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Teacher Effectiveness With At-Risk Students in Alternative Education Settings

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

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MA, Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2005

BA, Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

At-risk youth come to school with a variety of challenges that sometimes lead to voluntary or involuntary disengagement from traditional high schools. Alternative education programs are an alternate placement for students who have disengaged from traditional high schools. Although researchers have shown that teacher and staff approaches to the overall educational experience of a student contribute to student success in alternative education programs, they have also highlighted that the lack of teacher-student relationships contributes to student disengagement. These findings may indicate that not all teachers are willing or able to connect with at-risk students. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what educators identified as the personal factors that support their motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting in a Northeastern U.S. city. Self-determination theory was the theoretical foundation to study the relationship between the motivation of an educator and their effectiveness. Data included semistructured interviews and guided writing assignments with 4 educators from an effective alternative education program. Seven significant themes emerged that educators identified as personal factors that support motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting: (a) understanding, (b) defining moment, (c) perspective and outlook, (d) personal and/or psychological goal attainment, (e) intrinsic motivation, (f) teacher beyond academics, and (g) internal fortitude. Implications for social change include information to help in recruitment of effective teachers for engaging at-risk students, thereby promoting their chances for academic and nonacademic success.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my one and only child and the love of my life, Makai Sanks. You are the reason I embarked on this journey. I wanted to make sure I had a solid foundation so that you and I would always be ok and would never have to depend on anybody. I wanted to instill a scholarly attitude in you from the beginning so that you know and understand anything is possible with God, faith, and the right attitude.

Also, I dedicate this work to all first generation college students who come from a low-socioeconomic area. I dedicate this to you because I want you to know nothing is impossible. I want you to know that your destiny is yours and can absolutely be fulfilled. I want you to listen to your heart and follow that pulse.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

In some school districts, a gap exists between understanding the many variables students face that affect their learning abilities and how to motivate them to succeed. Many factors contribute to engaging a student in the learning process that go beyond curriculum instruction. Some studies show educators can engage students through understanding what motivates them (Bickerstaff, 2010; Caroleo, 2014; Dods, 2013; Edgar, 2014; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Porche, Fortuna, Lin, & Alegria, 2011; Smith & Thomson, 2014). This concept supports the idea that the learning capacity of students can be directly related to their motivation but should not be confused with their ability. Having the ability to motivate students in their learning process and recognizing the impact that engagement has on their performance is vital in ensuring the success of students.

While this is the case, some students continue to fail and remain disengaged from academic and vocational programs (Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011). Students who have emotional, behavioral, and academic difficulties that are not manageable in traditional high schools typically are considered at-risk by academic professionals and voluntarily or involuntarily drop out of school. As an alternative to traditional high schools, students who drop out may choose to attend alternative education programs (Caroleo, 2014; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010). Unfortunately, not all alternative education programs are successful in engaging, retaining, and graduating at-risk students who were not successful in traditional high school. In some cases,

alternative education settings do not have formalized systems and standard operating procedures, and according to research by Geronimo (2010, p. 207) and Kim & Taylor (2008, p. 211), many alternative programs function as “dumping grounds” for unwanted and unmotivated students.

On the other hand, some alternative education programs are effective in their mission of achieving student success for at-risk young people who have not been successful in traditional high schools (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Shankland, Genolini, Riou-França, Guelfi, & Lonescu, 2010; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Wilson et al., 2011). These programs are designed to meet the needs of the student first, and they incorporate components geared towards the growth, development, and success of the student that are not used in mainstream classrooms or typical alternative education programs (Laursen, 2010; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Wilson et al., 2011). Students who attend effective alternative education programs are getting needs met that were not met in traditional education programs or other alternative education programs. Students exiting effective alternative high schools have reported less anxiety, less depression symptoms, better academic results, greater psychological well-being, increased self-esteem and positive perception of themselves, higher levels of satisfaction in their current lives than those in traditional high school students (Caroleo, 2014; Shankland et al., 2010).

There are a wealth of studies that have shown students who were not successful in traditional high school settings being engaged in alternative schools (Bickerstaff, 2010; Geronimo, 2010; Kim, 2010; Hendrickson, 2012), being satisfied with their schooling, and producing positive outcomes (Caroleo, 2014; Shankland et al., 2010; Smith &

Thomson, 2014). Researchers have assessed the components of effective alternative education programs (Caroleo, 2014; Edgar, 2014; Geronimo, 2010; Hendrickson, 2012; Johnston, Cooch, & Pollard, 2004; Lind, 2013; Smith & Thomason, 2014) and have found that one of these components is the approach some teachers and staff members take to the overall educational experience (Dods, 2013; Edgar, 2014; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Rice, 2010; Smith, & Thomson, 2014; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Wilson et al., 2011). The components that have been assessed include teacher strategies, teacher to student relationships, teacher intervention strategies for difficult students, classroom practices, behavior of effective teachers, and even teacher judgment and how these factors relate to practices of effective teachers in alternative education programs.

The goal of alternative education programs transcends academics to include the social, emotional, and behavioral growth of students as a factor in success (Caroleo, 2014), and teachers play a major role in facilitating the nontraditional learning environment. One almost universal finding of what contributes to such results is the impact teachers have in engaging disengaged youth, primarily through caring about them as individuals (Dods, 2013; Edgar, 2014; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Rice, 2010; Smith, & Thomson, 2014; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Wilson et al., 2011).

While there is literature on how teacher and staff approaches to students' overall educational experience contribute to student success in alternative education programs, there is a gap in exploring personal factors of teachers from the perspectives of the

teacher that contribute to their willingness and ability to engage at-risk students. The literature does not address why some educators are willing to take risks to engage disengaged students who were not successful in former academic environments. In Chapter 1, I discuss the literature that shows that not every teacher is willing or able to engage at-risk students, possibly due to the challenges that accompany the students. The literature shows how teachers are effective with at-risk students, but what researchers have yet to explore is what drives some teachers to work with a challenging population of students. It is understood that teachers must engage students as individuals, but it is not well understood why there are some teachers who are willing and able to successfully create this relationship. By talking to educators themselves and understanding what they identify as personal factors that support their motivation, eagerness, and interest to be an effective teacher in an effective alternative education setting, there is a greater chance of getting adequately prepared educators in these environments to meet the needs of at-risk students.

In order to fully understand why it is important to identify personal factors that supports a teacher's motivation, interest, and eagerness to be effective in an effective alternative education setting, there is a need to understand the complexity involved in working with at risk students and alternative education programs. In this proposal, I explored a variety of characteristics of students who are considered at risk to fully understand the challenges educators face with teaching at risk students, alternative education programs where many at risk students end up, and the impact that various factors have on engaging at risk students in alternative education programs.

The results of this study will contribute to the existing body of literature by providing empirical evidence on what works with the population of students, particularly regarding the influence of teachers who play a major role in their success. It is the responsibility of educators to be knowledgeable about and implement practical, effective strategies to meet the needs of students (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2014). The literature surveys students and administrators on what contributes to effective alternative education settings, but what remains to be explored is what teachers identify as the factors contributing to effective alternative education settings. Chapter 1 includes sections on the background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, research question, theoretical framework, nature of the study, definition of terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study.

