation rates would not decrease (Carr, 2014). One of the most prevalent reasons for the implementation of Alternative graduation programs is high-stakes testing, which is attached to graduation and diploma requirements and funding. Funding places additional stressors on school districts since funding exists through the rise or percentage of cohort graduates with standard diplomas (Florida Department of Education, 2016). But little is known about the perceptions of at-risk students enrolled in Alternative graduation programs and how these programs influence the self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation of at-risk students. Prior research has suggested a need to explore and understand the at-risk student. I explored how placement in alternative graduation programs influences at-risk student perceptions (Johnson et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2019). The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to examine the experiences of at-risk students in Bay County, Florida, who were placed or enrolled in an alternate graduation program.

This chapter includes literature search strategies used throughout the research process, which provides for several different search approaches as well as keyword options that expanded the search parameters. Additionally, the theoretical framework by Deci et al. (1991) illustrates and accentuates the importance of self-determination, self-

efficacy, and motivation of the at-risk student to become successful in any educational environment. The following sections include definitions of several concepts such as at-risk, graduation rates, high-stake testing, and alternative graduation programs, in addition to defining the current gaps in the literature. This chapter concludes with a comprehensive review of the literature that relates to the present study.

Literature Search Strategies

I performed an extensive analysis of the literature regarding at-risk students, school dropouts, high stakes testing, alternative graduation, and diploma programs. The review was limited to peer-reviewed and scholarly research articles, government reports, and dissertations. Databases used to conduct the literature search include EBSCO, ERIC, Academic Search Premier, PsychINFO, PsyARTICLES, ProQuest, SAGE, and Thoreau. Sources from the Internet search include web pages of peer-reviewed education organizations and agencies such as the Florida Department of Education, U.S. Department of Education, Ohio Department of Education, Texas Department of Education, and Bay District School Graduation Programs data. The keywords, acronyms, and phrases used in combination, or alone, to obtain the literature are as follows: *academic achievement, alternative, alternate, at-risk student, blended curriculum, credit recovery, diploma, dropout rates, and reporting, education, educational paths, end of course exams, funding, general equivalency diploma (GED), graduation rates, graduate, high school, high stakes, intrinsic case study, lived experiences, motivation, narrative inquiry, Online Learning, perception, phenomenological, private diplomas, self-determination, self-determination theory,* and *self-efficacy.* To demonstrate saturation in

the literature, variations and combinations of these words helped yield authors, ideas, and themes.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical framework I used was Deci et al.'s (1991) SDT, which is the overall interest in learning and what factors promote intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, sense of accomplishment, and success. SDT has not been explicitly used in a study of at-risk students and their perceptions of self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation through the lens of alternative graduation program. SDT has been used successfully in many educational settings to better understand the influences and perceptions of students' feelings and experiences of high school and personal capabilities (Khalkhali et al., 2013). Students who find their educational placement limiting or dissatisfying have less intrinsic motivation, feel less confident, and are determined to complete academic tasks (Wilding, 2015). Application of SDT can also be used to encourage students to place importance on their education based on their free will and their determined motivation and self-efficacy. Applying self-determination theory with a positive social context can promote a positive educational experience (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For example, Deci and Ryan (2000) implemented SDT to improve motivation, performance, and development, especially in social and educational environments, which help satisfy basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and self-efficacy. Deci et al. (1991) also researched how external influences on student perception, self-determination, and motivation altered personal growth and found that through achievement and understanding, academic

engagement such as effort, persistence, and self-regulation through intrinsic and extrinsic motivation inspired students to become successful in educational programs.

Self-efficacy is not the central theoretical framework applied to this study, although it is integral to foundational works regarding student self-determination, achievement, and motivation. Therefore, it is relevant when referencing self-determination theory to reference Bandura and self-efficacy. The perception of self-efficacy influences student aspirations, levels of motivation, contributes to academic success and future career choices (Bandura, 1993, 2012; Bandura & Barbaranelli, 1996). Self-efficacy influences how people motivate themselves and their perceived sense of failure or success. Self-efficacy should be combined with self-determination or other like theories to ensure meeting the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs, contributing to overall self-satisfaction and wellness (Ryan, 1992). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy influences the choices people make and how much effort they expend on a specific chore.

Further research has established that self-efficacy influences academic motivation, learning, and achievement, and the effects of self-efficacy continue throughout students' academic careers (Bong, 1999). Additionally, Bandura (1977, 2012) found that verbal encouragement, verbal persuasion, modeling success, and motivation are all factors relating to student perceptions of their level of confidence and motivation. In accordance with SDT, Bandura (1993) held that students who held high levels of self-efficacy were able to regulate their own learning while mastering academic activities,

maintaining educational aspirations, and self-motivation toward academic accomplishments.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

At-Risk

Many states have a less than 70% graduation rate for at-risk students (Florida Department of Education, 2016). A single definition for the term *at-risk student* is challenging. There are several contributing factors to being considered at risk. The first indicator is students who may not complete high school. The at-risk indicators include students who are 1 to 2 years below grade average, have a GPA lower than 2.0, have missing graduation credits, have failing grades, or cannot pass one or more state-mandated tests for graduation. Students with disabilities (ESE) and ELL are also included in at-risk student categories (Office of Planning et al., 2016). Through the implementation of ESSA, the graduation rate of at-risk populations has risen, but there is still a significant difference between the populations (Balfanz, 2018). For instance, there are significant socioeconomic factors that contribute to students assigned to the at-risk category. According to the Florida Department of Education (2016), 76% of low-income students graduated on time in 2014 compared to 89.8 % of nonlow-income students, which constitutes an almost 14% difference between the at-risk population and those not considered at-risk. Roughly two out of every four low-income students are graduating on time with their cohort groups, and many of these students require additional programs to recover credit deficiencies (DePaoli et al., 2018). Additionally, students might be placed in at-risk categories if they have a history of moving, parents or siblings who have

dropped out, incarceration, excessive absenteeism, disengagement from school, or needing to recover credits toward graduation (Powell et al., 2015). Race may also be a factor, as high school dropout rates for African-American and Hispanic students range from 7.3% to 11.7%, compared to a 5.1% dropout rate for White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Regardless of the intervention employed by the school, at-risk students are more likely to drop out based on their perceptions regarding school and success than their mathematical and reading abilities (Parr & Bonitz, 2015). At-risk students often feel discouraged and unsupported. The mobility rate of at-risk students is also much higher than their peers, which is compounded by high levels of discord in their lives, making them more suspectable to dropping out of school (Hemmer et al., 2013). Thus, at-risk students continue to drop out of school, especially if they do not have the proper interventions or academic supports (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). Future research may be conducted to explore how students perceive themselves in various educational settings and whether these perceptions contribute to the dropout epidemic (Weihua & Christopher, 2014). Although the definition of at-risk changes depending on the state or district, the one common denominator of the at-risk student is that they may leave high school before receiving a diploma, requiring an alternative graduation program to graduate.

State Exams

The need for school funding and increased graduation rates has placed pressure on public schools across the nation (Alliance for Excellent, 2018; DePaoli et al., 2018;

Fedders, 2018; Fennoy et al., 2018; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2018). Alternative graduation programs are options offered to at-risk students to help them earn a standard diploma. Options for alternative graduation and diploma programs in public schools across the United States are a result of the connection between graduation requirements and the required high stakes testing, HSEE, and varying standardized tests.

Despite the schools' need to meet testing requirements, this may not be the best way to motivate students and help them learn or graduate on time (Deci, 1996). Students who have low self-efficacy and self-determination demonstrate test avoidance (Bandura, 1995). Students subject to relatively difficult state exit exams are less likely to earn a regular high school diploma (Traynor & Chapman, 2015), which may be due to test anxiety from comparisons to peers or fear of failure (Wu & Lee, 2017). Students who have failed HSEE demonstrated negative self-perception, disappointment, and fear that others in their school environment perceived them as failures (Kruger et al., 2016). Additionally, research has shown that unaccompanied or homeless youth stopped trying in their schoolwork because they expected to fail one or more state-mandated testing. The perception of failure and lack of academic success diminishes student confidence, self-efficacy, and motivation, especially in the at-risk population. At-risk students may also feel that educators and school officials typically perceive them as unmotivated (Bandura, 2019; Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Fisher et al., 2017; Weihua & Christopher, 2014; Weisman, 2012). Therefore, key people (teachers, mentors, guidance counselors, and peers) guiding students might help at-risk students through feelings of negativity, failure, and hopelessness while giving them the motivation, determination, and self-efficacy

toward their graduation goals achieving which may have social change implications in educational reforms (Bandura, 2019). Districts strategized on how to increase graduation rates while creating a viable solution to the growing number of at-risk students who are dropping out. One such solution is the development of alternative graduation options toward earning a standard high school diploma.

Alternate Programs

There have been shifts in public education, with the initiation of the NCLB and the subsequent legislation of ESSA in 2010 placing accountability on districts and individual schools (Chu, 2019). The Obama administration presented schools with incentives to create rigorous mandates regarding policies that impact achievements and contribute to increased graduation rates for all students, especially those considered at-risk (DePaoli et al., 2018). The blend of high stakes testing, mandatory high school accountability reports, funding, and graduation rates included in school grades has pushed school districts across the nation to develop innovative options for helping increase the rate at which students obtain their diplomas within their allocated cohort year. For example, several studies have been conducted on graduation rates and alternative graduation programs and how to schools are offering new programs such as online courses, credit recovery options, and cyber charters to assist with graduation rates (Nespor & Voithofer, 2016). What has not been studied is how the students feel about placement in alternative graduation programs that influences student self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation towards program completion.

Most often, the students placed in alternative graduation programs overlap with the students who meet the at-risk criteria (Powell et al., 2015). An increasing number of districts have started to transfer students off their school rolls and into alternative graduation programs based on low achievement, test scores, or behaviors. Moving students to alternate programs can be based on providing a more intensive environment, but often this move causes significant harm to the student's self-perceptions and academic successes (Fedders, 2018). At-risk students often have high amounts of absenteeism. Absenteeism in at-risk students often causes a lack of performance, motivation, and credit deficiencies (Genao, 2015; Kirksey, 2019; Mac Iver & Messel, 2013), which in turn has added popularity to the implementation of alternate graduation programs. Alternative graduation program implementation has gained popularity for several reasons some reason include absenteeism, truancy, state/federal funding, new legislations, and seat time (Cunningham, 2018; Edwards, 2017; John & Magnus, 2009; McKee & Conner, 2007; Mills et al., 2013; Murray & Holt, 2014; Pennacchia & Thomson, 2016). At-risk students who have attendance issues also have a significantly lower chance of graduating (Cabus & De Witte, 2016). Robison et al. (2017) found that when students had more than 20 absences, their graduation chances are reduced by 76%, and expelled students' chances of graduation are reduced by 54%.

Moreover, these students feel the pressure to obtain a high school diploma while experiencing the stressors of graduating on time with their cohort. Thus far, the data is often incomplete when it comes to the at-risk population. The problem alternative graduation programs is that there is not enough information regarding their effectiveness

or influence on graduation rates, and they are often created to mask a problem that occurs in a traditional school setting. Students who are placed in alternative programs are often the same students with varying alternative labels such as disruptive, truant, and at-risk (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). alternative graduation programs placement for at-risk students is not a new phenomenon, nor is it exclusive to the United States.

In European countries, Alternative graduation programs are often called exclusionary education and used for at-risk students. The latter are struggling in a regular classroom setting for various reasons such as behaviors, attendance, etc. These students often require additional assistant to graduation or are at risk of dropping out or early school leaving (ESL; Nada et al., 2020). According to Atkinson and Rowley (2019), there is growing concern regarding the increasing numbers of at-risk students placed in exclusionary or alternate programs throughout Europe and the effect this placement has on the students. There are alternative program studies conducted in Portugal because they reduce the number of students dropping out by providing alternative graduation programs (Nada et al., 2020). Atkinson and Rowley (2019) conducted an eco-systemic study based on the students' perspective of what works in an alternative program. They looked at nine students aged 10-16 and found that the students placed in these programs want to feel successful, but they often felt defeated and wanted to be educated like other students. Chile has increased funding to provide alternative programs for at-risk youth. In a descriptive study of 18 alternative programs Espinoza et al. (2020) found that motivation did not affect these students as much as the perception of failure instead of success. The study was inconclusive, and Espinoza et al. concluded that future research on alternative

pathways needs to occur to ensure that at-risk students receive the appropriate education and chance of future success.

As the pressure to improve graduation rates continues, the increased enrollment of students in these alternative graduation programs also continues to mount. The implementation and introduction of alternative routes to education occurred in the 1930s (McKee, 2007)Today, educational gaps between at-risk students' disadvantages and substandard access to education programs and standard diplomas have spurred a need for varying alternative graduation programs (McKee & Conner, 2007). But not all states agree with alternative graduation programs; for example, New York disagreed with separate tracks, acknowledging that it would not ensure equal education for all and instead create a two-level society (Finn et al., 2015). However, there has been a dramatic increase in enrollment in Florida's Alternative graduation programsfrom 259 in 2008 to 4,063 in 2011, showing a 16-fold increase in just 3 years (Hughes et al., 2015). A survey on New York HSEE's and graduation rates also showed a boost during the 2012-2013 school year in placement into alternative graduation programs, as 59% of 59 schools polled had placed students in alternative graduation programs for credit recovery and alternative graduation or diploma options amid concerns of lack of knowledge on the experiences of these students (Clements et al., 2015).

Alternative graduation programs can be offered in several different ways depending on the district, state, and overall effect on the school, and the student. For example, in Florida, alternative graduation programs can be implemented through the state-run virtual school, district-operated credit recovery, or an independent private

provider (Alghamdi, 2020).Private providers include Diplomas Now, Giant Campus, PLATO, Apex, Aventa, Education2020, Smart Horizons, all of which are excluded from the overall enrollment estimates of the schools or districts (Viano, 2018). Studies conducted on online credit recovery have also demonstrated that at-risk students are able to take a failed course that is a convenient, flexible, and effective way to earn the missed credit required for graduation (Rickles et al., 2018).

Despite the options offered through alternative graduation programs, half a million high school students still drop out each year. There are questions about whether some students who recover lost credits or go to alternate programs graduate without demonstrating vital competency and readiness (Taylor, 2018). When at-risk students are offered an alternative graduation programs, it is considered less well-regarded than the traditional graduation options (Finn et al., 2015). At-risk students tend to feel marginalized and alienated in both conventional and alternative schools (Phillips, 2013). Students also have an innate need to connect with their educational environment, leading to either positive or negative self-perceptions (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Program placement and peer influence have a significant influence on success rates, motivation, behavior, and even dropout rates (Palardy, 2013). Additionally, further research is needed to examine how interventions, policies, and relationships within the school setting can benefit or hinder the graduation process (Robison et al., 2017). Students who entered alternative programs had a smaller chance of positively contributing to society and graduating unless they had the proper structure and implementation of educational supports giving these students the perception of success (Zolkoski et al., 2016).

Growing Popularity of Alternative Graduation Programs

The pressure experienced by administrators, teachers, policymakers, and politicians to increase or maintain graduation rates is often in direct conflict with what the students may inherently need to become successful in an educational setting. As alternative graduation programs grow, further research should focus on the students who are influenced by these programs. There needs to be additional accountability to ensure that these programs are providing at-risk students the level of education they deserve (Hemmer et al., 2013). Previous research has indicated a need to explore and understand how working towards an alternative graduation program impacts at-risk students (Johnson et al., 2007). Johnson et al. (2007) found that when receiving a standard diploma contingent on high-stakes testing, it puts pressure on all students. Still, it places undue stress on the at-risk population, and this pressure can deter this group of students from receiving their diplomas unless placed in alternative programs. Opponents of alternative graduation programs contend that the curriculum is not challenging enough, not providing students with much needed skills for success, nor is it raising their performance to the appropriate grade level to continue into higher education (Powell et al., 2015). According to Powell et al. (2015), the "solutions" such as alternative graduation programs have lowered the bar for passing and watered down the curriculum. With pressure from policymakers and the Department of Education, many schools have implemented substandard alternative solutions. There is growing concern regarding virtual alternative graduation programs. Several studies on virtual alternative graduation programs have found that some of the lower-cost alternate programs offered online have

little academic value and do not have the educational standards and rigorous classes required for a genuine standard diploma (Carr, 2014; Clements et al., 2015; Corrin et al., 2014; Corry et al., 2017; Cunningham, 2018; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Heppen et al., 2017; Nada et al., 2020; Oliver & Kellogg, 2015).

Brodersen et al. (2017) found lower-cost schools do not provide the rigorous curriculum required for a successful transition into college and career. In their report, they found that some online and blended programs offer rigorous curriculum centered around student learning while others are inadequate and focus on financial gain (Brodersen et al., 2017). One such alternative graduation program is *Diplomas Now*, which established a service to provide some of the necessary support needed by at-risk students. In the first-year implementation, researchers found that many alternative graduation programs are not providing essential skills for career and college readiness. The lack of career and college readiness skills could be attributed to the lack of rigor and high focus on obtaining the high school diploma and not proficiency resulting in 40% of students having to take remedial courses in college (Corrin et al., 2014). Farrelly and Daniels (2014) conducted a qualitative descriptive study interviewing students and listening to their voices and how their lived experiences affected their educational experiences after being placed in an alternative program. Four of the six interviewees stated that the academic rigor was not equal to their regular high school setting, but some also felt that it was the first time they had a chance to become successful and had someone believe that they could graduate. One common reoccurring theme during the interview was the importance of motivation and self-efficacy and how this was affected

by their environment. One of the limitations noted in the study was the lack of understanding of alternative graduation programs, and to better understand the phenomenon, there needs to be further research that includes the voices and experiences of the students since only they can explain how these programs influence their perspectives (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014).

It is essential to gain an understanding of the experiences of the at-risk student and how these experiences influence self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation. Several studies indicate that students view education in a negative light because of outside influences. Farrelly and Daniels (2014) found that students felt school was boring and ineffective, often giving assignments that do not have real-world use. Yet, other students felt that specific instructors, educators, or subject presentations could change their mindset about education. Students with the perceived mindset of success found that school officials and educators who went beyond academics to focus on motivation and mindset made a positive impact on their decisions and success (Zaff et al., 2017).

Further finding by Johnson et al. (2007) noted the need for future research of students who are afforded alternative graduation options, emphasizing the at-risk population. Students found that education is ineffective because a test leads to the instruction of it. At-risk students interviewed in Ohio found that state-mandated exams guided the classroom instruction, often making the subject boring and the teachers stressed, giving them a sense of helplessness and was once of the most cited reasons for dropping out of high school (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014).

Murray and Holt (2014) recommended extensive research to identify the key elements of academic success and alternative program completion in order to improve program quality and rigor. In an examination of alternate graduation programs offered in New Jersey high schools, researchers found that at-risk students are often placed prematurely in alternative graduation programs to prevent them from dropping out. According to Clements et al. (2015), these students typically experience low academic achievement, are chronically late to school, have high levels of absenteeism, and exhibit other risk factors that may prompt them to drop out before obtaining their diplomas. The alternative graduation program structure used in New Jersey is operated through intensive academic support through a program anchored by an online instructional system and project-based learning (Genao, 2014). This study looked at students age 14 through 20 enrolled in this particular alternative graduation program and found that performance and GPA went up significantly in grades 9 thru 11, but was substantially higher in the 12th grade due to higher retention rates and a desire to obtain a high school diploma (Genao, 2014).

Online Alternative Programs

The perception of success and graduation rates is a significant focus throughout high schools across the nation. Florida has partnered with several online education companies to ensure the graduation rate continues to rise. These companies are part of the alternative graduation program, which is undertaken through several modes of online learning. According to Brodersen et al. (2017), there are several ways at-risk students can benefit from online graduation options. The two online options researched are online

learning and blended learning. According to research conducted by Singh and Thurman (2019), there are over 46 definitions of online learning produced from 36 different resources. One standard definition of online learning is a method of education that is primarily delivered through the internet and does not incorporate videos or face-to-face interactions with educators (Miller et al., 2017). Online learning is often used interchangeably with virtual education, cyberlearning, and e-learning. Online alternative programs are different than blended alternatives, where there is the ability to personalize the program based on student needs. Most online alternative programs allow students to work at their own pace but are still under the supervision of an educator. Still, that educator is not providing live instructions or face-to-face interactions (Powell et al., 2015). Regardless of the alternative graduation program, they must perform and operate with equity and deliberate knowledge and contain the same quality educational resources as a standard high school diploma (Carr, 2014). Students placed in alternative online programs often find that the preparation of the courses is to achieve the high school credit, and there is not the needed customization for mastery of the skill (Barnett, 2016). During a phenomenological study, participants felt that they often were embarrassed and thought that the online courses were designed to get them the needed credit and to graduate them quickly, but not necessarily the adequate instruction (Gaylor & Nicol, 2016). Although this study mirrored the results of other students, there are several studies where participants felt that online alternative graduation programs were beneficial to their education, especially since many of these students may have dropped out or considered a

non-graduate without inclusion into these programs (Hughes et al., 2015; Levin, 2000; Stallings et al., 2016).

Murray and Holt (2014) recommended future studies attain input from the people involved in alternative graduation programs. The stakeholders include students, their parents, and teachers involving their experiences and completion of the programs, which could lead to effective program implementation, hiring practices, and strong self-efficacy and positive experiences of the students. Clements et al. (2015) found that further research should examine student experiences while in an alternative graduation programs and their future educational goals, preparedness for college, and how they perceive the experience helped them achieve graduation objectives. Hoops and Kutrybala (2015) suggested future research on students' perceptions regarding the impact of alternative graduation programs on their personal growth, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. Rodriguez and Arellano (2016) found that future research should use qualitative measures to ensure a deeper understanding of the experiences of students who fail HSEE's, are placed in Alternative graduation programs and how their perspectives changes throughout the course of the program. Zolkoski et al. (2016) researched 11 students' resiliency using the resilience scale and semi-structured interviews. They found that when placed in alternative graduation programs, students were only successful based on their perceived sense of self but concluded that further studies were needed to focus on the students who have received alternative graduation options or alternative diplomas and their perceived outcomes.

According to the literature provided by Zolkoski et al. (2016), future interviews and data collection questions should focus on student self-perception and determination of completion, which should include how other factors that provided support and assisted in program completion. Previous findings have excluded these particular findings and have focused on environmental and program factors more than the student itself. Viano (2018) proposed additional research should consider the popularity of online classes and credit recovery as a graduation option. It is crucial to study further the experiences of students who are enrolled in these programs since research has found that alternative online students are innately different than regular online learners. Kuo et al. (2014) conducted a mixed-method study examining online learners' characteristics of success. Over 180 students were surveyed, and a descriptive analysis was performed. At the conclusion of the study, they found that students were more motivated if the content provided through the course was of interest. When the researchers conducted a correlational analysis, they found that online learners who share similar characteristics such as high self-efficacy, stronger motivation, and perseverance made more effort than those students with reportedly lower self-efficacy. However, those with low self-efficacy sometimes experience incentives to learn more about an unfamiliar subject, where someone with a high self-efficacy may not prepare as well for a task (Kuo et al., 2014). Livingstone and Helsper (2010) did face-to-face interviews of 1500 students' online skills and found that those in the at-risk population are often hindered when it comes to technological savviness. They also found that opportunities could be either negative or positive, depending on the levels of self-efficacy and time online. Online alternative

programs are not one size fits all and can be customized to reach the target population.

The population that is often placed in these programs is the at-risk learner who has failed

several classes and must be enrolled in an alternative graduation program for credit

recovery as a last effort towards graduation (Viano, 2018). Some at-risk students require

a personalized approach to alternative placement and credit recovery, which would fall

under the provision of blended alternative graduation programs.

Blended Alternative Programs

The definition of blended alternative programs is customizable online educational

programs where students have some control over time and space. Still, they must also

include a component of live instruction or ties to a brick and mortar institution (Staker et

al., 2012). Several studies have explored blended alternative programs focusing on how

they operate. Yet, there are limited published studies that have examined the perspective

or experiences of at-risk students and how enrolling in alternative graduation programs

has influenced their self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation towards program

completion. According to Rickles et al. (2018), several studies on online and blended

alternative programs spotlight on how the program is being implemented or the type of

students placed in these programs, but there needs to be more information on the overall

effectiveness of these programs. Heppen et al. (2017) examined the growing trend of

alternative graduation programs that can be fully customizable to suit the needs of at-risk

students. The customization is for students who are failing the required math credits for

graduation and found that students placed in online programs without a mentor or support

did not do as well as those placed in blended alternatives.

The target population for these programs is at-risk students in danger of failing and who may not receive some of the support or educational opportunities in traditional programs. Placement of students in alternative graduation programs occurs for varying reasons such as grades, failing exit exams, test scores, low credits, pregnancy, attendance, discipline, aging out of high school, and so forth (Balfanz, 2011). Unfortunately, some at-risk populations of students have higher dropout rates and a more difficult time with alternative graduation programs. For instance, at-risk Hispanic or Latino populations performed better when placed in alternate graduation programs that are blended and provide additional support compared to those that are strictly independent learning (Corry et al., 2017). According to Stewart et al. (2013), when online alternative graduation programs are combined with a blended approach, students have better results, primarily when there is the additional implementation of mentors applied throughout the programs' development.

Researchers studied at-risk students enrolled in ECOT, a blended alternative graduation program located in Lucas County school district. The alternative program advertised that all students placed in the curriculum would be on target to graduate. Yet, the study revealed that the school places more emphasis on profit than on providing a nurturing learning environment and has serious academic deficits not genuinely meeting the needs of at-risk students (Nespor & Voithofer, 2016). Still, not all blended alternative graduation programs are subpar; some have provided students a second chance at achieving a high school diploma. Blended alternative graduation programs with successful outcomes have implemented proven strategies for at-risk students, such as

differentiated, personalized, engaging, and interesting curriculum. Successful students reported engagement with the content, high levels of interest, and appropriate academic skills (Alghamdi et al., 2020; Brodersen et al., 2017; Saiger, 2016; White et al., 2007). One component that improves success and self-efficacy is the integration of self-reflection and face-to-face mentoring. One student reported that without the mentoring and personalization component of the program, she would not have been given the needed motivation for program completion. On the other hand, researchers concede that having only one high school diploma route will never meet the needs of all students, especially the at-risk population, conceding the need for continued alternative graduation programs with different levels of distinction (Finn et al., 2015). Proponents agree that alternative graduation programs are needed to provide the implementation of a rigorous curriculum, differentiating levels of instruction, and personalization for the at-risk student population with the mindset of helping students achieve their academic goals.

Self-Determination

Self-determination is the concept that individuals have the ability to make choices while exerting control over their lives related to the self. Self-determination is not stagnated and can change over time depending on student perceptions of successes or failures (Shogren et al., 2018). Concurrently, varying environmental factors support or contradict students' sense of choice and control, leading to either positive or negative outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2004; Deci et al., 1991). Self-determination cultivates positive outcomes when autonomy, competency, and relatedness are satisfied within the learning environment producing increased motivation and confidence (Hsu et al., 2019). Students

from varying educational settings were studied, and researchers concluded as control educational choices increased, success levels also increased (Turner, 2019). Self-determination in educational settings helps promote learning and growth while at the same time, there is evidence that it can improve exam scores and ultimately increase the chances of graduation. (Hsu et al., 2019). A longitudinal study of 371 at-risk high school students exposed to various self-determination interventions combined with remedial educational interventions demonstrated a positive pattern of growth in self-determination, perceptions of success, and increased testing scores (Shogren et al., 2018; Wehmeyer et al., 2013). Self-determination involved students' basic needs such as control, autonomy and perception which are pivotal in educational learning environments. Students who do not have these basic needs meet suffer from decreased motivation, engagement, perception of control and ability to succeed (Huang et al., 2019; Reeve et al., 2018). Several studies have linked educational success and completion of educational tasks to self-determination. Studies on the link between self-determination and completion in students between the ages of 18-30 demonstrated increased motivation in task completion when the task was considered interesting, there was an incentive to accomplish, and the task was perceived as valuable. The students who exhibited more motivation and self-determination qualities were more confident and showed increased levels of perceived ability to complete the educational tasks given to them (Anderson, 2016; Legault & Inzlicht, 2013).

Self-determination is an integral part of success for at-risk students, including the English Language Learner (ELL). They are often placed in alternate graduation programs

due to language acquisition and the inability to pass stringent exit exams. Various studies have focused on the relationship between self-determination and the process of language acquisition and successful academic experiences (Nartgün et al., 2019; Sener & Erol, 2017). Deci and Ryan (2000) believe that the positive support of educators in the educational environment allows students a sense of control in the learning process, initiating an increase in self-determination, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy.

Nartgün et al. (2019) studied the relationship between self-determination and self-efficacy in students who are expected to learn English and the influence self-determination and self-efficacy have on the perception of learning and the perception of the self. The study involved 398 students who were given two scales on for self-determination and the other for self-efficacy. According to Nartgün et al. (2019), the students who were successful learners had higher levels of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Barbaranelli, 1996) and heightened perception of self-determination (Deci, 1996; Deci et al., 1991). At-risk groups such as ELL's have higher drop-out rates and lower academic motivation than their at-risk peers (Alfaro & Umaña-Taylor, 2015). They found a correlation between academic success, self-determination, and self-efficacy, focusing on academic achievements related to perceived self-efficacy and the ability to solve learning problems (Karatas et al., 2015). Studies have found that students with low levels of self-determination, either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, do not have the competences to develop the self-efficacy required to overcome barriers or obtain goal completion (Bandura, 1995; Deci et al., 1991; Nartgün et al., 2019; Sener & Erol, 2017).