Background

Students who drop out of high school have long been at the center of scholarly attention (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Rumberger, 1987), yet high school students in the United States are continuing to drop out and disengage from school (Porche et al., 2011; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). One in three students drop out of school every year (Smith & Thomson, 2014). The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (2000) reported the number of students suspended and expelled from school doubled from 1975 to 2000, highlighting the increase of student behavioral difficulties in traditional schools and the number of students being disengaged from school. In addition, there are lower graduation rates of Black and Hispanic youth with an

average graduation rate of 50% (Porche et al., 2011; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010). Furthermore, over 70% of incarcerated inmates have dropped out of high school (Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Porche et al., 2011).

In 2009, 16% of teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 were not engaged in work or study (Wilson et al.., 2011) and 3.3% of public high school students in grades 9-12 dropped out during the 2011-2012 school year, which is the last reporting year (NCES, 2015). Additionally, NCES (2015) data from 2012 showed 3.8 million school-aged youth who dropped out of high school and were not in possession of a high school diploma or certificate of completion, and 2.6 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who were not institutionalized were also not enrolled in high school and were not in possession of a high school diploma or alternative credential. The dropout rates of Black and Hispanic students have historically been higher than those of White students (Bickerstaff, 2010), with the most recent 2012 dropout rates of 6.8%, 5.4%, and 1.6% respectively (NCES, 2015). Similarly, the dropout rate of students living in low-income families have historically been higher than students in high-income families (Bickerstaff, 2010), with the most recent 2012 data showing dropout rates of 5.9% and 1.3% respectively (NCES, 2015).

Given the data on noncompletion rates in traditional high schools, some attention must be given to the factors contributing to the disengagement of students from all educational programs, including alternative education programs. Factors that researchers have shown to contribute to students' disengagement include (a) home environments of nonnuclear families, (b) low academic ability, (c) overall perceptions about and towards

school, (d) parental education and training, (e) belief the school has responsibility for academic failures, (f) school relationships, (g) poverty, (h) the need to be employed to support their family, and (i) school size (Smith & Thomson 2014; Wilson et al., 2011). Although personal factors are usually key contributors to a young person being at risk for not completing school, researchers have further suggested that a school experience that includes being deprived of positive relationships with teachers, having a large class size, and experiencing academic failures leads to ultimate disengagement of at-risk students and contributes to their noncompletion (Smith & Thomson 2014; Wilson et al., 2011). Students attribute their resistance to the learning process in traditional high school to the lack of relatable curricular information, cultural disconnects with the teachers, and lack of understanding and compassion when personal obligations need to be met (Bickerstaff, 2010; Geronimo, 2010; Kim, 2010; Hendrickson, 2012). Equally important is that students have felt pushed out of school, as if teachers were (a) more concerned with work completion than student comprehension of material, (b) do not understand students' lives outside of school and fail to make accommodations for them to succeed, (c) do not care, and (d) have low expectations for students if they display any qualities different from most other students (Bickerstaff, 2010; Kim, 2010; Hendrickson, 2012). This is not to say all teachers demonstrate these behaviors and attitudes, but these are some of the key reasons behind students disengaging from school.

To respond to the growing population of students not engaged in high school, alternative education programs, including alternative high schools, emerged to offer another solution (Caroleo, 2014). Students exhibiting emotional and behavioral

challenges in high school usually are assigned the term *at-risk*, and many times these students are placed in alternative education programs away from mainstream classrooms (Caroleo, 2014; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010). Alternative education programs have served as a placement for students who have behavioral or academic needs that cannot be tolerated or supported in the traditional school system (Caroleo, 2014; Kim, 2010; Smith & Thomson, 2014).

Some researchers have shown that accountability lies in the expertise of educators who are responsible for understanding the factors that enable the development of every student and those that prevent student engagement (Dods, 2013; Edgar, 2014; Hardman et al., 2014). There are several variables that impact students' learning abilities and motivation. According to Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) and Bickerstaff (2010), students entering alternative education settings typically have experienced a wide variety of life trauma or obstacles that have impacted their previous ability to complete school. These include mental health issues, learning problems, school failure, and family problems. Fifty percent of young people who display emotional or behavioral problems resulting from trauma drop out of school (Dods, 2013). Because experiences of trauma hinder a student's relationship building, well-being, and academic and social success in schools, school-based relationships can have a significant impact on these students (Dods, 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

In the literature, many researchers have suggested that teacher and staff approaches to the overall educational experience is an important component of effective alternative education programs (Dods, 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Nelson &

Sneller, 2011; Smith, & Thomson, 2014; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Wilson et al., 2011). At face value, these students often seem uninterested in learning or present as disturbances in the mainstream classroom (Dods, 2013). When no one seems to care in or out of school, these students drop out (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Yet, when a teacher develops a relationship and shows a student they care, it engages the student in their learning, in the school culture, and in their own success (Dods, 2013; Edgar, 2014; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Rice, 2010; Smith, & Thomson, 2014; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Wilson et al., 2011).

Although teachers are a significant contributor to engaging students, low income schools and at-risk populations are not the preferred placement for some teachers (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011; Rice, 2010). Poor administrative leadership, lack of collaboration, inadequate discipline, and general dissatisfaction with the job and responsibilities summarizes how some teachers perceive their experiences in low income schools (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011). Additionally, although trauma history can have an impact on a student's school experience, the effect a student's history with trauma experience has on a teacher can also be challenging. Some of students' academic struggles are embedded in social and emotional issues that contribute to their difficulties (Bickerstaff, 2010; Caroleo, 2014; Dods, 2013; Edgar, 2014; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Porche et al., 2011). However, in the classroom, the causes of these difficulties often appear to be a lack of motivation (Bickerstaff, 2010; Smith & Thomson, 2014). For the teacher, the student who is deemed at risk may have failing grades, unknown social and emotional challenges, absenteeism, outbursts, lack of attention, and behavior

concerns, but as noted by Dods (2013) and Donaldson & Johnson (2011), this may be the student who most needs a connection with a caring adult.

Studies have shown that effective teachers make intentional decisions to work with specific populations of students based on intrinsic professional factors (Rice, 2010). If there are specific factors that contribute to teachers intentionally choosing to work with at-risk students despite the challenges the student and the school present, it is important that these influences be identified in an attempt to match effective teachers with disadvantaged students. Studies have shown that teachers who are able to teach with awareness and care about students as individuals will provide students with a connection and sense of worth, which will support their success (Dods, 2013; Edgar, 2014; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Rice, 2010; Smith, & Thomson, 2014; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Wilson et al., 2011). The data shows the need for alternative programs with unconventional approaches, and the literature indicates that engaging at-risk students requires not only employing teaching strategies, but also includes caring and teaching with awareness of social and emotional factors impacting students and effective practices for engaging at risk students. Yet, the literature has shown the challenges presented with working with at-risk students and in alternative education settings. Administrators may not know what to screen for when hiring educators to work with at risk students. They would need to know the qualities to look for when recruiting educators who teach with awareness of social and emotional factors. In this study, I asked educators who willingly work in effective alternative education settings what they identified as personal factors that support their motivation, eagerness, and interest to be

an effective teacher in an effective alternative educational setting. By matching students with educators who work through the challenges that exist with at-risk students in alternative education programs, the likelihood of student success is increased.