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is the internal belief in the ability to exert control over their lives and power over the events that impact their lives. Self-efficacy may present differently depending on extraneous factors, self-perceptions/beliefs, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1977, 1982, 2012, 2019). In comparison, perceived self-efficacy is the belief in the capability to implement and achieve a task in different situations and settings (Bandura, 1995). Efficacy is the perceived belief people have over how they think, feel, act, and self-motivate themselves and are influenced by four types of influences, experiences, modeling, social influence, and physiological/emotional factors (Bandura, 1995). Experiences of failure or perceived failure weaken self-efficacy in students hindering the ability to overcome stressors and obstacles (Bandura, 1982, 1995; Bandura & Locke, 2003). Students placed in programs or environments that enhance negative self-perception have less motivation than students who believe they can be successful, while students who are placed in successful environments demonstrate higher levels of self-efficacy and completion of tasks (Bandura et al., 1999; Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018). Studies show that students who are retained in earlier grades have less academic motivation in high school due to a perceived sense of failure and lower self-efficacy while feeling older than other students is a type of academic failure (Cham et al., 2015). Many at-risk students have an educational and emotional deficit making them feel like failures in their high schools, so it is essential to monitor how the different alternative graduation programs influence students' perception of self. In a study conducted by Slaten et al. (2015), at-risk students verbalized the need for encouragement, validation, and

understanding of their educational and emotional needs. (Bandura, 1993) believed that self-efficacy could play a role in many areas of a person's psychological state, behavior, self-determination, and motivation. At-risk students, often with low self-efficacy, exhibit test anxiety and school avoidance, demonstrated through extreme absenteeism (Khanehkeshi & Ahmedi, 2013). In the study by Slaten et al. (2015), several of the at-risk students who were studied stated they could not be successful in high school without self-efficacy, motivation, and the determination to graduate.

Interventions and programs that stress giving control back to the student while placing failure in perspective, modeling perseverance through self-efficacy, show successful outcomes for at-risk students (Brewster et al., 2019). Several studies have concluded that completion rates in high school are lower when students have lower levels of self-efficacy. Researchers from a study conducted in Norway examined students' self-efficacy and its relationship to the academic and vocational program completion rates ((Daehlen, 2017). They found that student drop-out rates increased when their lack of belief (self-efficacy) decreased, thus showing a relationship between self-efficacy and program completion. Low self-efficacy is linked to reduced attendance, task avoidance, or school rejection. At-risk students often avoid testing and other school-related issues and situations that are out of their control, cause anxiety, depression, and task avoidance (Khanehkeshi & Ahmedi, 2013). Bandura (1995) contends that building self-efficacy and positive self-belief is paramount to self-improvement and perceived success. Murray and Holt (2014) conducted extensive research on students placed in an alternative graduation program. Their study consisted of three control groups of at-risk students. Once the

research data was complete and analyzed, they found that all three control groups considered self-efficacy a critical component in program completion. It was also noted that alternative education is supposed to provide a caring and supportive environment that instills self-efficacy and determination. Yet, the conclusion of the study revealed that further research was needed to understand these students and how alternative programs affect their self-efficacy (Murray & Holt, 2014).

Understanding how the at-risk student's self-perception of self-efficacy, motivation, and self-determination are influenced through the inclusion of alternative graduation programs while also understanding their emotional well-being is an integral part of several studies. According to Ball et al. (2016), students who fail to graduate high school are at a disadvantage regarding college and career opportunities and have low self-efficacy and less motivation than their educational counterparts. The study further found that at-risk students' perception is their reality, and if they expect to fail when provided with alternative programs, they believe they have failed and are not as motivated to complete the task at hand. The study also showed that when students were given positive accolades before program placement, their levels of self-efficacy and motivation improved (Ball et al., 2016).

Murray and Holt (2014) learned that the role of self-efficacy combined with motivation plays a pivotal role in a successful educational experience. They discovered that students who are given some autonomy and engage in experiential learning tend to do better in alternative graduation programs compared to students who cannot exert control over their education. Research conducted in an alternative program found that

students who felt successful and included in the alternative graduation programs enhanced their perceptions of self-efficacy (Eisenman et al., 2015). Personal beliefs, control, and self-efficacy are vital components of the successful completion of online alternative graduation programs. In a student satisfaction study, students who had high internet self-efficacy (Eastin & LaRose, 2000), positive interactions, and personal freedom in their learning format showed higher levels of satisfaction in their education (Kuo et al., 2014). Self-determination and self-efficacy are not the only factors influencing educational success in at-risk students; another important educational factor is motivation. Gaylor and Nicol (2016) further recommend future studies on the emotional well-being of at-risk students and how their different choices and beliefs towards future educational pursuits or career pursuits are influenced by self-efficacy and motivation.

Motivation

Motivation is an integral part of successful educational experiences. Several researchers have studied motivation and the effect it has on educational attainment. The research has focused on the perceptions and beliefs of students and how they predict or influence success (Bandura, 2012; Deci et al., 2001; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Muenks et al., 2016; Wigfield et al., 2008). Motivation is associated with a better conceptual understanding, improved problem solving, creativity, and increased positive experiences (Deci, 1996). Weihua and Christopher (2014) Academically at-risk students with lower levels of motivation combined with their perceived inability to become successful in school influences their desire to drop out (Weihua & Christopher, 2014). Researchers

found that high school is where perceived ability and academic motivation cumulate. As the at-risk student becomes older, there is a decrease in the perception of achievement, lowering their academic motivations and desire to be successful or complete high school (Alfaro & Umaña-Taylor, 2015).

The desire to be in control is a significant component of motivation and self-efficacy in academic settings. At-risk students often a sense of inequality and a lack of control in their educational choices altering their academic motivation through actions and intentions of others in control of their educational future (Fisher et al., 2017). What is often perceived as a lack of motivation can also be the avoidance of a goal where the student feels a lack of control (Fisher et al., 2017). At-risk students are often perceived as having lower motivation regarding goal setting and completion. Yet, Brewster et al. (2019) argued that at-risk students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is linked to control and relevance of goal attainment. At-risk students want to feel in control of their educational goals and often show motivation and goal completion when allowed control over their academic difficulties (Brewster et al., 2019). In a study conducted in Spain, students exposed to controlling teaching styles in a physical education setting demonstrated lower levels of intrinsic motivation. They also reported negative experiences and perceptions in their classes (Moreno-Murcia et al., 2018). In agreement with Deci and Ryan (2000), intrinsic motivation and favorable experiences lead to positive consequences and the likelihood of continued motivation in the future. Muenks et al. (2016) studied the influence of perception on student ability in school contexts. Students believe that effort and ability are intertwined and can affect the amount of

motivation given to an academic task. Gaylor and Nicol (2016) used a case study method to research motivation and feelings of success in at-risk students. Their study found that students were more motivated to succeed if they were able to see someone else succeed or fail. From the study, it was also concluded that self-efficacy and motivation are intertwined and that students who often lack motivation also lack self-efficacy. The lack of self-efficacy, self-perception, and motivation is a fundamental part of students not being successful in a regular classroom setting. Programs that use a motivational approach and are designed with the at-risk student in mind would allow the student to independently manage some of their learning activities while having some control over their personal goals (Moreno-Murcia et al., 2018). Khalkhali et al. (2013) found that self-determination and motivation are associated with positive outcomes in academic settings. Students exposed to a positive learning environment after a negative learning experience have a difficult time becoming successful because they have already learned avoidance and failure (Brewster et al., 2019). A recent ethnographic case study from Sweden established that the dropout epidemic and alternative graduation programs are not an inclusive feature of the American education system. The Swedish study led by Lund et al. (2017) found that students believed the number one factor that contributed to their success is motivation and the belief that they can be successful while being taught in positive environments. Several students also felt that they went from "loving school" to hating it due to a shortage of learning supports and lack of adult motivation. The study has limitations due to the small sampling size of only seven student interviews.

Research conducted by Brewster et al. (2019) found that the perception of failure was as detrimental to the at-risk student as the act itself. Students who perceived that they were going to fail lacked the motivation to try. Yet, these students also exceeded all expectations when provided support, resources, and goals that improved motivation and self-efficacy. Brewster et al. (2019) found that educational interventions that emphasize perceived failures adversely impact motivation and self-efficacy. Students who are told they are failing were more than likely to be unsuccessful and therefore fail. Herring (2013) conducted a study of 95 students offered an alternative diploma option and found that intrinsic motivation was a factor in program completion. This study also found that gender played a role and that females were more motivated than males concerning program completion. Continuing research will provide input that could change program accessibility, professional development, and community awareness, creating a more significant opportunity for more students to successfully complete alternative graduation programs (Murray & Holt, 2014).

Summary

Graduating and receiving a diploma is an integral part of a productive society. It is imperative to understand the perspectives of at-risk students through the lens of alternate graduation programs. There is prior research on alternate programs, program completion, self-determination, motivation, and self-efficacy, but this research is unique because it encompasses all those factors through in-depth interviews with the at-risk students placed in these programs. Without the personal insights of this at-risk population, educational programs cannot address some of the influences that cause at-risk

students to drop out or persist in receiving a diploma regardless of the methods. Chapter 3

will detail the methodology, research design, and rationale, role of the researcher, data

collection, data analysis, participant selection logic, participant recruitment,

instrumentation, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to develop a deeper understanding of how placement in an alternative graduation program affects students' perception of self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation towards program completion. The study's findings added to the current literature connected to alternative graduation programs and at-risk students. To best achieve the correct data and address the problem, I used a qualitative narrative inquiry. This chapter encompasses the reasoning behind the chosen design and conceptual framework and why it is the best design for this particular study. This chapter also includes information on my role as researcher, methodology, possible ethical considerations, the process I used to collect data, interviews, and recruitment. The conclusion of this chapter contains the discussion of confirmability, dependability, transferability, credibility, limitations, and ethical considerations. Ethical considerations are in place to protect the privacy of the participants while ensuring that the research is conducted without research biases. Limitations of the study may include small sample size, open-ended questions, the possibility of researcher biases and volunteer biases, all of which have been addressed in the forthcoming chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

Rationale for Narrative Analysis

I used a narrative inquiry approach using qualitative methodology through in-depth interviews with semistructured questions focusing on the influence of self-determination, motivation, and self-efficacy of program placement in alternative

graduation programs. A narrative analysis allows the researcher to listen to the story of the participants, analyze their stories, and look for themes in their personal narratives (Berry, 2016; Clandinin & Connelly, 1989). According to Clandinin and Huber (2010), narrative interviewing is akin to storytelling, which is a way of making sense of experiences. As a researcher, it is essential to have an open conversation with every participant. Narrative research inquiries reconstruct the experiences of everyday life and the participants' perspectives of life events, making them neither true nor false based on their specific experiences (Green, 2013; Muylaert et al., 2014). Narrative research is a representation of the participants' experiences and can be a contribution to areas needing to be studied. Narrative research requires mutual trust and respect between the researcher and the participants (Prout et al., 2020). Narrative research allows for a deep understanding of the participants through their stories as perceived by them. The analysis of narrative research is open to interpretation based on what is seen and heard from the narrative of the participants. It is not just a retelling of the story but an action towards change (Muylaert et al., 2014). The goal of my study was to better understand at-risk students' sense of self-determination, motivation, and self-efficacy through the lens of alternate graduation programs. The results of this research could encourage positive policy changes and potentially assist students who are considering dropping out but might be persuaded to receive a high school diploma through alternative programs.

Several different approaches, such as case study and phenomenological, were considered for this study, but narrative research design and inquiry best answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are at-risk students' perceptions of being placed in alternative graduation programs?

RQ2: What affect does placement in an alternative graduation program have on students' attitudes towards self-determination and program completion?

RQ3: What affect does placement in an alternative graduation program have on students' attitudes towards self-efficacy and program completion?

Role of the Researcher

As the author of this doctoral research, I was also the primary interviewer. I had multiple roles throughout this process. My roles in this study were to recruit participants, construct the interview questions, interview the participants, transcribe the participants' interviews, analyze those interviews while balancing my profession with personal biases. I have been an educator and school counselor for 18 years and needed to ensure that no one I had a previous relationships with would be allowed to participate in this study. As the researcher of this study, all personal preconceptions and biases were addressed through the combined use of bracketing and reflexivity. Combining bracketing and reflexivity assist the researcher in putting aside any of the researchers' personal experiences (Baksh, 2018; Berger, 2015; Chan et al., 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Recruitment of participants used social media, snowball sampling, graduation pathway directors and referrals from several graduation teams located in Florida.

As the sole researcher, the design of all questions was pilot-tested on students who had previously graduated from an alternative graduation program but could not be included in the participant pool. This was strictly for my knowledge and no findings from

the pilot study were used. The interview questions were pilot tested via Zoom due to

Covid19 restrictions. For this study interview questions were semistructured and open-

ended. The researcher conducted all interviews via Zoom or other electronic platforms,

telephone, or face to face, depending on the participant's needs and abilities. Face-to-face

and telephone interviews were audiotaped. For those held via Zoom or other electronic

platforms, Zoom and Google provided verbatim transcripts of interviews and were the

method most utilized. To ensure the validity and credibility of the research TRINT

software was used as a backup transcription tool.

As the researcher, I needed to ensure that I had no previous connection with any

of the participants. Any participant who had previous connections with my home school

was removed from the pool of applicants. I submitted a school agreement letter to send

out emails to students who have graduated from different alternative programs I did not

have to follow up with district-required protocols since all participants had graduated and

were over the age of 18. Participants were able to provide their own consent. Once all

required consent was obtained, I recruited and obtained signed consents of participants

via email, social media via Facebook/Instagram, and in-person until 6 participants were

located. Consent was also obtained verbally during the interview process. Email and

social media are the preferred sources for recruitment, and email was the preferred

method for obtaining informed consent due to the high use of technology among adults,

current social distancing restraints, and convenience of electronic methods for reaching

participants (Fritz & Vandermause, 2018). This study consisted of purposeful sampling,

interviewing only at-risk students who entered or graduated from alternative graduation programs.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The target group was purposefully selected alternative graduation programs for students who received a diploma from Bay District Schools. Using purposeful sampling allowed me to gain information-rich participants for a specific phenomenon (see Palinkas et al., 2015). Participant selection was based on the purposeful sampling method. Participants were of varying perspective, diversity, and depth which allowed for rich narratives (Creswell, 2007). Seeking participants with specific characteristics is purposive sampling and is often used in qualitative studies (Morse, 2011). I did not need to request written consent from the following district personnel: superintendent, research coordinator, and graduation pathway director because all students were over the age of 18 and graduated from an alternative graduation program. I worked directly with the graduation pathway director, who provided data on at-risk students who have graduated from alternative graduation programs. Once the data was provided, I recruited participants via email, social media such as Google Forms, Facebook/Instagram, and in-person until 6 participants were located. Due to the difficulty locating participants through purposeful sampling, I used snowball sampling. The consent of the graduation pathway director was required to access participants, but permission from the district will not be necessary since all students are of legal age, 18 and over, and were able to provide consent.

Instrumentation

As a qualitative study, the data collected was based on individual narrative interviews with participants. Using questions that allowed participants the opportunity to explore and share their lived experiences through the phenomenon explored in this study, I was able to capture the true essence of their experiences. Hermeneutic conversations allowed participants to fill in gaps providing insight into their experiences through their narrative (Dangal & Joshi, 2020). The goal was for the participants to feel comfortable enough to tell their stories (Berry, 2016). The interview protocol consisted of semistructured interviews with predetermined, open-ended questions specifically related to the research topic. The use of open-ended questions encouraged the participants' responses and allowed them to embrace the interview process (Goldstein, 2017). The development of appropriate questions, follow-up questions, probe questions, and closing questions was an appropriate method of capturing the true essence of the participants' narrative (Moustakas, 1994; Sowicz et al., 2019). Interviews were 60-90 minutes in duration, eliciting responses that elaborated on their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. In-depth interviewing is considered a reliable method of data collection for qualitative studies (Fritz & Vandermause, 2018). Due to Covid-19 and social distancing restrictions in my area, Zoom or other electronic platforms and phones were the preferred method of interviewing. None of the participants wanted or participated in face-to-face interviews. Interviews conducted via video chats are considered an effective and appropriate collection method (Fischer et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2017). The use of Zoom or other electronic platforms provided a verbatim transcription of all interactions and

conversations, allowing for accurate interpretation of the interviews. For accuracy and validity in data collection, TRINT software was used as a backup for transcription of narratives, as was my smartphone as a secondary recording device. Transcription of the interviews also allowed for minimal handwritten notes allowing my focus to be on the participants and their words. At the end of the interviews, all participants were asked to give an invitation to anyone they know who may fit the criteria of my study. This step was in part to ensure I have enough participants. Additional participants were recruited through the use of snowball sampling approach to achieve data saturation. Due to the current pandemic, all interviews were conducted via electronic methods

Instrument Development and Validity of the Interview Guide

The researcher-developed interview questions were created for this study (See Appendix B) through a comprehensive review of existing interview guides exploring similar phenomena (see Arczynski et al., 2016; Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Interview questions were created to answer the research questions and obtain an understanding of how alternative graduation programs affects participant's perception of self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation. The development of interview questions is created to reconstruct the participant's experiences while answering questions that remain unanswered in current literature (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020; Brinkmann, 2014). The questions were written in language that is easily understood by the participants creating an atmosphere of comfort leading participants on an exploratory journey through their narratives as active participants allowing conversations to continue through their lived experience filling the gaps unanswered in literature (see Muylaert et al., 2014; Ward et

al., 2018). Further refinement of the interview questions occurred following valuable feedback from my committee members.

Sample Size and Saturation

I recruited 8 participants to individually interview via zoom or other electronic platforms, but ended up using only 6 participants due to exclusion criteria. The sample size was modified depending on the required saturation of data (Guetterman, 2015; Walker, 2012). Saturation occurred when all elements have been explored, and there was no longer a need for new information (de Cassia Nunes Nascimento et al., 2018). I recognized data saturation when participants repeat themes from previous interviews, and no new information was provided. The procedures and processes of the interview are key to data saturation. To ensure saturation, the use of semistructured interviews should be sequential with open ended-questions to ensure responses that elaborate on their experiences while eliciting responses that illuminate their attitudes and beliefs (Saunders et al., 2018). The primary focus should be on the quality and richness of the interviews and the narrative they provide and not the number of participants (Robinson, 2014). The focus of the interview questions was on collecting data and themes that were aligned with the research questions.

For this study, I also used a form of purposive sampling. According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), finding key participants is an integral part of the participant recruitment process, and often, information can be provided through others. I extended an invitation to district personnel who work in alternative education pathways to enable them to pass on the invitation to participants who meet the criteria of this study.

Participant Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Participants were chosen through purposive sampling, which is the purposeful selection of participants via a database of students enrolled in alternative graduation programs. Access to students names who graduated from alternative graduation programs was facilitated by the graduation pathways director, in collaboration with other school officials involved in the alternative graduation program. In accordance with district policy, both the district and I disseminated recruitment announcements and consent forms through email and social media channels, including platforms like Facebook, and Instagram. The use of purposive sampling is used in qualitative research requiring participants with specific characteristics (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling is not random and ensures that specific participants who can share different experiences and views will be used to answer proposed research questions (Campbell et al., 2020). Participants were selected based on a specific set of criteria. The participant's inclusive criteria are individuals between the ages of 18-25 who had been placed in an alternative graduation program. The exclusion criteria were individuals who had previous interaction with the researcher or have been enrolled at any facilities the researcher had been employed. A short intake form was discussed in the initial phone conversation to ensure participants met the criteria.

Purposive sampling methods was used to recruit participants who met the following criteria: participants must have been in an alternative graduation program prior to graduation, participants were between the ages of 18-23, allowing a shorter timespan between high school graduation, allowing for more reliable memory recollections of their

experiences. I accepted the first 6 participants interested, who also met the criteria

required for my study. A short intake form was used to ensure that the participants met

the required criteria. The inclusive criterion for participants is prior placement in an

alternative graduation program, be between the ages of 18-25, and the exclusive criteria

is prior enrollment in any school the researcher has worked in or prior knowledge and

interaction with the researcher. To ensure saturation and to have enough participants

through purposive sampling, I also used snowball sampling, which can help narrow the

range of participants that were not found during purposive sampling (see Palinkas et al.,

2015). Snowball sampling was used when it became challenging to locate participants. In

snowball sampling, the research requests a participant to recruit other members who

shared similar characteristics fitting into the study (Morse, 2011).

All interviews scheduled were done in a way that accommodated the participants

adequately. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, other electronic platforms, or in some

cases, face to face allowing a comfortable and private setting to conduct all interviews

which ensured the privacy and comfort of the participants. In the eventuality that a

participant required a face-to-face interview, those interviews would have been

conducted at a local library that has private study rooms should Zoom, other electronic

platforms, or phone interviews not be an option. None of the participants requested a

face-to-face interview.

Questions were predetermined and open-ended in nature and conducted using

semi-structured interviews. This type of interview elicited the respondents' underlying

attitudes and beliefs. Utilizing this method of accommodating interviews allowed me to

explore emerging ideas during the interview (Creswell, 2007). Interviews were between 60-90 minutes long, depending on the participant's willingness to discuss their story. All participants were given the option of a follow-up interview to clarify any ambiguities when transcribed and to discuss the researcher's interpretations.

Participants were invited to participate in the study via zoom or other electronic platforms, phone, or face to face through an email invitation. Email is also another source of interviewing that has gained popularity, although this will only be used as a last resort since the preferred method is vial Zoom, other electronic platforms, phone, or face to face. According to Hunter et al. (2013), young people and groups with higher incomes tend to answer emails and questionnaires more often than any other type of communication. Should the need arise, email could have been used as an alternative source of interviews.

The procedures for data collection began through telephone contact where the consent form was explained, and all participants were encouraged to ask any questions regarding the research. Once informed consent was explained, I set a time and date to proceed with the interview process. Informed consent was provided by the participant verbally, through electronic consent, or in person. I explained to them that I had randomly assigned a number in place of their names on their audiotape to ensure confidentiality. The target participants were students who have previously graduated from an alternative graduation program. I personally collected all the data given to me through semi-structured interviews. Due to the pandemic and generational preferences, all interviews were conducted through Zoom or other electronic platforms, phone, and

face to face unless social distancing guidelines change. Once data collection began, I conducted interviews as they are scheduled with the participants, and data collection continued until I reached saturation of the data. Face-to-face interviews could have been used, but phone and virtual interviews were considered the most effective mediums (Zhang et al., 2017).

I recorded all interviews and kept detailed field notes regarding the meetings. Zoom and any other electronic platforms automatically transcribed the entire interview, and TRINT was used as a backup, which ensured researcher accuracy. An additional backup was an HD audio recorder on my Smartphone to ensure that all interviews were properly recorded should there have been a problem with one of the other software programs in use. Each interview was approximately 60-90 minutes in length. Once all interviews were completed, I did a thematic analysis of all the interviews using the seven-step analysis method. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), the seven steps involve: transcription, reading/familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finalizing the thematic analysis. These methods permitted me to identify common patterns and relationships, enabling me as the researcher to answer my research questions in this study.

Patterns were formulated through the use of coding and NVIVO software. I conducted a pretest interview with a student with similar criteria to that of my research to evaluate my questions and the length of time for future interviews. This pretest served as a pilot run of the open-ended interview questions. This was not part of the data, but as a method to test the interview questions.

Data Analysis Plan

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews involved open-ended questions, which are typical for a qualitative research study (Levitt et al., 2017; Percy et al., 2015). Zoom and Trint transcription services were used throughout the process. To ensure accuracy, I recorded and reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy. I analyzed all data through thematic analysis and searched for the development of themes by looking at the patterns that ensured I set up the proper categories (Percy et al., 2015). The focus was on the narratives and what was being said by the participant while using the seven-step analysis method of (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To assist in the process and ensure that themes were correctly coded, I analyzed and managed the data using the NVIVO qualitative software. As a researcher, it was imperative to have organizational skills and to be persistent when coding. According to Saldaña (2015), there are seven essential characteristics every researcher must have. Those characteristics are organization, perseverance, understanding ambiguity, flexibility, creativity, ethics, and have an extensive vocabulary (Saldaña, 2015). The use of this software allowed the facilitation of finding patterns of phrases, terms, and story structures and import references and themes (Brandao, 2015; Edwards-Jones, 2014). I utilized proper coding techniques to ensure that I created content-rich themes that are fundamental to my study. I took precautions to ensure that all ethical procedures were followed to ensure dependability, reliability, and validity (Cascio et al., 2019). Another method that was employed to ensure trustworthiness was the use of bracketing and reflexivity. According to Ahern (1999); Baksh (2018); Chan et al. (2013); Creswell (2007); Lincoln and Guba (1982), in order to

ensure credibility, validity, dependability, and conformability, a researcher must be reflexive. To ensure transparency, discrepant interviews were included in the findings. Outlier interviews were not excluded from the data because it can affect the reliability of the study (Bleich & Pekkanen, 2013).

<div align="center">**Issues of Trustworthiness**</div>

Credibility

Credibility refers to the believability and validity of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). Findings should be reported accurately and be free from personal biases, which is why it is imperative to use several methods to ensure such a fact. Several methods can be used to achieve credibility. Some suggested methods ensure accuracy when coding, crossing check codes with independent researchers, triangulation of data, a saturation of data, and member checking (Creswell, 2007). According to Lincoln and Guba (1982), member checking is one way to achieve credibility and validity in qualitative research. Allowing the participant the ability to review and evaluate their words was imperative to ensure credibility. Birt et al. (2016) believe that participants who are asked to validate the words in their transcripts provide the accuracy of the data and reduces the chances of transferability.

Transferability

Transferability is understanding the importance of the context and setting of the research and the knowledge that the outcome will not provide one single truth (Guba & Ohio State Univ, 1981; Sultan, 2019). For this study, the researcher collected data from one school district in one state. The researcher must be aware that there could be

transferability by assuming all alternate graduate programs elicit the same results. To offset this possibility, I, as the researcher, provided accurate and vivid narrative interpretations of the participants, their settings, and their experiences using thick descriptions. Thick description is the understanding of issues that need to be addressed, especially those in education (Bell & Kissling, 2019). Thick description is the level of detail provided while seeking to understand the motivation and circumstances of the participants. Thick description is achieved with quality open-ended questions that enable the participants to share their narratives (Freeman, 2014).

Dependability

Dependability is the ability to duplicate and replicate the research process (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). Dependability and reliability are concepts closely related to qualitative research (Cypress, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1982). Some noted techniques to ensure dependability were triangulation, peer review, audit trail, maintaining a reflexive journal, and member checking. To ensure dependability in this study, a peer review was conducted by field experts to validate the themes and descriptors. A peer review will uphold the thematic analysis is directly from the participants' narratives and researcher observations, and not the words of the researcher.

Confirmability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1982), the reflexivity of the researcher is the most important instrument of the study. Reflexivity and confirmability are important because it is the objectivity of the researcher (Schwandt et al., 2007; Thomas, 2017). The confirmability in the study will depend on the ability and the effort of the researcher

(Cypress, 2017). To maintain confirmability in this study, the researcher will maintain detailed field notes. An audit trail occurred in the form of documentation of the field notes when the study was conducted. The researcher maintained a running account of the process through the use of a daily field journal. It was vital for the researcher to be aware of any initial preconceptions and biases from previous personal experiences (Tufford & Newman, 2012). One way to avoid preconceptions and biases was through bracketing. Bracketing is where the researcher is aware and notates that there may be a possible preconception, whether it be in themes, interview questions, or in the narrative of the participants (Tufford & Newman, 2012). According to Baksh (2018), sometimes, just the act of thinking about bracketing can lead to reflexivity.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical Considerations in Research

My completed research maintained the highest ethical standards. Data collection did not take place until IRB granted approval. Prior to the start of the interviews, participants were provided with a brief information form and an informed consent form (Appendix B). The content of the informed consent form stated that their participation in the study is voluntary. All information was provided prior to giving informed consent. Privacy was paramount, so pseudonyms or random numbers were assigned to all participants and their former institutions, thereby achieving privacy. The implementation of ethical procedures ensured confidentiality and eliminated any preconceived knowledge of the student. Since I work within the school system, I ensured that objectivity remained intact and that my research was clear of biases or preconceived notions. Any student who

had previous connections with my worksite was dismissed from the participant pool. A letter was drafted to the alternate graduation program director requesting access to emails and databases of possible candidates. During the data collection process, all data was stored in a locked filing cabinet. Virtual transcripts were backed up and placed in a secondary storage device for both the safety of the documents and to ensure continued confidentiality. Recognizing ethical considerations was an important part of the research process, as was the need to protect the participants who were sharing their narratives. Ethical principles are an important part of qualitative research, especially during narrative inquiries where personal information must remain confidential. It was the primary responsibility of the researcher to implement the standards as framed by the Belmont Report by maintaining ethical standards and awareness of any considerations to ensure that the participants were protected from harm while ensuring their dignity and privacy throughout the research process (National Commission for the Proptection of Human Subjects of & Behavioral Research, 1978; Ross et al., 2018).

Ethical Concerns Regarding Recruitment

I utilized a purposive strategy to amplify fair and unbiased recruitment of research participants. Snowball sampling was used for additional participants since there were not enough participants from the purposive strategy. The development of the recruitment material for this study used culturally correct, concise, and simple language, which was free of biases taking into consideration the ethical concerns and rights of the participants (Nusbaum et al., 2017). The participants for the study were not considered a vulnerable population by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), or under the Office of Human

Research Protection; therefore, they did not require any additional ethical considerations based on vulnerability (Ketefian, 2015; Office for Human Research Protections, 2018).

Informed Consent

As a researcher, I had an ethical responsibility to provide an informed consent that clearly described the purpose and procedures of the research, any anticipated risks or benefits of participation, how the data will be used and stored (Geldenhuys, 2019). Additional ethical considerations must be taken by the researcher when conducting qualitative studies, and narrative interviews of participants and the informed consent must be clear and concise while maintaining accurate accounts of the participants' words without the biases of the researcher (Burles & Bally, 2018). Participants were made aware that they may refuse to participate or withdraw from the research at any time (Geldenhuys, 2019; Opsal et al., 2016).