Problem Statement

Although researchers have shown that teacher and staff approaches to the overall educational experience of a student contribute to student success within alternative education programs (Dods, 2013; Edgar, 2014; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Rice, 2010; Smith, & Thomson, 2014; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Wilson et al., 2011), they have also highlighted that the lack of teacher-student relationships contributes to student disengagement (Bickerstaff, 2010; Geronimo, 2010; Kim, 2010; Hendrickson, 2012). These findings indicate that not all teachers are willing or able to connect with at-risk students and that not all can be effective in aiding their students' development. Yet, there is limited scholarly understanding of what educators identify as factors contributing to being effective with at-risk students. The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers understand factors that strengthen their impact with at-risk students in an effective alternative educational setting. This study is important because existing literature highlights that not all teachers are effective in engaging disengaged at risk students (Bickerstaff, 2010; Geronimo, 2010; Kim, 2010; Hendrickson, 2012; Smith & Thomson 2014; Wilson et al., 2011). What is known is how to engage students; what is not yet known is what makes teachers willing and able to motivate students engage.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what educators identified as the personal factors that support motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting in a Northeastern U.S. city. Personal factors refers to what the teachers perceive make them willing and able to engage at-risk students in order to help them achieve greater academic results and promote their social, emotional, and behavioral growth.

Research Question

I developed the following research question to guide my inquiry:

RQ: What do educators identify as the personal factors that support motivation, interest and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting?

Theoretical Framework

In studying the factors teachers identify as supporting their motivation, interest, and eagerness to be effective with at-risk students, Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory (SDT) provided a useful construct. SDT refers to a person's intrinsic motivation to meet their psychological needs for goal attainment and the fulfillment that the activity itself gives the individual. SDT suggests that individuals are naturally self-motivated, interested, and eager to succeed. Because of the behaviors most commonly associated with at-risk students attending alternative education schools, an individual working with this population would have an intrinsic desire and passion to believe in the work they do and in their self-efficacy to implement change. By exploring

the research question, I contributed to scholarly understanding by providing the educator's perspective on what factors are related to their willingness and ability to engage at-risk students. In Chapter 2, I provide a more detailed explanation of the SDT, a research-based analysis on how the theory has been applied in previous research, and a thorough look at how the study and research questions can be viewed from the perspective of the theory.

Nature of the Study

This was a qualitative collective case study. This design was best suited for this research plan for several reasons. First, case study research can be completed with an individual, several individuals, a group, an entire program, or an activity (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). This case study included an entire subgroup, educators at an alternative program. Second, the participant can be the subject of a case study or an issue can be addressed by multiple persons to show different perspectives. In this study, I explored commonalities of various educators at the program. Third, a case study approach is selected when an in-depth understanding needs to be developed with clearly identified cases (participants) or a case (Creswell, 2013). My aim was to understand what educators identified as personal factors that contribute to their willingness and ability to engage at-risk students in an effective alternative education setting.

For this reason, a case study was the best approach. I used the research question to explore variables that contribute to their effectiveness and did not focus simply on their teaching strategies. The purpose of the study was to identify personal factors that

emerged through data collection. I explored variables such as personality, motivation, personal upbringing, life experiences, values, personality traits, and professional training.

This case study included educators at an effective alternative education program in a Northeastern U.S. city. The effectiveness of the program is determined by successful effort-to-outcome data. Many nonprofit organizations in New Jersey receive funding from grantors and the state that require qualitative and quantitative reports on outcomes of their programs. Efforts to Outcomes, management information systems, and the Department of Labor Management Information System are examples of grantee reporting systems that capture pre- and posttest scores, surveys on efficacy, impact evaluations, and community engagement metrics, among other measures. To this end, the program I selected for this study had data that showed effectiveness through increased academic scores and the emotional and behavioral growth in its students. My access to the program was a factor in determining the exact location for data collection.

While there are no rules for determining sample sizes in qualitative research, there are considerations based on approach and saturation. For this case study, I obtained a sample of four ($N = 4$) through purposeful sampling that was subject to change as needed to ensure saturation (see Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2009). Selecting a sample of four has been suggested by Creswell (2013) as the minimum number of participants for case studies. A sample of four participants allowed me to interpret the data to understand similarities, patterns, and themes, and to minimize the weakening of the information.

In order to generate an in-depth understanding of the case, I used two forms of data (see Creswell, 2013; 2014). One form of data collection was through interviewing.

The original plan was to conduct individual face-to-face interviews with the educators at their program sites in a confidential meeting location utilizing hand written notes and audio recordings. However, this procedure changed, as will be discussed in Chapter 4. The open-ended questions captured the intrapersonal qualities these educators possessed and made way for emerging themes related to personal identities, turning points, and self-reflection. By interviewing the educators, I was able to capture common themes in what they identified as contributing to their effectiveness. This interviewing allowed me to explore cognitive, feeling, value, and background that I used to identify similarities amongst an intentional sample population specific to their experience with at-risk young adults.

The second form of data collection was a guided writing assignment. I asked the participants to write a letter to self as if they were speaking to their inner self; then I collected the letter as data for analysis. With the guided writing assignment, I asked participants, "Why do you do this; why do you wake up in the morning and return to work?" Having educators reflect on what allowed them to do the work they do provided another avenue of data for the research.

The data analysis process for this study imitated what has been suggested by Creswell (2013; 2014). This process included organizing the data, a read-through of the data, coding and organizing the themes, representing the data, and interpreting the data. First, to organize the data, I created and organized the files. Second, I read through the field notes, transcripts, and letters. In addition, I included notes to create initial codes in order to begin making sense of the complete picture followed by the details. Third, I

created codes and themes of the data by describing the case and the setting in which it occurred (e.g., the classroom or program space). Fourth, I analyzed the data searching for specific themes, aggregating the information into large clusters of ideas, and providing details that supported those themes. Fifth, in interpreting the data, I used categorical aggregation to look at relevant meanings within the subgroup of educators and discuss what was learned.

I analyzed, annotated, and coded the transcripts for the presence of emergent themes. Within that process, I checked, verified, and altered, as needed, the themes that led to the identification of higher order themes across participants. I finalized master themes and related subthemes and created a table of the themes. I audio recorded all interviews with participant permission and transcribed verbatim. To assist in the data management, analysis, and representation as discussed, I utilized a software program, NVivo, which was useful for the study.

Definitions

Alternative education programs: Educational activities that fall outside the traditional K–12 curriculum that serve students who are at risk of school failure. Many states and school districts differ in how their programs are structured inclusive of population of students, setting, and services provided (Porowski, O'Connor, & Luo, 2014).