Confidentiality

According to Fisher and Vacanti-Shova (2012), a conscientious researcher does what is right because it is the right thing to do. Confidentiality in research is imperative, and an important role of the researcher was to ensure that all steps were taken to provide the participants with confidentiality. As the primary researcher, I took all possible steps to ensure the confidentiality of the participants by providing pseudonyms that de-identify them in the research process. Participants were also informed of the limits of confidentiality due to concerns of minors, elder, or apparent self-harm (Fisher & Vacanti-Shova, 2012). As the researcher, I conducted extended measures to ensure there was no harm to the participants.

Ethical Concerns of Data Collection Processes

Once the research begun, participants could have chosen to withdraw from the study or during an interview without penalty (Cohen et al., 2018; Fisher & Vacanti-Shova, 2012). As stated previously, sampling size is not as important as in-depth quality narratives that delve into perceptions and experiences of the participant (Berry, 2016; Cohen et al., 2018; Robinson, 2014; Ross et al., 2018). it is more important to collect accurate data through narratives with continued emphasis on saturation (de Cassia Nunes Nascimento et al., 2018; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Hennink et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2018; Walker, 2012).

Treatment of Data

As detailed previously, all data collected was securely contained, and the collection of such data followed all ethical guidelines. A specific password encoded laptop was used for this research. The laptop included the latest edition of NVIVO software, where all transcribed interviews of every participant were maintained. Transcription of interviews provided by Zoom or backup program. Trint Software was also downloaded and placed in a secure file within the laptop, and a backup file was downloaded onto a flash drive. Adding to the security measures, the laptop included security software that was continuously maintained by the researcher. The removable flash drive used in the research process was hard-encrypted, placed in a secure lockbox that only I can access. All material gathered in the research process was coded to protect the identity of the participants. This included transcripts and reflective journals (Gaudet

& Robert, 2018). All material was securely stored and will be available for up to 5 years upon request.

Summary

This chapter is a synopsis of the rationale for the selection of narrative inquiry as to the anticipated data collection method. There is a detailed explanation of the role of the researcher and potential biases. Within this chapter, there is an in-depth explanation of the data collection plan, participation selection logic, participant recruitment, instrumentation, and procedures for future data collection. This chapter also included ethical implications that may occur in my study. Once approved by the IRB, future findings will be included in chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to investigate how placement in an alternative graduation program affects students' perception of self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation toward program completion. The narrative inquiry interviews allowed for collaboration between the researcher (myself), and the participants (see Clandinin, 2018). To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, member checks were conducted throughout the interactions. The use of a deliberate selection process enabled me to pinpoint six individuals who possessed substation information, with their experiences directly relevant to the specific to the phenomenon in this study (see Palinkas et al., 2015). Additionally, I ensured the reconfirmation of the participants' consent before conducting each interview. The narrative interviews involved the use of open-ended questions tailored to address the research inquiries. Following the interviews, I analyzed the collected narratives underwent analysis using Deci and Ryan's SDT and Bandura's self-efficacy theory as guiding frameworks.

Setting

All six participants were offered their choice of setting and format. All the participants chose to be interviewed via the Zoom virtual platform. The participants each chose a quiet location with minimal interruptions. I conducted all interviews via Zoom in my home office located in Panama City Beach, Florida. The date, time, and location of the interview for the participants were based on their convenience. This flexibility allowed for a comfortable and relaxing setting enabling the participants to provide optimal engagement of open-ended narratives pertaining to the research questions.

During the semistructured interviews, both video and audio transcriptions were made through the Zoom software. Individual audio and video recordings were saved on my personal password-protected computer. Video and audio transcriptions were then transcribed using TRINT. TRINT transcribes all audio and video recordings and allows editing and printing. I went back through all the transcriptions and videos several times to ensure the correct words were used, ensuring all transcriptions to be accurate. During one interview the service was intermittent and unstable, and the transcription ended up being a little shorter than the rest of the interviews. When listening to this interview I had to review it slowly and had to repeatedly listen while using the pause function several times to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. Fortunately, I was able to take copious notes throughout the interview process allowing thick and rich narrative to be completed with the combination of transcription and notes. Nevertheless, due to the member check process all participants were given ample opportunities to clarify, expand, or change previous statements as needed.

Central Research Questions

The interviews consisted of three central research questions, each containing four to five subquestions. These open-ended questions were used throughout the interview process, enabling the participants to share their experiences as they were perceived by each participant. The research questions were asked in order, but there were times when the participants would divulge information that was pertinent to other research questions or sub questions. This is where my field notes and journal played an integral part in the interview process.

RQ1 What are your perceptions of being placed in an alternate graduation program?

RQ2 What affect did placement in an alternative graduation program have on attitudes towards self-determination and program completion?

RQ3 What affect did placement in an alternative graduation program have on your attitude towards self-efficacy and program completion?

Demographics

Narrative inquiry requires a collaborative and relational interaction that can be complex in nature, which allows the participant to immerse themselves in their experiences (Clandinin, 2018). Although the intended number of participants for the study was 10-15, only six qualified participants completed full interviews. Two participants had to be excluded due to their lack of diploma status at the time and one had to be excluded due to prior knowledge of the researcher. After the interviews were completed, participants were asked to recommend anyone they felt fit the study criteria. Two additional participants were provided to the researcher via snowball sampling. Initially there were 8 participants, but two were excluded due to the exclusion criteria. In totality 6 participants were interviewed during the summer and fall of 2022. As I transcribed and coded, I continued to recruit participants to ensure saturation would be met. Several participants who were scheduled failed to attend their interview and contact was never reestablished. Although the number of participants was lower than originally anticipated, saturation was achieved as themes were continuously repeated.

All participants were of legal age (18 or over) and were able to consent to the interview. The participants had received a high school diploma and participated in an alternative graduation program such as charter, online, hybrid, homeschool, or other types of alternative placement. The participants were of varying perspectives, diversity, and depth to provide complete narratives of the research questions, thereby reaching saturation (see Creswell, 2007). The participants were also diverse in cultural and social economic backgrounds. The participants included three females and three males. Two White non-Hispanic males, one African American female, one White non-Hispanic female, one Hispanic female, and one African American male. Although the sample size was small, participants all shared deeply personal narratives of their experiences through the lens of alternative graduation programs (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participants	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Year obtained high school diploma
Participant 1	20	White	Male	2021
Participant 2	23	White	Female	2019
Participant 3	21	Multi-ethnic	Female	2020
Participant 4	24	White	Male	2018
Participant 5	18	African American	Male	2022
Participant 6	18	White	Female	2022

Data Collection

Narratives were conducted via hermeneutic discussions and conversations. Several participants contacted me for an update on the progress of the study. These conversations were documented in my field journal. Narrative inquiry was used to collect data through the experience and stories of the participants. The goal was for the participants to feel comfortable enough to tell their narratives without restraint (see Berry, 2016; Dangal & Joshi, 2020). The goal of the qualitative narrative study was to achieve saturation, such that no new information was given through the interview process. Two participants could not be included due to not having completed testing and one for previous knowledge of the researcher. Data saturation occurred after the sixth official interview was conducted and completed.

Participants expressed differences in perceptions of education in relation to traditional and alternative settings. All participants expressed differing sentiments about self-determination, school, school personnel, and graduation. The participants had varying backgrounds, behaviors, mindsets, and goals that led them to placement into alternative graduation placement. It is important to note that Participant 6 was the only one who never attended a traditional high school but rather enrolled directly from a homeschool setting.

Participant Profiles

Participant 1

Participant 1 is a 20-year-old white male. His interview provided the longest narrative. He discussed with honesty, wit, and intelligence his experiences in a traditional high school compared to his experiences in his alternative placement charter high school. Diagnosed with a semiterminal illness, he admitted to severe behavioral and attendance issues during his enrollment in the traditional high school. He also honestly reflected on some behaviors from administration and faculty that he felt led him to exhibit some of the problematic behaviors. He also candidly discussed his experiences in an alternative charter high school and how it has molded his current life choices and experiences.

Participant 2

Participant 2 is a 23-year-old white female who bounced from traditional high school to traditional high school. She also had a short time in an online charter school before being placed in an alternative charter high school. Extremely shy, she divulged a painful experience in traditional school settings, in which she lacked credits and was unable to participate in theater productions due to grades, attendance, and credits. She describes a journey of self-reflection that led her to dropout her junior year of high school only to return to continue her education through an alternative graduation programs.

Participant 3

Participant 3 is a 21-year-old multiethnic female who had also just graduated from an alternative graduation placement. She was considered one of the oldest graduates since she just received her diploma at 21. She was also one of the only participants that had an

individual education plan. She openly discussed her motivation to remain in school and how she felt that she truly never belonged in any setting. She felt pushed out of her traditional high school and had to appeal several times and use legal measures to remain in school.

Participant 4

Participant 4 is a 24-year-old white male who was recently discharged from the Coast Guard. His interview yielded a journey of self-discovery through educational pursuits. He reflected on returning to school because he needed a diploma to move on to the next phase of his life. He described never truly belonging in a traditional high school setting and candidly discussed his lack of attendance and his failure to procure the credits needed to graduate. He discussed dropping out for a year and working. When he expressed his desire to rejoin a traditional high school, his reentry request was denied, leaving him with the feeling that he had been forced out of the traditional setting due to the absence of certain testing requirements needed for graduation. His recruiter suggested an alternate charter high school that would help him earn his diploma and graduate on time.

Participant 5

Participant 5 is an 18-year-old African American male who just graduated with his diploma. He struggled with attendance and discussed the behavior issues that placed him in several alternative school placements. He openly discussed his attendance issues and lack of motivation or interest in school. He struggled with academics and testing and

he felt pushed through and out of traditional settings. He credited his mother for this self-reported "last chance" to get a diploma through alternative educational placement.

Participant 6

Participant 6 is an 18-year-old white female who completed all her graduation requirements and received her diploma a year early through attendance in an alternative graduation program. Her narrative began with stories about her struggles with anxiety and mental health issues that she felt were compounded in a traditional high school setting. Her educational journey included home-school and online educational pursuits prior to entering an alternative graduation program.

Data Analysis

For this study I analyzed the data using Braun and Clark's (2006, 2013) seven-step process. Table 2 shows how each phase of the process was handled throughout the study.

Table 2

Braum and Clarke Seven Steps of Thematic Analysis

Steps	Process
Transcription	Transcribing the interviews. Reading and rereading the interviews. Taking notes on possible reoccurring themes.
Reading/Familiarization	Reading through the transcripts to ensure familiarization and proper coding
Coding	Sorting and naming codes for further review
Searching for Themes	Gathering all data and codes and seeing what is or isn't relevant.
Reviewing Themes	Review and collate potential themes based on codes and interviews
Defining and Naming Themes	Review codes and begin defining and sorting themes.

Note. Source (Braun & Clarke, 2013)

Transcription

The first step in the analysis process was the transcription of all the interviews. As the researcher, I reviewed the interviews multiple times to ensure accuracy. Corrections

were made using the TRINT software program. According to Braun and Clarke (2013) once all corrections are made and member checking occurs to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed interviews the transcriptions can be printed, allowing the researcher to move to Step 2.

Reading/Familiarization

Reviewing, reading, and otherwise becoming familiar with the transcripts is an important part of thematic analysis. The interview transcripts were lengthy and dense, so it was important to read through them multiple times to fully understand them. During the familiarization process, the video and audio portion of the interviews were also reviewed several times to ensure I was paying attention to nonverbal cues. Nonverbal cues could include, but are not limited to, gestures, facial expressions, or tone of voice (Braun et al., 2013).Special attention to these nuances can provide additional insight into the participants' thoughts and feelings. During Step 2 of thematic analysis copious notes, highlighting, underlining, and bracketing occurred.

Coding

The coding of emerging themes is an important aspect of qualitative data analysis and was Step 3 of the analysis process (Braun et al., 2013). I started using NVIVO for the coding process and to sort through the various themes. The initial codes generated were anxiety, control, diploma, home, school setting, personal, self-determination, and motivation. Themes were then sorted and cross-checked with field notes, interviews, and transcripts. The themes were then further analyzed and sorted by sentiment as to whether the experiences were positive or negative. NVIVO proved hard to use and re-sorted the

code several times, coming up with different variables. The themes were cross checked, and NVIVO was used to interpret and analyze the data several times to ensure the proper themes and codes were being used. Once NVIVO had sorted themes that were reoccurring throughout the interviews I was able to then sort through the themes manually. The codes were subsequently arranged in descending order, leading to the identification of recurring themes. Once there was a foundation of themes and codes I continued reviewing and rereading the transcripts. During this process, comprehensive notes were diligently recorded, and after reviewing the field notes, the themes were manually coded. According to Shkedi (2019), analysis software is an impressive tool, but will never be a substitute for the analysis and commitment of the researcher. Therefore, the majority of the data was analyzed, re-analyzed, and hand coded.

I hand coded using post-it notes of assorted colors to ensure that the themes and sentiments expressed by the participants were accurate and true to their words. Once the initial themes were coded, those themes were further evaluated and sorted into participant sentiments. The initial round of coding required the categorization of participants' sentiments, which encompassed both negative and positive feelings. This segregation of positive (feelings of approval or optimism) and negative (feelings of disapproval or pessimism) sentiments was vital in ensuring the accurate analysis of the participants' narratives. According to Bandura (2012) the emotional aspects of an educational experience, whether positive or negative, can significantly impact one's academic motivation. The coding process involved categorizing both positive and negative sentiments from the participants' experiences in both traditional high schools and

alternative school settings. The participants frequently conveyed their mixed sentiments, reflecting both positive and negative experiences. They elaborated on how these experiences, whether positive or negative, influenced their perception of self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation. In some instances, initially, negative sentiments evolved into positive ones following a change in the educational environment, leading to adjustments in the coding of the related theme. Afterward, I revisited and analyzed the transcripts, once more emphasizing key phrases, statements, and terms related to the identified themes. Data saturation was reached with the sixth participant mentioned in this study. Further analysis uncovered five areas of commonality expressed by the participants. Those areas are as follows: determination to succeed, feelings of belongingness, control over program completion, influence of sentiment on program completion, and motivation towards program completion.

The coding process was completed using NVIVO and a word frequency query. The word frequency query identified words that were commonly used throughout all the interviews allowing for emerging sentiments and themes. The query was completed in chunks and then compared to the transcripts and field notes. (See figure 1 and figure 2).