At-risk student: A student who is likely to fail at school with school failure being seen as dropping out of school before high school graduation (NCES, 1992).

Teacher effectiveness: The academic and nonacademic impact of a teacher on engaging at-risk students in alternative education settings to include attitudes towards and beliefs about at-risk and disengaged students.

Assumptions

One assumption behind this study was that the participants were forthcoming and answered the interview questions honestly, understanding the information would not be used against them but simply as exploratory research. This assumption was highly crucial to the study in order to obtain relevant and credible data for the study. The second assumption was that the findings from this study will be used to guide and enhance the fidelity of effective alternative education programs. This assumption was important to the study because it impacts social change as a result of conducting the study.

Scope and Delimitations

There were specific factors in this study chosen for specific reasons. Based on data from the existing body of literature on students exiting traditional high school, the topic of interest is effective alternative education programs. After an extended review of the literature, a consistent factor contributing to effective alternative education schools and engaging students in alternative education schools was the teacher impact (Dods, 2013; Edgar, 2014; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Rice, 2010; Smith, & Thomson, 2014; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Wilson et al., 2011). Teacher impact has influenced school connectedness and student engagement from the views of researchers, administration, and students in these settings. Beyond that, researchers have explored the ways in which educators connect with students despite the challenges the

student and the schools present with practices such as caring for the student, individualized instruction, respect, and safety (Bickerstaff, 2010; Geronimo, 2010; Kim, 2010; Hendrickson, 2012; Smith & Thomson 2014; Wilson et al., 2011).

To this end, there were boundaries that existed in the study. Due to a gap in the literature of factors contributing to educators willingly engaging at-risk students toward academic and nonacademic success, it was important to discover what teachers identified as personal factors that supported their motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher at an effective alternative education. Additionally, an anticipated boundary of this study was that it only included an alternative education program with data that shows effectiveness of increased academic, social, and emotional measures. However, the procedure for selecting an effective alternative education program was altered, as will be discussed in Chapter 4. As Chapter 2 highlights, alternative education is ambiguously defined in the literature, and there is an absence of standard practices for alternative education schools. As a result, each program is structured differently from one another with various components. Consequently, the selection of a program for this study included an alternative education program that showed effectiveness.

Dewey's transactional theory of inquiry (1946) is a theory that has been used to explore the relationship between students and teachers (as cited in Abowitz, 2000). The theory examines the various factors involved in a student-teacher relationship. The transactional theory of inquiry considers the culture that makes up the background of the student and the teacher and the extent to which that background plays a part in forming the relationship, or the lack thereof. Utilizing this theoretical approach encourages

teachers to explore the behaviors of students who appear to be resistant, not only look to find meaning in those behaviors, but to also use that inquiry to communicate more effectively in the classroom (Abowitz, 2000). This theory was excluded as a theoretical framework for my study because it does not align with examining what it is about the teachers in alternative education programs who are already effective at engaging students.

The purpose of this research study was not to create transferability, as it was exploratory research. A delimitation of the study was my use of purposeful sampling. To ensure I received levels of information rich data, I used purposeful sampling (see Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Educators working with at-risk students who have a different outlook on student success contributed to producing information rich cases.

Limitations

There are several components that can be seen as limitations and weaknesses of any qualitative study, calling into question the ethics of the study. As a key instrument in the study, I was solely responsible for providing an accurate account of a story and the details that constituted the full picture of this research project. To address the credibility of this research design, there were three strategies I employed to secure trustworthiness of the study.

To ensure credibility, I employed a methods triangulation (Patton, 2002). Methods triangulation involves the use of various data sources to test for consistency (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). One, in order to be confident in the data collection, analysis, and results, I checked for the consistency of findings through a flow of evidence that validated the themes and findings. To ensure the final “story” sat well with the

participants, there was corroboration with the participants as I reviewed the final data with the participants.

Furthermore, I utilized an additional two strategies to make sure this research plan has evidence of quality. First, I included the credibility of myself (see Patton, 2002), guaranteed reflexivity within the study (see Creswell, 2013). Second, to ensure a high quality case study, I used a critique checklist as a criteria framework (see Creswell, 2013). This checklist was comprised of criteria I used to assess a good quality case study. By utilizing the checklist through the research process, I made certain to frame the report around how it will be evaluated.

Some limitations that may be seen as bias to impact the data is one, the participants were solely comprised of educators. While the data from this study will impact the student body, this study did not utilize the voice of students since several studies exist on topics related to students in alternative education. Two, this study would only have validity if there was a willingness of educators who meet the criteria to participate in the study because not any educator would satisfy the criteria participation.

As a career agent in this line of work, I needed to remain aware of my biases. I set aside my own beliefs to ensure I did not side with the participants or only provide results that confirmed my professional beliefs.

Significance of the Study

This proposed work will add to a body of literature increasing scholarly understanding of what teachers themselves identify as contributing to an effective alternative education program with a population of students that were not successful in

traditional high schools. By exploring what educators believed to contribute to teacher effectiveness over and above pedagogical strategies, there will be an understanding into how students are more engaged in alternative programs with a positive school experience. This research can be informative in three major ways: One, educate stakeholders on what to screen for when hiring professionals to work in their alternative education or youth development programs. Two, programs can use this information to adopt best practices and improve systems while working with at-risk students. Because educators are at the forefront of ensuring educational outcomes are met, it would be crucial to know who works best with the population. Lastly, traditional high schools will be informed of the teacher to student dynamic to decrease high school dropout rates and placement into alternative education programs. High schools can also use the results of this study to add to training curriculums for professional development. By understanding these components, administrators will ensure the direct service staff working with at risk students are a good fit. The goal of this research was to be an agent of social change and impact the lives of marginalized students. One of the factors involved is the teachers and how and what they bring to the teaching experience.

Social Change

Social change is bringing about awareness to either a gap in the literature or general area of interest that needs addressing and acting upon that knowledge. There is a lot of literature in the field regarding much content around the same subject area. Therefore, social change is beyond the literature, beyond the evidence, and beyond the studies, but in the implementation of change as a result of the aforementioned.

Educational psychology is a great platform to inform various areas but specifically in education. As Sheldon & Biddle (1998, p166) stated, “simple-minded accountability systems,” is a contribution to the statistics we have with students and the international achievement gap that says students in America are out-performed tremendously in comparison to students in other countries (Dr. Wagner, Laureate Education, Inc., 2011; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006 as cited in Rollin, Subotnik, Bassford, & Smulson, 2008). With this being the case, educational psychology can inform some systems to bring about effective social change in the educational system.

Therefore, the results of this research study can be used in a number of ways by professionals or consultants to bring awareness that will create and maintain educational cultures focusing on the development of students in and out of the classroom. Professional development trainings and workshops can be developed, utilizing this and past research, on the evidenced based strategies that work to engage this group of young people to districts where drop out and disengagement rates need addressing to improve the student success rates. Also, a curriculum for professionals can be created to be used in creating or re-creating programs to fit the needs of the student.