Figure 1

Coding of Sentiments

SENTIMENT OF SCHOOL PRIOR TO ALTERNATIVE PLACEMENT
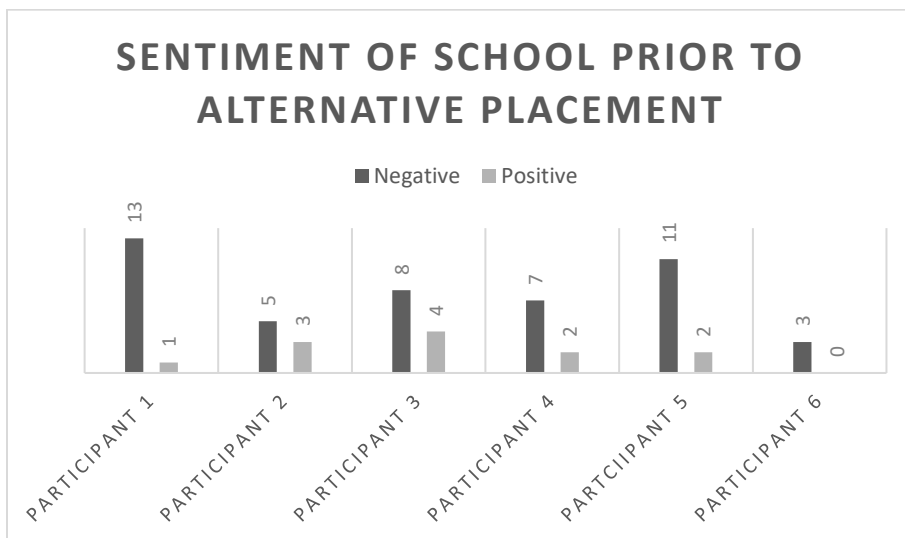
Figure 2

Coding of Sentiments in Altnerative Graduation

SENTIMENT OF SCHOOL DURING ALTERNATIVE GRADUATION PROGRAM
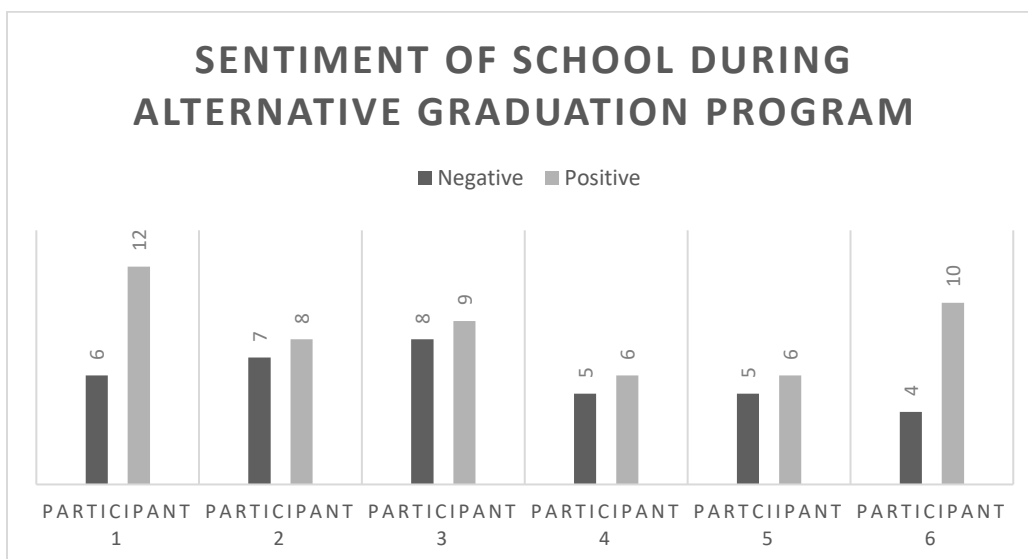
After the coding of positive and negative sentiments I continued the coding using a query of frequently used words and phrases throughout the interview process. Several words occurred throughout the interviews, such as attendance, referrals, fights, lack of motivation, dropping out, hopelessness, determination, motivation, teachers/mentors, groups, help or lack thereof, and support. An in-depth analysis of the words that commonly occurred was then graphed for clarity (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Word Frequency Query
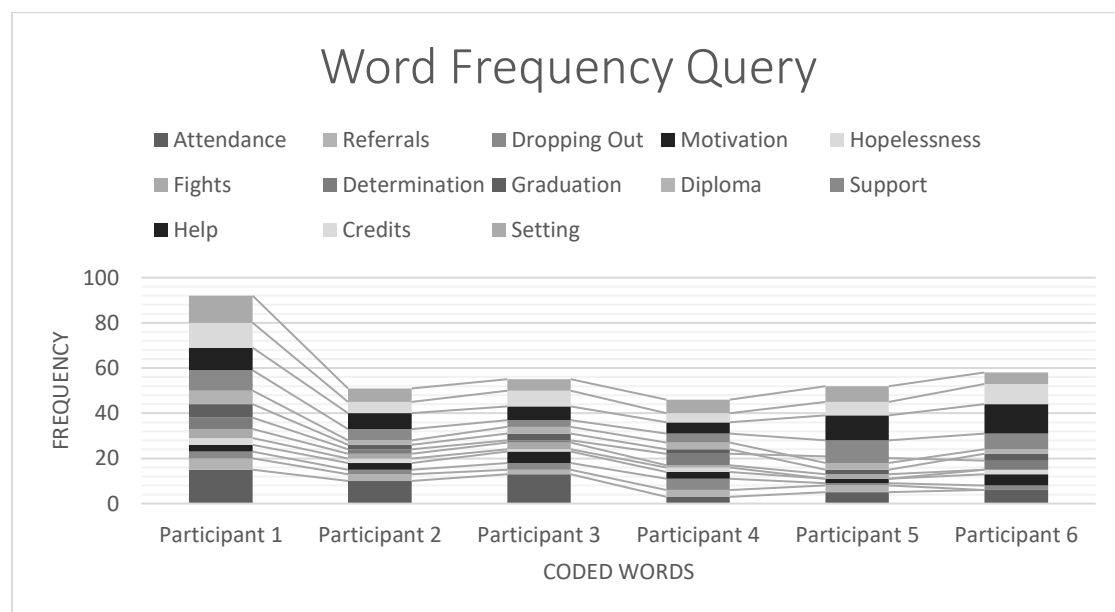
Once the frequency of the words and phrases was created, I reread the interviews, highlighted the areas that matched the coding and started recording the themes that were related to the words and to the research questions. The emerging themes were attendance, credits, control, feelings of belonging, motivation, self-determination, setting, and curriculum.

Theme Analysis of Collected Data

Through thematic analysis, I began to identify and analyze patterns and themes within the data. The consistent themes that emerged through coding and data analysis as related to the research questions were attendance, credits, control, feelings of belonging, motivation, self-determination, setting, and curriculum. Thematic analysis allowed this researcher a valid way to filter the data presented as uniquely expressed by each participant. In-depth analysis of the data allowed for persistent patterns of words and phrases used that allowed for specific themes to emerge based on participant commonality. Commonality themes were found, and the focus of this research was based on those findings. The themes all the participants had in common were attendance, credits, control, setting, feelings of belonging, and motivation. Upon further investigation only 4 of the 6 participants mentioned curriculum so it was removed as one of the themes.

Attendance

According to the Florida Department of Education, regular school attendance by students should be enforced by the superintendent of every school district. Florida requires 135 hours of seat time to receive full credit for any given course (Florida Department of Education, 2023).

Five of the six participants admitted to severe attendance issues in their traditional high school setting. Several participants expressed that attending school was pointless and a few admitted that low attendance exacerbated their lack of desire and motivation in attending their classes.

P1 stated "I was told I wasn't going to be successful, so I just stopped showing up. I would only go about once every two weeks." He felt that there was not a reason to attend and when he did attend, he did not feel like the teachers and administrators wanted him there.

P2 felt that there was absolutely no point in attending school. According to P2 "no one cared if I attended or not and when I did attend the teachers would give me a hard time."

P3 recalled being placed in elective courses she wasn't interested in and felt it was just easier not to be at school. P2 felt that the staff would make it worse when she returned to school by referencing her attendance issues. After a while she stated that it was just easier to avoid school and not deal with the teachers' negative comments.

P4 acknowledged that attendance was his biggest issue in high school. He seldom went to classes because he just wanted to get his GED and move on.

P6 admits that attendance issues in middle school was one of the reasons she entered the homeschool environment. She felt that entering an alternative high school was difficult at first because she was not acclimated to attending school daily. Whenever she stayed home or missed days consecutively, she would receive a call from the alternative placement school asking if everything was okay. Although surprised at first, she stated that she quickly became thankful for the daily attendance reminders from her teachers, administration, and office staff.

Credits

In Florida public schools, credits are a way to measure a student's progress towards graduation while indicating successful completion of course work. Each course in Florida is assigned a specific credit value, ranging from .05 to 1.0. To graduate, students are required to meet a minimum number of credits in various subject areas. To fulfill graduation requirements, Florida students have several options, but the most common are the 24 or 18 credit pathways. To earn the 24 credits, students must complete four credits of English, four credits of mathematics (must include algebra 1 and geometry), three credits of science (must include biology), three credits of social studies (must include world history, United States history, American government and economics), one credit in physical education and personal fitness (.05 each), one credit in a performing or fine arts course, eight credits in elective course. The 18-credit pathway eliminates the physical Education and personal fitness credits and reduces the electives from eight credits to three credits. All students must also pass state testing requirements and have a GPA (grade point average) of 2.0. To receive the course credit students must pass the course and meet the attendance participation requirements. The 18-credit pathway, academically challenging curriculum to enhance learning (ACCEL), can be used to graduate a year early or to assist credit deficient students graduate on time.

All the participants acknowledge that they were credit deficient in one or more core classes. 5 out of the 6 participants were placed on the 18-credit pathway due to credit deficiencies and GPA. Credit deficiencies make it difficult to graduate in a timely manner from a traditional high school. All the participants were placed in an online credit

recovery program. Several participants describe being placed in Edgenuity or APEX. Both Edgenuity and Apex allow students to make-up failing courses via a computer-based program (Imagine Learning, 2023).

P4 felt that no matter how determined he was to graduate he was destined to fail. He stated, "I was being placed in three math classes and I remember pleading with my counselor that I didn't understand any of the math that was being taught." He recalls still working on the first level of math and then had to also take the next two levels just to catch up on his credits. He stated, "I was losing a daily battle and math was winning." He stated, "I was so credit deficient in math that my courses were stacked, and I had no idea on the concepts because I did not have the foundational skills."

P6 entered the alternative graduation programs due to a unique situation. She attended a traditional middle school, but due to attendance and anxiety concerns entered a homeschool program. Once enrolled in a homeschool program she realized that she was credit deficient and would not receive a traditional high school diploma. Participant 6 stated "I tried to enroll in several traditional high schools, but my enrollment was denied due to credit deficiencies and lack of testing requirements."

Control

According to Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory control is an integral part of a successful educational experience. "Educational control" refers to the extent to which educational environments support or undermine students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Students who feel they have control over their learning and experience a sense of choice and autonomy are more likely to be engaged, curious, and willing to explore and learn in a meaningful way (Bandura et al., 1999; Bandura & Locke, 2003; Deci et al., 1991).

Control was an unanticipated theme in the research. All the participants expressed either longing for educational control or feeling a lack of educational control. According to the participants control is having some say over their educational decisions. Several of the participants didn't want to attend unnecessary classes. In a traditional high school students are expected to take 7 classes every day, while in alternative graduation programs they are only required take 4.

Participant 1 stated that he continuously felt that nothing was within his control. He was in classes he didn't want, He had to adhere to a schedule that didn't suit his health situation. He felt that other more privileged students had more control on his campus, and that he was always a target of the school administration. Once he entered the alternative placement, he stated he had "felt like he was in control of education for the very first time in his life." He also stated, "they listened to what I wanted in my life, they cared."

Participant 3 recalled her traditional setting as "being in a birdcage", she felt she didn't have any control over her environment or her life until she switched schools. Suddenly she could listen to music when she wanted and if she needed more time on a specific subject, she didn't have to change classes, she could continue working and not have to worry about being in trouble for not following the rules.

Participant 4 stated "having control over my environment and my education made me want to succeed, I didn't feel the same pressure and truly felt like I was given a voice."

P6 felt that she had more control over her daily educational decisions. She didn't have to take unnecessary electives and go to different classes every 45 minutes. Participant 6 stated "I didn't want to take 3 physical education classes just because I had to fill seven periods in my day, I just wanted to take the courses I needed to graduate and leave."

Setting

Setting describes the educational placement of the at-risk students who were interviewed. There are different types of educational settings offered to these students such as traditional, online, online hybrid, or a combination of the above. All the participants in this study expressed that their educational setting influenced their sentiments on their school experiences.

Participant 1 stated that with his illness he often didn't feel well and had to work in a separate class or office. He also stated that there were times he did not feel well in the morning and would have to attend an afternoon class. Since the setting in his alternative school was smaller, he also felt that the people were more understanding of his circumstances and not so judgmental of his situation. He also didn't feel the pressure of having to use the restroom all the time because the setting was so much smaller, and the people just interacted with each other differently than in his traditional high school. Participant 1 expressed that attending an alternative school setting helped him with

setting his goal of graduation. Participant 1 stated "when I wasn't feeling well, I didn't feel uncomfortable being in the restroom for an extended period of time because everyone understood my health situations."

Participant 4 describes never wanting to go to all these different "unessential" classes to going to a school setting that promoted individuality and different scheduling to fit in with his needs. He continues with how the flexible setting worked for him. His alternative high school had two separate schedules that could be attended: a morning shift and an afternoon shift. When asked which shift participant 4 preferred, he stated that it would depend on his needs at that particular time of his life. Sometimes he would need to attend the morning sessions and other times he would need to attend the afternoon sessions. His favorite part was that because the school had a fluid setting and schedule it relieved a lot of the stress, he was feeling in his traditional high school setting.

Participant 6 never attended a traditional high school setting because of her severe anxiety. She felt that a smaller alternative school setting would help her graduate with a diploma, plus several traditional high schools had denied her admittance. She stated "I don't think I would have made it in a regular high school, there are just way too many people, and way too many class changes. It just wasn't for me." Participant 6 believed that having control over her setting influenced her motivation to graduate with a high school diploma instead of a certificate of completion.

Feeling of Belonging

Feelings of belonging tend to be a deeply rooted emotional experience that occur through interactions with a community, place, or person. Belonging is a sense of affinity

that is experienced through interactions with certain people, or a specific place, and even in a particular environment. This type of emotional bond can bring comfort, security, and a feeling of being understood. Lack of belonging can result in feelings of loneliness, isolation, and decreased well-being (Allen, 2021).

Five of the 6 participants described not "fitting in" or being an "outcast" at their traditional high school. The 6th participant did not attend a traditional high school, but still described how attending an alternative graduation high school gave her a sense of belonging that she did not feel in a traditional educational setting. She felt that the staff, teachers, and administration cared for her well-being and wanted her there. Participant 6 mentioned that "whenever I would miss school or was overly anxious someone would step in, they would either call me or take me aside and help me through whatever I was going through."

Participant 3 discussed how negative she was about school and always felt that no one wanted her around. She recalled when she dropped out of school and then tried to return to the traditional high school, the staff and administration did not want her to come back. They kept telling her she had too many credits or she was too old. She stated, "I was so upset then my school counselor suggested I enroll in an alternative graduation program and not in my traditional high school." She remembers going on tour of the alternative graduation high school and recalled "I instantly felt like the staff truly wanted me there, I felt good." Participant 3 stated that "even when my ADHD got out of control, my teachers would allow me to listen to my headphones and work that way." She felt that everyone was considerate of her needs and what she needed to be successful.

Participant 5 recalled a home visit by one of the administrators and staff. He couldn't believe they showed up at his house and wanted him to come back to school. They talked to his mom and that's when he realized that his mother really wanted him to go back to school and get a high school diploma. He stated, "I remember my mom crying and wanting me to have a diploma, it really sucked seeing her so upset." The fact that the school personnel went out of their way to find him and talk to his mother showed him that he belonged there and could finish high school.

Motivation

Motivation in education refers to internal and external factors that influence a student's willingness, desire, and commitment to engage in learning, academic goals, and ultimately academic success (Affuso et al., 2017; Huitt, 2011).

Several of the participants felt that once they were placed in or entered an alternative high school setting, they found they had a renewed determination and motivation to succeed. Participant 3 stated, "I never wanted to do my schoolwork, but suddenly I was motivated to complete my assignments and actually accomplish something."

Participant 4 believed that the motivation to achieve his high school diploma was more about proving the staff and administration of his traditional high school wrong. One of his previous administrators told him that he should get his GED and stop wasting their time. When he entered the alternative graduation program, he still had the same defeatist attitude from his traditional high school. Then suddenly one day he told himself "You've

got the opportunity to prove all these people wrong, you've got to have the drive,

motivation, and determination to finish this on my own."

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility is the believability, validity, and truth of the findings and the data

included in the research and analysis (Connelly, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1982). To

ensure that credibility of this study member checking was done several times.

Throughout the interview follow-up and clarifying questions were asked such as "What

did you mean when you stated." This process of member checking ensured that the

experiences discussed were done so with detail and fidelity. A double recording system

was used to ensure that credibility was maintained throughout the transcription process.

The interviews were recorded on Zoom and TRINT to ensure that all nuances of the

interview were captured.

To mitigate potential research bias, the researcher diligently monitored personal

biases throughout the study. It was a primary focus to exclusively incorporate the

narratives, emotions, and experiences of the participants while safeguarding against any

influence from personal biases or preconceived opinions on the topic. Employing

bracketing, in combination with maintaining a reflexive journal, was a recommended

strategy for addressing and managing any potential personal biases that might have arisen

during the research process.(Baksh, 2018; Creswell, 2007).

To address transferability the researcher used all the interview findings including

findings from discrepant participants and any possible outliers (Bleich & Pekkanen,

2013). As recommended by Birt et al. (2016). Accurate and detailed information was

included in the participants' narratives, enabling them to thoroughly review their own words and preserving the fidelity of the data.

Dependability is the ability to reproduce and replicate a study (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). Dependability was achieved during this study through the use of a reflexive journal, member checking, audit trail and using the established interview protocols and the seven step phases of analysis. To reduce participant bias, I began each interview explaining confidentiality and the desire to know about their experiences. I further explained that all their experiences were welcomed throughout the interview process regardless of sentiment.

Coding was used to organize and make sense of the data. I initially started the coding process using NVIVO software and then continued hand coding to ensure accuracy and to safeguard that nothing was missed throughout the process. Once the codes were identified I verified the participant's responses through member checking.

Confirmability and reflexivity were achieved in this study through several methods. Detailed field notes were taken throughout the process as was a running account of the process. Bracketing was also used while journaling and through the interview process. Bracketing was especially prevalent during the thematic analysis process of transcription, familiarization, and coding (Baksh, 2018).

Results

All participants were asked the same interview questions and sub questions. Participants were asked follow-up questions or questions based on their initial responses. All follow-up questions were asked to ensure the participants were verbalizing exactly

what they wanted to express without bias. The participant responses were then reviewed

to reveal codes that were further reviewed to reveal themes.

Themes Related to RQ 1:

RQ 1 What was your perception of being placed in an alternate graduation

program?

The first research question yielded several themes. Participants were thoughtful

regarding the decision to be in an alternative graduation program, their decisions prior

and after program placement as well as their decision to continue striving towards a high

school diploma.

Sub question 1: How do you describe your academic experiences in high school

Participant narratives yielded the following themes related to RQ 1 and sub

questions: attendance, control, and lack of credits. All the participants described

difficulties in academics (lack of credits), attendance issues, and overall frustration with

their lack of control over their academic progress.

Participant 1 stated that he was not on track to graduate and that his lack of state

mandated testing put a "target" on his back. The more remedial classes they placed him

in the more he "rebelled" with the administrative staff. Participant 3 felt that because of

her learning disabilities her academic performances were subpar, and she was already

older than most of her peers. She stated, "I was so frustrated with all my academics that I

hung with the wrong crowd and got into some trouble." Participant 3 stated "At one point

I was placed in Edgenuity all day long, lectures can be boring but being in a computer

class all day was way worse." "I would go to the bathroom and just hang out because I

was going against the system, against administration, I was doing things my way, but then I would get suspended and in trouble all the time."

Participant 5 expressed the sentiment that in his traditional high school, his presence seemed inconsequential, as the focus primarily revolved around his performance in mandated tests, rather than his overall well-being or engagement in the school community. He stated, "I wouldn't show up to school for weeks, nobody ever reached out or even cared, so why bother." He felt that he had zero control over his academics. He stated the worst part about his traditional high school was losing all his electives to be placed in either remedial courses or credit recovery. Participant 5 stated "I first I was angry that I was administratively placed in an alternative placement, I felt they had taken away my choices." He felt pushed out by his traditional high school and even his mom wanted him at another placement. Once he arrived at the alternative school, he realized that he was in charge and had control over his academic success. When he got into trouble, the staff counseled him and discussed why he was acting out. Participant 5 stated "the staff cared about my feelings and provided more mentorship and support towards educational success than his traditional high school. I felt someone was in my corner."

Sub question 2: Did you ever want to drop out of high school?

Each of the participants discussed both contemplating and, in some cases, actually carrying out the act of dropping out and leaving a conventional high school setting. Participant 2 recalls transferring to several different traditional high schools within a year only to find that she was falling further and further behind academically. She finally decided to work full-time and dropped out. It was at the exhortation of her family and

finally her grandmother bribing her with a vehicle that prompted her to return to high school. Once she tried to return to her traditional zoned school, she was told she was too credit deficient and did not have the adequate testing to be readmitted. She was told that she needed to go to a for credit charter school.

Sub question 3: What do you believe led you to be placed in one of these programs?

Most of the participants describe prior educational instability such as lack of credits (out of cohort), attendance issues, discipline issues, feeling that no one cared about them, and lack of state mandated testing as the reasons they were placed in an alternative high school setting. Participant 1, 3 and 5 stated that alternative placement was mainly due to the crowd they associated with and how they interacted with administration and faculty in the traditional high school setting. Attendance and lack of testing was a mitigating factor with several of the participants. Participant 3 stated "I just didn't want to attend school anymore, and when I did attend school the teachers and counselor would make negative comments." Throughout her narrative she describes getting into trouble and hanging out with the wrong crowd, "I figured it really didn't matter what I did, I know my crowd was wrong, but I wanted to be sent home, it really didn't matter to me that I was falling even further behind."

Sub question 4: What did placement in this program do to your academic performance?

Participant 1 stated that he did not initially have a choice in program placement. He felt he was often targeted in his traditional high school and had severe attendance

issues. Participant 1 stated "Although I had a lot of health issues that contributed to my lack of attendance, I was also hanging out with a rough crowd, I was getting out of school suspensions because I refused to do in-school suspensions." When he was originally placed in an alternative graduation placement high school, he decided not to attend and completely dropped out of school. After a while he decided to return to high school for his family. When he tried to return to his traditional high school, they did not allow him to reenter stating that he was too credit deficient and an attendance risk. They provided him with a few placement options all outside of his traditional high school setting. His options were completely online, homeschool, or a couple of alternative high schools. He decided to visit one of the traditional charters. Participant 1 stated that at first, he felt pushed out and the lack of control made him "angry and confused." Once he visited the school and the environment, he felt a renewed sense of "hope". Participant 4 stated that having control over his environment provided a "shift in mindset." Participant 4 finally felt that he could go as fast or as slow when it came to earning credits as he wished. He stated it took him a bit to realize that the "power was all his." He felt empowered to finish something without having to worry about following traditional guidelines and rules. When asked to clarify he stated that "if I wanted to complete all my math credits first or last, I had the power to do just that, or if I wanted to just work on my history credits on a Tuesday, I had the option to go into a different room and complete those credits." Participant 2 stated that not having to be enrolled in 7 class periods (required in high schools) everyday allowed her some control. having the ability to not do 7 periods or worry about having 3 physical education classes was what kept her going to the

alternative school, even when she had the option of graduating from her traditional high school. Participant 2 stated "I have a love of learning, but I learn at my own pace, I like to feel like I have some control over what I learn." Participant 4 recalls going to his counselor and asking why he was in 3 math classes. He stated "She just wouldn't listen to me, all I wanted was the military class and she said I had to be in 3 classes because of low test scores and credit deficiencies" at that point he just recalled feeling dejected and like a failure. Participant 4 remembers being removed from the military class and placed in remedial and additional math class. "I felt like a loser, wasting my time, with zero control over my life, I just didn't want to go to school anymore, it was pointless."

Themes Related to RQ2

RQ 2: What affect did placement in the alternative program have on attitudes towards your self-determination towards program completion?

5 out of 6 participants stated that alternative placement changed their attitude towards program completion. Participant 1 was the most vocal about his determination to finish and finally get a diploma. He felt that his time was limited due to his illness and that he had found a place with people who not only cared about his education but also cared about him. This realization helped him change his attitude and gave him a "renewed desire to get his high school diploma." Participant 1 stated "having a diploma really doesn't matter to me, but it matters to my dad, to my family."

Sub question 1: What is self- determination?

4 out of the 6 participants knew and could define self-determination. Some participants required a provided definition to assist in comprehending the question more

effectively. The provided definition for self-determination clarified it as the ability to take charge of one's choices and actions, free from external influences or control. It's the ability to set one's own path and act in alignment with personal desires and motivations. Once the definition was provided, the participants understood the scope of the question and were able to provide narratives relating to the research question. To ensure they all understood the question I asked clarifying questions regarding self-determination. Participant 1 stated that for him self-determination was holding himself accountable for his actions and goals even when no one else cared. Participant 2 defined self-determination as "putting your mind to something and finding something to be passionate about even if you don't want to do it."

Sub question 2: How did entering the program make you feel?

3 out of the 6 participants stated that they initially felt unwanted, hopeless, and without educational direction. Participant 1 stated "They made me feel like I was Pablo Escobar or something like that." Participant 2 stated that after so many different traditional settings she did not have a lot of hope that she would finally be able to finish high school and get a high school diploma. Participant 2 also stated that in her mind she gave the school "2 months" and if she did not see hope or if she did not have any motivation, she was going to get her GED. Participant 6 stated that entering the program was her only hope of ever receiving a diploma due to her lack of credits, prior homeschool education, and testing requirements.

Sub question 3: How did placement into an alternative graduation program change your attitude towards yourself?

All participants initially had negative feelings of themselves due to their placement. Participant 1 asked himself "What kind of loser am I." Participant 3 stated "This is the only place that will take someone like me". Participant 4 stated "No one else wants me so here I am." Participant 5 stated "I wasn't going to get attached to anyone, I was just waiting for my mom to give in and let me drop out of high school."

According to the participants the attitude shift was quick and continued throughout their enrollment. Participant 2 recalled finishing a class within two weeks of enrollment. Once that class was completed her school mentor sat her down and came up with a detailed "success plan." She then had to take her success plan to two teachers and 1 additional staff member for accountability. She stated that she was embarrassed at first, "I was like this is just one class, what's the big deal." She remembered that her accountability people and administration were so excited over her one accomplishment. Seeing their excitement initiated a drastic shift in her attitude and motivation changed. She stated, "I was like I can do this, I did this, and I have a goal now."

The other participants describe a similar shift from not having any motivation, desire, or belief in themselves, to suddenly having more motivation, determination, and belief in achieving their goals of graduating from high school with a diploma.

Sub question 4: How did placement into an alternative graduation program change your attitude towards school?

Participant 4's narrative was incredibly detailed and heartfelt as he described his experiences in and out of traditional and alternative high school settings. When asked about attitude toward self-determination and the decision to return to school he stated, "I

had to decide if I wanted to worry about the one step in the small goal or the big goal in the endgame." When asked to clarify the endgame, he stated the "The endgame is the diploma." Participant 4 affirmed that being placed in an alternative graduation setting completely changed his attitude towards school by allowing him some control over his academics and finally feeling like he belonged somewhere. He stated, "If I was absent someone would take time to call me and see why I wasn't at school, all the support and caring made me motivated to go to school."

Themes Related to RQ 3

RQ 3: What effect did placement in the alternative graduation program have on your self-efficacy and program completion?

Sub question 1: What is your definition of self-efficacy?

4 out of the 6 participants understood the definition of self-efficacy. Before proceeding with the sub-questions, the researcher found it necessary to offer a definition of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their own ability to successfully complete a specific task or achieve a particular goal. Self-efficacy is about how confident you feel in your own capability to get things done. Once the concept of self-efficacy was clarified, all the participants comprehended it and were able to provide insights and comments regarding the sub-question.

Sub question 2: How did placement into an alternative graduation program influence your self-efficacy?

The participants all felt that entering a graduation placement program added to their self-efficacy. Participant 1 recalled his sentiments prior to entering this school

compared to his traditional high school, "I didn't have many goals, but once the teachers, and administration took the time to outline a plan." Participant 3 stated I didn't have a goal, but they helped me see that I could actually be something, I started planning for my future."

Sub question 3: Do you believe this was a positive or negative influence?

5 out of the 6 participants felt that placement in an alternative graduation program was a positive influence on their academic success and obtaining a high school diploma. Participant 1 stated, "Going to the alternative school changed my feelings towards school, towards myself, and the people at the school, I have made lifelong friends." Participant 2 stated, "Talking to my mentors changed my life." Participant 4 stated "I truly believe that being transferred to another school led me to take my life in a positive path or direction."

Sub question 4: How did placement into the program influence your motivation?

All the participants expressed varying levels of motivation prior to and after program placement. Participant 2 found that in order to remain in school she had to find her motivation to continue attending school. Participant 2 stated "I was so used to skipping school that it was difficult to find the motivation to attend on a regular basis." Her mentor suggested that she celebrate every little step. She stated, "I realized that what I was doing was good for me, I had support, I was proud of myself and that motivated me to keep going." During an impromptu conversation initiated by participant 2. She mentioned she is now managing a large hospitality center and is continuing her education in marketing and real estate.

Sub question 5: Did you feel that the alternative graduation program was the only way to get a high school diploma?

All the participants believed that placement in an alternative graduation program was the only way they could or would have achieved program completion. All the participants credit mentors and faculty members with improving their self-efficacy and overall improvement in their educational outlook. Participant 6 describes her feelings of elation when she realized that not only would she achieve a high school diploma, but that she may graduate earlier than anticipated. Participant 6 stated "I was scared because the traditional high school wouldn't take me, they thought I didn't have enough credits because of home school, but Central took me and I managed to graduate earlier than even I expected." During the follow-up interview participant 6 stated she had just enrolled at the community college and was going to pursue a career in education to help students who struggled like she did. She stated that going to an alternative school "changed her life and changed the way she looked at herself and how she perceived education." Participant 4 has entered an EMT program and felt that without the mentorship provided through the alternative program placement he would never have had "the opportunity to be on a new path in life or a new belief in himself."