Summary

There is existing literature where researchers show teacher and staff approaches to a students’ overall educational experience contribute to student success within alternative education programs. However, there is a gap exploring what leads some educators to their willingness and ability to engage at-risk students. With the change of students, so

should the change of programs seeking to develop the student. It is the role of educators and professionals to become knowledgeable and implement strategies that are effective in meeting the needs of students. Chapter 2 will provide an exhaustive review on key factors related to the alternative education and at-risk students, the theoretical framework for this study, and the search strategy for the literature review.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Teachers in high-poverty schools, even those who have experience and credentials, are generally inadequately prepared and supported to handle the instructional challenges that would be demanding for the most experienced and accomplished teachers. Experts from across the political spectrum increasingly have come to understand that a system in which teachers with the least experience are given the hardest teaching assignments is not serving the needs of students. (National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools, 2005, p. 3)

Alternative education programs are educational settings for students who did not succeed in traditional high schools. The National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools (2005) highlights that schools serving at-risk students experience difficulty with recruiting and retaining teachers who can succeed in best meeting the needs of the students. Also, this challenge supports the notion that engaging at-risk students requires more than classroom experience and academic credentials. Although an educator may have academic training for the skills to teach this population of students (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011), evidence suggests that it takes more than academic credentials to engage a population of students who have been previously disengaged in schools. Given this data, it is important for school administrations to reassess how to recruit teachers who are most effective at meeting the needs of the students. As such, it is necessary to understand if there are commonalities among educators who are willing and able to engage at-risk students in order to most effectively promote the success of the student.

Although literature exists positing that teacher and staff approaches to an overall educational experience contribute to student success in alternative education programs, there is a gap in the literature regarding exploring what it is that motivates educators who have an inherent interest in working with at-risk students and that contributes to their effectiveness. The purpose of the current study was to explore personal factors that support motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting. It is imperative to understand factors that contribute to engaging students in the learning process in order to match appropriate educators who can foster academic and nonacademic success of students with the students who most need their help.

In the next few sections I outline the literature search strategy and review literature on the theoretical framework, alternative education programs, social and emotional perspectives relating to working with students in these settings, and the impact of teacher and school-based relationships on the academic and nonacademic success of students. Finally, this chapter closes with a summarization of major themes in the literature along with a summary of what is known on this topic, what still needs to be explored, and how I aimed to address one of those gaps.

Literature Search Strategy

For this literature search, I used all 40 of EBSCO host service databases. The following databases were where many of the articles came from: ERIC, Education Research Complete, Academic Search Complete, PsycINFO, and PsycArticles. Also, I used Thoreau database to search for relevant articles. Additionally, the index, thesaurus,

and the subject options were used in these databases to help in building a search based on a set list of words and phrases related to the keywords and topic. In these databases, I selected full text and peer-reviewed journals as specific inclusion criteria. Only articles from the last 5 years and seminal work were the focus of the study. I chose this strategy to compare past and current literature on the topic as well as to become more informed on the scholarly research in the field. Lastly, I used an iterative process along with Google scholar to search for literature.

I used the following key words and descriptors to create the library searchers, including Boolean operators to communicate to the database exactly what was being searched if the purpose was to limit (AND), expand (OR), or eliminate (NOT) results from the search. Teacher and at-risk keywords were usually included in all of the searches because those variables were the foundation of this research.

- *At-risk* OR *alternative education* OR *alternative high school* OR *youth development*
- *Student success*
- *Student achievement*
- *Teacher* OR *Educator*
- *Attitudes* OR *beliefs* OR *perceptions*
- *Personal factors*
- *Professional factors*
- *Characteristics*
- *Motivation* OR *intrinsic motivation* OR *satisfaction*

The Boolean operator AND was a word scramble of the descriptors and terms above. For example:

- *Utilizing at-risk* OR *alternative education* OR *alternative high school* OR *youth development* AND *teacher* OR *educator*
- *Utilizing at-risk* OR *alternative education* OR *alternative high school* OR *youth development* AND *teacher* OR *educator* AND *attitudes* OR *beliefs* OR *perceptions*

Utilizing this search strategy produced an abundance of literature on alternative education programs but no current literature on commonalities between intrinsically motivated teachers who work in effective alternative education programs. These results indicated a gap in the literature and the need for this particular research.

Theoretical Foundation

Motivational theories help to shed light to the underlying causes of behavior and play a crucial role in understanding those behaviors. Deci & Ryan's (1985) SDT fundamentally accounts for motivation being the foundation for regulating behavior and understanding personality (Garn & Jolly, 2014). In studying personal factors of educators that support their motivation, interest, and eagerness to be effective in an alternative education setting, SDT provides a useful construct. SDT refers to the intrinsic motivation of an individual to willfully engage in activities to meet their personal and psychological goal attainment (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008; Van Nuland, Dusseldorp, Martens, & Boekaerts, 2010). SDT suggests that individuals are naturally self-motivated, interested, and eager to succeed, and the quality of the goal is one of the important factors associated

with an individual's personal investment in the goal. These core areas of SDT are why I selected this theory as the theoretical framework for this study because it can shed light on reasons why an educator would be willing and able to be effective with a challenging population of students. Intrinsic motivation is a significant contributor to job motivation and effectiveness. Because of the challenges associated with working with at-risk students in alternative education settings, an educator who chooses to work with this population of students would be motivated differently. SDT can provide insight into how educators believe in the work they do as well as their motivation and desire to implement change and outcomes.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

With SDT, there are two factors related to the total motivation that can influence a change dynamic: autonomous motivation is the process by which individuals have choice in their behavior, and independence is when individuals act by themselves (Deci & Ryan, 2008). When an individual has choice in their participation, there is a deeper investment, which yields positive results. Greater persistence, positive affect, enhanced performance, greater conceptual understanding, and creativity have all proven to be linked to autonomous behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2008). A self-determined individual who is autonomously regulated is more likely to endure a difficult journey because of what a goal, such as student engagement, means to them. This idea can support the reason an educator is willing to engage at-risk students despite the challenges associated with doing so. Psychological resilience has been defined as the "ability to adjust to varied situations and increase one's competence in the face of adverse conditions" (Bobek, 2002, p. 202).

This idea supports the reason an educator would be able to engage at-risk students. A teacher who does not possess self-determination may not be resilient in the face of setbacks and difficulties that accompany engaging with and teaching at-risk students.

An individual who embarks and continues on a journey to help others make changes in their lives can be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. This is related to motivational change for a number of reasons. One reason is that extrinsic rewards can decrease intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). For example, salary and professional reputation as extrinsic motivators can impact the willingness of a qualified teacher to work through the challenges that accompany working in alternative education. However, if extrinsic motivators, which can be threatened, become the dictating goals, the pursuit of working with a particular population may be affected and result in a motivational shift. Secondly, change in motivation can exist as a result of negative feedback that will leave an individual amotivated, with little intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. Amotivation is influenced by an individual who believes their desired goal is connected with their behavior, or when actions are needed to complete a desired goal but the individual lacks confidence in their ability to complete those behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2008). This is important to note because if a teacher does not understand the challenges associated with a student, amotivation can exist if they focus simply on the behavior of the student.