Five out of the six participants perceived either explicitly or implicitly that they were not welcomed in their traditional school environment. Participants in this study overcame several obstacles to overcome their perceived failures that led to placement in an alternative graduation program. 5 out of 6 participants viewed placement in an alternative graduation program as an improvement in their self-determination, self-

efficacy, and motivation which resulted in program completion and ultimately the achievement of a high school diploma. 4 out of 6 participants' narratives tell of how having control over their academic futures, settings, and caring faculty helped motivate them and keep them on track towards their diploma goals and future educational goals.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study. One limitation was the geographical scope which was small and limited to one county. Another limitation was the lack of English Language Learners (ELLs) in this study. Although a few were recruited their lack of English prohibited their participation in this study. The narratives of these participants are unique to their area and their experiences. According to Creswell (2007) my research findings, notes, and observations during the interview process may help future researchers understand this population and alternative graduations programs in further research. Another limitation was participants who did not complete the program due to testing requirements, receiving their GED, or going to a private institute to receive a diploma.

Implications

At-risk students are often placed in alternative graduation programs. The participants in this study reported a variety of factors that led to their success or lack of success in an alternative graduation program. Participants openly and honestly addressed the research questions via their narratives through the lens of alternative graduation programs. Their voices should be shared with educational stakeholders to adjust graduation programs in both alternative and traditional high school settings. Further

discussions of the participants' experiences could impact the future success of these programs and how to increase self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation to support program completion.

Conclusion

This research in this study focused on the participants' narratives. Their narratives focused on their journey through the lens of alternative graduation placement programs. The reasons for placement into the program varied with the participants. All the participants had an initial commonality which was feeling unwelcome or a lack of belonging in their traditional high schools. Four of the participants described the tumultuous relationships they had with faculty, staff, and administration. All the participants described a defining moment where they were either forced out of their traditional high school or made the decision to leave their traditional high school setting and enter an alternative graduation program. These participants initially felt expelled and unwanted, but most found a placement that helped them find new goals while achieving the old goals set upon them. All the participants at the time of the interviews had passed state testing and had received their high school diplomas. 3 of the 6 participants were enrolled in a college program, another participant was just finishing an EMT certification. All the participants stated they would recommend an alternative setting due to the ratio of students and teachers, which allowed for mentorship and more educational help. The participants felt that the smaller setting and smaller groups allowed them to ask more questions and not have to deal with some of the issues that kept hindering their educational progress in a traditional high school.

Summary

In Chapter 4, the data collection, setting, demographics, analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results of the study were presented. With the use of NVIVO and manual coding, all data was analyzed inductively and deductively. All Participants participated in hermeneutic conversations allowing for rich and thick narratives. During the interviews, I used open-ended questions and followed up with some clarification questions. Overall, I allowed the participants to relive their stories and allowed them to feel comfortable enough to provide insightful narratives. In chapter 5 I present the discussion, conclusions recommendations, and implications for social change.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to look at self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation of at-risk students through the lens of alternative graduation programs. My goal as the researcher was to understand the participants' experiences through their narratives. Through the review of peer-edited prior literature, I found a need to hear the experiences of the at-risk student through their narratives. In a review of the literature, research conducted by Cabus and De Witte (2016), Deci (1996),Deci et al. (1991), Eisenman et al. (2015), and Reeve et al. (2018) concluded that an educational environment that cultivates self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation is paramount to a successful educational experience.

In this chapter, I explore the unique narratives, life stories, and personal experiences of individuals. As I navigated through the intricate paths of these narratives, I uncovered rich insights that shed light on the experiences of at-risk students through the lens of alternative graduation programss. The use of narrative inquiry as my methodological lens not only allowed me to capture the nuances of individual experiences but also unveiled the collective tapestry of stories that contributed to a deeper understanding of the participant's experiences.

Interpretations of Findings

Six distinct themes emerged from the narratives of participants' experiences and stories as described through the lens of alternative graduation programs. As illustrated in table 3, the six emerging themes were attendance, credits, control, setting, feeling of belonging, and motivation.

Table 3

Themes in Relation to the Research Questions

Research question	Themes
RQ1	Attendance, Control, Credit attainment
RQ2	Control, Setting, Feeling of belonging, Motivation
RQ	Motivation, Credits, Feeling of belonging

Research Question 1

RQ1: What are at-risk students' perceptions of being placed in alternative graduation programs? The themes that emerged for RQ1 were attendance, control, and credit attainment. Participants described their traditional high school experiences and how their behaviors and lack of self-determination led to enrollment in an alternative graduation program. The participants described how they often did not attend school and when they did, they often felt like they were not in control of their education.

The participants spoke of having control over their learning processes, curriculum choices, and elective activities. They often described disillusionment with having seven class periods and being forced to take electives or remedial courses they did not feel were a benefit to their overall graduation goals. The findings indicated that the degree of control they experienced significantly impacted their overall self-determination, satisfaction, and motivation. The participants also discussed how they lacked sufficient credits to continue with a traditional high school and still earn their high school diploma.

Many of the participants emphasized the importance of earning credits because to them credits or lack thereof represent a pathway to graduation and an overall motivating factor that influenced their overall experiences in both the traditional high school and the alternative program setting. In accordance to the literature presented by Powell (2013) and Huntington-Klein et al. (2021), students experiencing positive motivation toward earning credits for graduation exhibit heightened productivity, greater self-determination, and increased motivation for success.

Research Question 2

RQ2: What affect does placement in an alternative graduation program have on students' attitudes toward self-determination and program completion? The themes that emerged for RQ2 were control, setting, feeling of belonging, and motivation. Participants spoke of their experiences that led to changes in their self-determination, attitude, setting, and program completion. Participants discussed how they suddenly had more control over their education. For this study, I employed a combination of Deci and Ryan's SDT and Bandura's self-efficacy theory. This integrated framework suggests that the ability to make choices, make decisions, and exercise control within education contexts can significantly impact both self-determination and self-efficacy. Within the theoretical framework, it is recognized that educational environments offering students autonomy and control over their academic and environmental decisions have the potential to boost their self-determination and motivation when it comes to accomplishing tasks, such as achieving a diploma. Several participants spoke about being able to choose the time they

went to school and the classes they chose to finish. Participants felt they could control the classes they were able to take and not have to worry about unnecessary electives.

Many of the participants described the importance of their educational settings, they spoke of atmosphere, accessibility, and most importantly, the presence of a supportive and caring community. This theme underscores the idea that the educational setting can profoundly affect participants' feelings of motivation, belonging, and overall self-determination. In prior research conducted by Ryan and Deci (2000), it was established that the educatioestablishronmen possesses the capacity to either enhance or diminish self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation with regard to completing a graduation program. This underscores the significance of educational settings, particularly in the context of at-risk students.

Research Question 3

RQ3: What affect does placement in an alternative graduation program have on students' attitudes towards self-efficacy and program completion? The themes that occurred for RQ3 were motivation, credits, and feelings of belonging.

Several narratives centered around the participant's newfound motivation towards program completion due to a positive learning environment, a sense of belonging, and the knowing that entering an alternative graduation program was the only way they would receive a high school diploma. The feelings of belonging emerged as a powerful theme in the participants' narratives and provided rich insight into their experiences. Many described the significance of feeling connected to their environment and their instructors.

The participants who suddenly felt a sense of belonging in their new environment expressed higher levels of motivation, self-determination, and self-efficacy. According to previous research, the manner in which a student views their own abilities and their educational surroundings can significantly impact their academic experiences as evidenced in studies conducted by (Bandura et al., 1999; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Hidayat Rafiola et al., 2020; Locke et al., 2007; Stajkovic et al., 2018; Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield et al., 2008).

The findings of this study further reinforce the idea that students' perspectives and emotions can either positively or negatively impact their educational journey. This theme underscores the significance of nurturing inclusive and supportive environments to enrich students' experiences in any educational context, be it traditional or alternative. Students consistently yearned for a sense of belonging.

The themes are interrelated. Bandura's research indicated that students who possess a high level of self-efficacy and control over their educational choices possessed more motivation and persistence, influencing their ability to set and achieve academic goals (Bandura et al., 1999; Bandura & Locke, 2003; Giddens, 2016). These factors can significantly influence program completion. The participants felt that a program that provided a positive and supportive setting that fostered a sense of belonging was more likely to have self-determined, motivated, and engaged participants who were committed to completing the program successfully. As the participants' heartfelt narratives unfolded, a noticeable transformation occurred in their emotions and feelings. Their outlook shifted from negative to positive, particularly concerning their self-determination, self-efficacy,

and motivation, especially when compared to their experiences in a traditional high school environment. When implementing high school programs for at-risk students, it is crucial to take into account significant factors such as feelings of belonging, motivation, the learning environment, and mentorship.

Limitations of the Study

One significant limitation of this study was the relatively small sample size. The study was limited to six participants with specific inclusion criteria and in a specific geographical area. Per study inclusion criteria all participants had received a high school diploma after placement in an alternative graduation programs. The study primarily relied on specific experiences and narratives as provided by the participants. While the qualitative narrative inquiry approach can offer valuable insights, it may not capture the full spectrum of perspectives or experiences as related to the research topic. Since I focused on a specific geographical area it may not be representative of other populations. The interviews were based on the experiences of the participants through the lens of an alternative graduation program, and these specific experiences and narratives are part of the innate characteristics of the participants. Due to the unique circumstances and participants of this study, it may be challenging to reproduce the exact same research design or methods in a different setting or at a different time. This limits the ability to validate the finding through replication. I am unsure if this study can be reproduced in another area or with a larger population of graduates. This study was representative of the feelings and experiences of the participants in this area with shared characteristics that may not duplicate.

Recommendation

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to gain a deeper understanding of the at-risk student through the lens of an alternative graduation program. Future research recommendation is to further study the at-risk students who were placed in alternative graduation programs through a larger scope and lens. Recommendation of a longitudinal study to track the educational outcome of the at-risk student to gain further insights comparing alternative graduation programs with those in a traditional educational setting. As previous research conducted by Bandura illuminated the significance of self-efficacy as a pivotal factor contributing to a positive and successful educational experience (Bandura, 1993; Bandura et al., 1999; Bandura & Locke, 2003).

Further research should focus on the relationships between the staff and those students and how those relationships affected the outcome of their educational choices, successes, and failures. An in-depth study could provide more information on the dynamics of staff-student relationships within alternative graduation programs and how these relationships impact educational and academic success. Further research could also focus on how student's control over their education and setting influences their self-determination and motivation to continue their education.

Implications

The findings of this study could provide insight to various school districts and officials on how alternative graduation programs could be structured to ensure students are receiving the educational care they need to be successful in a high school setting.

Program policies could be evaluated to ensure they align with the goals of the relationship between educators and students acknowledging and respecting their diverse needs. Successful alternative graduation programs could be reviewed to see the learning pathways to access a variety of resources to cater to the individual strengths and needs of the at-risk student.

Conclusion

In this study I interviewed 6 participants who had entered an alternative graduation program, they revealed the complex emotions and interplay between attendance, credit attainment, educational control, educational setting, feeling of belonging, and motivation and how those factors shaped their educational experiences. Through their experiences, they described how their educational setting influenced their self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation. Participants all disclosed heartfelt narratives regarding their challenges in both traditional and alternative high schools.

One of the commonalities that stood out was that the participants never felt they belonged in their traditional high school. They expressed that they did not feel they had anyone to connect with or who they felt cared about their socioemotional or educational needs. 5 out of the 6 participants found that they finally achieved that feeling of belonging through a different setting in an alternative graduation program. Feeling as though they belonged somewhere helped them achieve the motivation to attain their graduation goals and remove some of the negative behaviors they were exhibiting in a traditional setting. Belonging highlights the importance of fostering an inclusive and supportive environment which in turn enhanced the participant's educational experiences

and their overall self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation. Their change of placement also helped them regain control over their education allowing some of the negative behaviors such as attendance and lack of credit to diminish as their feelings of belonging increased. All the participants described the changes in their educational goals and motivation towards those goals once they believed they belonged and mattered. The alternative graduation programs met the needs of the participants both educationally and emotionally. Bandura believed that once control over educational environments occurred, students would be able to implement their self-determination and motivational skills (Bandura & Barbaranelli, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2000). The narratives these participants provided highlighted their experiences through the lens of an alternative graduation program, they all believed that without placement into these programs, they would not have achieved a high school diploma.

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Appendix A: Recruitment letter

Dear former student,

My name is Donka C. Flaig, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am doing a qualitative study using narrative inquiry, so I am looking for students to describe their experiences through narrative stories.

You are invited to participate in a research study that focuses on alternative graduation programs such as, but not limited to Edgenuity, APEX, credit recovery, Giant Campus, FLVS, homeschool. Your name has been provided to me by the graduation pathway director as being an ideal candidate to give me valuable firsthand accounts into alternative graduation programs from your own perspective. I am conducting interviews as part of this research study to gain an understanding of the student and alternative graduation programs and how their experiences influenced their perception self-determination, self-efficacy, and motivation towards program completion.

The interview process takes around 30-45 minutes. I am simply trying to capture your thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perspectives on being a student who entered an alternative graduation program. Your responses to the questions will be kept strictly confidential as will your identity. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings. The researcher will make sure that no personal gain will be obtained by your participation. You are assured that this study will be confidential, and your names will not be disclosed to any person should you agree or decline to participate in the study.

There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to my research and findings could lead to greater public understanding of alternative graduation programs and the students placed in such programs. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at or

Thanks

Donka C. Flaig

Appendix B: Interview questions

RQ1 What are at-risk students' perceptions of being placed in alternate graduation

programs?

1. How do you describe your academic experiences in high school?

2. Did you ever want to drop out of high school?

3. What do you believe led you to be placed in one of these programs?

4. What did placement in this program do to your academic performance?

RQ2: What affect does placement in an alternative graduation program have on attitudes

towards self-determination towards program completion?

1. What is self-determination?

2. How did entering the program make you feel?

3. How did placement into an alternative graduation program change your attitude

   towards yourself?

4. How did placement into an alternative graduation program change your attitude
   towards school?

RQ 3: What affect does placement in an alternative graduation program have on students'

attitudes towards self-efficacy and program completion?

1. What is your definition of self-efficacy?

2. How did placement into an alternative graduation program influence your self-efficacy?

3. Do you believe this was a positive or negative influence?

4. How did placement into the program influence your motivation?

5. Did you feel that the alternative graduation program was the only way to get a high school diploma?

Appendix C: Inclusive/Exclusive Criteria Intake Questions

<u>Inclusive Criteria Questions:</u>

1. Are you between the ages of 18-25?

2. Were you part of an alternative graduation program or pathway? Some of these may or may not include Giant Campus, Smart Horizons, Edgenuity, Credit Recovery, Apex, alternate placement, online program.

<u>Exclusion Criteria Questions:</u>

1. Have you ever been enrolled in a school the researcher has been employed at?

2. Do you have prior knowledge, or have you had prior interactions with the researcher?