Identification as a form of extrinsic motivation occurs when an individual identifies with the value of a goal and takes on responsibility for their behavior towards that goal; however, this is not to be confused with intrinsic motivation. When an individual makes a choice to take on a responsibility, it becomes an autonomous move

whereby the investment is similar to that of intrinsic motivation. An individual can identify a need in working in alternative education based on their personal or professional experience and what they believe would make a difference. Yet, it may not be until a life event occurs that gives that person the opportunity to directly work with the population (e.g., being laid off, moving, etc.). This example illustrates an individual who is not intrinsically motivated initially to make the move to working in alternative education but who identifies with the need and uses the opportunity to do so in their subsequent job search. In this process, the value becomes the motivator, initially extrinsic, that results in intrinsic motivation.

Self-Determination Theory and Past Studies

Deci & Ryan (2000) posited that at the core of optimal human functioning and motivation to grow is satisfying the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is having the choice and voice in decisions related to responsibility; competence is the feeling of ability and accomplishment; and relatedness is connected with others (Bassi & Fave, 2012; Lechuga & Lechuga, 2012; Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2012). It is when these needs are met that individuals are able to connect their intrinsic motivation to their environment and associate meaning and purpose to their tasks (Lechuga & Lechuga, 2012). Researchers that have applied SDT to teachers as a primary understanding of the motivational factors related to work production and satisfaction have shown a positive relationship between intrinsic motivation and satisfying the three basic needs (Bassi & Fave, 2012; Klassen et al., 2012; Lechuga & Lechuga, 2012). These researchers used components of SDT to explore what

motivates teachers to work (Bassi & Fave, 2012; Perry, Brenner, Collie, & Hofer, 2015; Ji, Anderson, & Wu, 2016; Lechuga & Lechuga, 2012) and if the three basic needs increased the efficacy and engagement of teachers (Klassen et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2015; Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan, 2007).

Many researchers who looked at different motivational factors of educators through the lens of SDT primarily discussed the impact autonomously regulated motivation had on performance. Some have gone on to explore the influence teachers have on the learning and behavior of their students (Bassi & Fave, 2012; Klassen et al., 2012); Perry et al., 2015, self-determination of learning in students (Bassi & Fave, 2012, Klassen et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2015), relatedness with students (Klassen et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2015), the choice to teach (Perry et al., 2015; Roth et al., 2007), and their teaching practices (Perry et al., 2015. These studies have produced positive results directly relating active learning (Bassi & Fave, 2012), lower drop-out rates (Bassi & Fave, 2012), and overall well-being at school (Bassi & Fave, 2012; Perry et al., 2015) to teachers who have autonomy in their workplace, are competent in their abilities, have relatedness with their students (Bassi & Fave, 2012; Klassen et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2015; Roth et al., 2007), and relatedness to their career (Ji, Anderson, & Wu, 2016). Furthermore, researchers have shown that teachers are more engaged and satisfied when their psychological needs are being met through autonomy support in their workplace, relatedness with their students, and competence in engaging students (Klassen et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2015).

SDT has also been used to look at the motivational factors that exist in teachers who do not experience stress or exhaustion in their positions. Findings from these studies showed that satisfaction of one or a combination of the three basic psychological needs has been negatively associated with stress and exhaustion (Bassi & Fave, 2012; Klassen et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2015; Roth et al., 2007). Sources of stress that can be experienced in education was not seen as stress in educators in these studies but as temporary difficulties met with problem solving outlooks (Ji et al., 2016; Perry et al., 2015; Roth et al., 2007). Because stress and exhaustion can contribute to an educator leaving the field of teaching or producing poor outcomes for students (Klassen et al., 2012), an important factor to this study is understanding that it takes a resilient and self-determined individual to withstand challenging situations. A self-determined behavior is when the choice of the individual aligns with the personal values of that individual. Therefore, it results in a deeper connection between the behavior of a person and their inner self. This connection prevents feelings such as exhaustion or stress because there is not a conflict present within the individual and their feelings about what they are engaging in.

By utilizing the SDT, researchers have shown motivators such as satisfying personal interest, feelings of self-fulfillment, pursuing professional enhancement, and curiosity to internal investments for educators in the field (Ji et al., 2016). Though challenges exist in the workplace, studies with the SDT framework find that teachers can find meaning and purpose in activities through which they continue to build their competence and relatedness (Bassi & Fave, 2012; Perry, et al., 2015). As equally

important for this study is the evidence that suggests teachers whose motivation is self-determined positively impacts the motivation of their students (Bassi & Fave, 2012; Klassen et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2015; Roth et al., 2007).

These studies have been conducted to determine motivational factors driving the career practices of professionals and have produced findings of resiliency in challenging situations to teachers who are self-determined. However, researchers have not explored personal factors that teachers, themselves, identify as contributing to their motivation, interest, and eagerness to be effective within alternative education settings. Much of the research studies the autonomy of teachers in K-12 educational settings in terms of their ability to make adjustments to the curriculum and their teaching practices. Furthermore, my study looks at autonomy in terms of teachers intentionally choosing to work with at risk students in alternative education settings. The lack of scholarly understanding into personal factors of educators who are willing and able to engage a challenging population of students supported the reason to examine what teachers identify as factors contributing to their effectiveness.

Vansteenkiste et al. (2004) points out that framing a task to include intrinsic and extrinsic goals promotes the most persistence and performance. What is important to note about SDT is in order for the individual to be invested in the activity, the quality of the goal of the activity is what matters. The concept of autonomous and controlled behavior in SDT is what creates a fundamental difference in the experience of an individual's pursuit to their goal. Therefore, one must be invested in their belief that change can happen in that area. If teachers intentionally (*independence*) choose (*autonomy*) to work

with at risk students through their challenges and are effective in doing so, SDT is an appropriate theory to help understand the relationship between their interest, motivation, and eagerness and their effectiveness.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Constructs

Teacher Effectiveness

Background characteristics such as subject matter and certifications, a caring teacher, classroom management, planning, instructional delivery, and assessment practices have been associated with effective teachers. Along with outcomes on whether students are making learning gains (Popp, Grant, & Stronge, 2011; National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools, 2005; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011), effectiveness of teachers has also included action practices such as quiet reminders of appropriate behavior and calm management styles (Popp et al., 2011). Much of past research has included studies of secondary data analysis versus first hand individual interviews. While these type of studies inform the research, in order to provide evidenced based data on what works, it is important to receive first hand and rich exploration from the participants themselves.

Getting the best teachers to work in alternative education settings with students who come with a wide range of learning and mental health needs has been challenging in the field of education (National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools, 2005; Perry et al., 2015). As factors outside of the home putting students at risk of failure have emerged, including inadequate teachers and schools cultures (Popp et al., 2011), it is important to look at what the needs of the students are and who can most effectively work

with the students to get their needs met. Because academics are the primary focus of schools and the ultimate responsibility for teachers, some educators are unaware of how social, emotional, and behavioral learning for at-risk students is necessary for academic learning to occur. Many at-risk students have unmet needs that impact their learning ability as well as their behavior in the classroom. When teachers recognize the challenges at-risk students have, they can utilize that understanding to engage the young person from a nonacademic relationship towards academic success. This concept will be explored in the upcoming sections.

In a study by Popp et al. (2011), it revealed that only 16% of educators considered the nonacademic needs of students in their classrooms. Additionally, Tobin & Sprague (2001) completed a literature review on the varied structures and practices of alternative education settings and components that were lacking in these programs that are needed to be effective with at risk students. According to Tobin & Sprague, many alternative education settings lack the implementation of evidence based strategies necessary to work with emotionally and behaviorally challenged students. These strategies include low student-to teacher ratios, highly structured classroom with behavioral classroom management, school based adult mentors, social skills instruction aimed to teach skills on social skill development, positive approaches to language and behavior management delivery, functional behavioral assessments to identify antecedents and consequences for challenging and appropriate behavior, high quality instruction, parental involvement, and positive behavioral interventions and supports. Of the 39 articles used for this study, 20 consisted of classrooms with low student-teacher ratios, 10 were made up of highly

structured classroom with behavioral classroom management, five included a school-based adult mentor, three included social skills instructions, 11 used positive methods, one utilized functional behavioral assessments, five classrooms had high quality instruction, three studies had parental involvement, and two incorporated PBIS. Of these studies, over half (*n*=24) scored at or below 70% on quality indicators based on the quality of the implementation.

The following literature review will provide insight into the thought process and motivation of educators working with challenging students. The literature review will support the notion that not all teachers can effectively work with and truly understand the work it takes with the population of students. Students with emotional and behavioral challenges who enter alternative education settings, which have been seen as last chance opportunities, must be met with effective practices to aid in their success (Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011; Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

Furthermore, this literature review will show that past literature findings have shown positive outcomes for students as a result of positive relationships with teachers. As a result, policymakers and educators have advocated for professional development on relationship quality and action steps to produce positive relationships (Perry et al., 2015; Stronge et al., 2011) and emotionally healthy classroom environments (Stronge, et al., 2011). Teachers who understand social and emotional needs of students and have the ability to respond to these needs are the foundation for a quality student-teacher relationship (Strong et al., 2011). The literature shows how teachers are effective with at-risk students, but what researchers have yet to explore is how to identify the teachers who

are willing and able to nurture relationships with students and thrive in the environment (Perry et al., 2015; Popp et al., 2011). In order to fully understand the importance of identifying the teachers who are effective in engaging this population of students, it is important to understand the students, the environment, and challenges the educators face. This foundational understanding will allow for further understanding for the need to identity educators who intentionally choose to work with at-risk students.

Alternative Education Programs

Ambiguity exists in the literature on an official definition for alternative education and how programs should be designed (Caroleo, 2014; Kim, 2010; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011) although there appears to be a universal understanding of the type of students who end up in these settings. The following are factors related to at-risk students who attend alternative education programs: (a) at-risk of dropping out of traditional high school (Kim, 2010; Smith & Thomson, Steinberg & Almeida, 2010), (b) showing behavior or mental concerns to an educator (Geronimo, 2010; Kim, 2010; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011), (c) pregnant or parenting teenage students (Caroleo, 2014; Kim, 2010), (d) having disruptive behavior (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2011), (e) expelled, at least once, from school (Flower, et.al, 2011), and (f) or at risk of academic failure (Kim, 2010; Wilson et al., 2011). Also, students from low income and single parent families make up a great portion of the population (Kim, 2010; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Students who are described as having any of these characteristics are the students who have been assigned the term at-risk. However, similar to alternative education, there does

not appear to be a formal definition of at-risk students; just factors associated with assessing if a student is considered at-risk.

Unlike traditional high schools, there is not a core curriculum implemented in alternative education programs nor is there a universal or formal mandate for how the programs function. Not all alternative education programs are effective in their program practices (Geronimo, 2010; Smith & Thomson, 2014) but if the model of the program is carried out appropriately, it can produce a program of quality (Geronimo, 2010). In much of the literature, there are varied types of programs with different goals on how to best meet the needs of the students who did not succeed in traditional high school. Some programs are authoritarian that operate with punitive approach known as "dumping grounds" or "holding cells" (Caroleo, 2014; Geronimo, 2010; Kim, 2010). These programs have curriculums that have been criticized as inferior to mainstream schools to discipline the less performing and difficult students and teachers (Geronimo, 2010; National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools, 2005). These schools may have security measures in place, search procedures, and are described as operating like prisons (Geronimo, 2010; Kim, 2010). Furthermore, these programs have five times the dropout rates of traditional high schools (Geronimo, 2010). These type of programs would not be considered effective alternative education programs because they are not successful in engaging the students or assisting with academic and non-academic success that did not occur in high school. Many students in alternative education programs have attended more than one high school or alternative education program (Bickerstaff, 2010). With this is mind, the research provides support that not every alternative education program is

effective in their mission in engaging students towards success that was not likely in traditional high school.

On the other hand, some programs are designed to make changes within the young person and provide a different school experience with the ultimate goal of decreasing the dropout rates; these programs operate with a holistic and humanistic approach (Caroleo, 2014; Geronimo, 2010; Lind, 2013; Smith & Thomason, 2014). Although the components of alternative education programs vary, there is consistency in academic and nonacademic practices that contribute to engaging the students in their learning process. In studying the school climate of effective alternative programs, the following was true as reported by students: (a) fairness of rules, (b) healthy relationship building between staff and students and among students (Lind, 2013), (c) student respect and dignity (Lind, 2013), (d) involvement in making decisions (Hendrickson, 2012; Lind, 2013), (e) the willingness of staff to adapt and problem solve, (f) belief that the teachers and staff care about them as individuals and their overall success in and out of the classroom (Johnston et al., 2004; Lind, 2013; Smith & Thomason, 2014), (g) teachers possessing a sympathetic attitude towards the students and issues outside of the classroom (Caroleo, 2014), (h) the non-existence of a controlled environment, and (i) an academic culture that is meaningful to the students and their lives (Caroleo, 2014; Edgar, 2014; Smith & Thomason, 2014). Additionally, many of the curriculum modules include some form of vocational training or instruction to integrate real world connections into the learning process (Caroleo, 2014; Smith & Thomason, 2014), social and emotional development (Caroleo, 2014), community service or service learning (Smith &

Thomason, 2014), learning opportunities outside of the classroom such as problem solving, conflict management and goal setting (Smith & Thomason, 2014), access or referral to social services (Geronimo, 2010), and smaller classroom sizes (Caroleo, 2014; Geronimo, 2010; Smith & Thomason, 2014). All of the aforementioned components work to help the nonacademic success in developing life skills of the student toward life beyond the classroom (Caroleo, 2014; Lind, 2013).

Social and emotional learning is an area that must be looked at when working with students who suffer from social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. Similar to other disabilities that require effective interventions, so must this area. Social and emotional learning offers another insight into effective practices and approaches to promote growth and progress in this population of students. Smith & Thomson (2014) offer a unique behavioural and cognitive perspective about the success of alternative programs. The behavioural concept aligns with the beliefs of John B. Watson (1913) and B.F. Skinner (1938) that learning involves a behavior change. The positive experiences of students in effective alternative education programs leads to an increase in self-efficacy which allows for optimal learning. As a result, these programs succeed because the students succeed. This theory is supported by research indicating a positive relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement (Caroleo, 2014, Cooper, 2011) and holds true in a study by Lind (2013) where students stated an increase in their confidence levels as a result of the positive environment in their alternative program. Similarly, the cognitive perspective comes from Bandura (1997) and his belief on self-efficacy that humans control their own learning. In many of these programs, students had a voice in

decision making (Hendrickson, 2012; Lind, 2013) and sometimes became co-authors in their educational process which according to Bandura, would make them more responsible for their learning and behavior. Students in a study by Lind (2013) viewed their educational experience as more valuable than their traditional school experience because of their ability to have an impact on decisions in their environment.

Cooper (2011) discussed three additional therapeutic approaches that have been utilized as intervention approaches for students with social, emotional, and behavioral disorders. One, the psychodynamic approach focused on relationships that allow for deep thought into the experiences that lead a person to the point of dysfunction. Two, the humanistic approach considered self-concept as a result of social and interpersonal relationship. Three, the systemic approach combined all psychological, social, and biological approaches. These approaches served as foundations for intra-personal growth in order to effectively work on inter-personal growth which ultimately guided overall wellbeing.

Trauma and At-Risk Students

There are countless variables that affect the learning and motivation of students. When discussing at-risk youth, one must consider and understand how significant of a factor traumatic experiences contribute to the emotional and behavioral concerns that educators have with the population of students. Nearly half of all youth experience traumatic events before the age of 16 (Dods, 2013) which means students start and attend high school with socio-emotional difficulties (Cooper, 2011). Consequently, these experiences lead to students having greater difficulty in staying and succeeding in school

(Popp et al., 2011). Trauma is defined as experiencing overwhelming forces, in which the victim is helpless, that supersedes their control; typically by witnessing or experiencing some form of violence (Edgar, 2014; Porche, Fortuna, Lin, & Alegria, 2011), adversity (Gawali, 2012), neglect (Dods, 2013; Porche et al., 2011), and injury (Porche et al., 2011). Young people who experience physical or sexual abuse and unstable living conditions typically attempt suicide, suffer from substance abuse, and engage in violent activities (Edgar, 2014; Porche et al., 2011). Early life trauma such as child abuse, neglect, and parental loss become risk factors for a wide range of somatic disorders such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (Kasckow et al., 2012; Majer, Nater, Lin, Capuron, & Reeves, 2010). These experiences contribute to how an individual controls behavior and automatic responses to stress because it occurs during the development of brain plasticity in early childhood (Majer et. al, 2010). Many of these experiences have been directly related to childhood trauma: poor academic achievement is a risk highly related to children who have been neglected or abused (Kasckow et al., 2010; Majer et al., 2010); sexually abused children have had delays in intellectual development and deficits in language and psychomotor abilities (Majer et al., 2010; Porche et al., 2011): and early childhood abuse and neglect display skill deficiencies in cognition, language, and motor (Majer et al., 2010; Porche et al., 2011).

Many educators and professionals involved in the student development process are not aware of how trauma can impact learning. Exposure to trauma related stress and violence has been found to decrease IQ scores and reading achievement in young children (Kira, Lewandowski, Somers, Yoon, & Chiodo, 2012). Individuals who are

diagnosed as PTSD suffer from memory performance on standardized tests and the combination of similar or dissimilar trauma experiences result in patterns that can greatly impact IQ scores. Because there are several trauma types, the impact each type has on intellectual functioning varies but still significantly impacts its abilities. Personal identity trauma negatively impacts working memory, sexual abuse effects perceptual reasoning and working memory and emotional damage, survival trauma effects processing speed, and abandonment trauma impacts perceptual reasoning, working memory, and processing speed (Kira et. al, 2012). On the other hand, collective trauma seems to not impact IQ and secondary trauma positively impacts working memory, processing speed, verbal comprehension, and perceptual reasoning. The deficits in these functions associate with poor school performance which goes back to increasing disruptive behavior and an intellectual decline resulting in a habitual negative cycle.

As mentioned, 50% of young people that display emotional or behavioral problems resulting from trauma drop out of school (Dods, 2013) and those with higher levels of post-traumatic stress are at higher risks for dropping out (Porche et al., 2011). Students with emotional and behavioral challenges fail their courses nearly twice as much as students with challenges from other disability groups (Flower et al., 2011). Trauma experience impacts the emotions and self-esteem of an individual as well as how one perceives things, learn, interpret events, and views the world (Dods, 2013). A student who has experienced trauma may possess an intrapersonal defense in protecting themselves, getting their needs met, or a need to feel in control to diminish their stress (Dods, 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). However, this defense will communicate a

different message in an educational setting because trauma will inhibit relationship building, wellbeing, and academic and social success of a student. The impact of trauma presents itself in the classroom as uninterested, unmotivated, an inability to concentrate, verbal or physical aggression, daydreaming, and absentee (Dods, 2013; Porche et al., 2011) as well as disruptive behavior (Porche et al., 2011). These students have a shortage of needs being met outside of the classroom and focus their attention on simply getting through the day as they constantly think of their outside stressors. This process will interfere with their energy, motivation, focus, and concentration in the classroom. Although all students exhibiting these behaviors have not experienced trauma, these are certainly indicators of someone struggling from early life or outside trauma. The stress of dealing with trauma will impact a student's academic ability and psychosocial welfare (Edgar, 2014) which puts them in unhealthy environments and situations. The behavior of most adolescents is attributed to a need not being met (Edgar, 2014) so when it is combined with trauma experience, it not only separates them from educational and employment opportunities, it creates a cycle of negative wellbeing (Porche et al., 2011).

School Connectedness and School Relationships

Childhood trauma is normally experienced at the hands of an adult that did not protect the child from the traumatic events; sometimes leaving the individual with a lack of trust in adults, lack of role modeling, and a lack of skill set for healthy relationships (Dods, 2013). Therefore, establishing trusting relationships with educators is not easy for these individuals especially given the fact that these students are usually excluded from mainstream learning or drop out of school as a result of negative experiences with

teachers and school systems (Flower et al., 2011). However, researchers have shown school-based relationships as the best predictor of minimizing at-risk behaviors leading to positive outcomes when educators understand the importance of developing these relationships (Dods, 2013). As stated by a teacher in a study by Edgar (2014), students will do anything when they trust you; but first, you have to get to know them. School-based relationships have noteworthy impacts on students who have experienced trauma. Research has shown that connection to, at least, one caring adult can be one of the most important factors for students with at risk factors (Stronge et al., 2011). There are a plethora of studies producing evidence that one of the most valuable components in alternative education programs for students is the supportive relationships established between staff to student and student to student (Bickerstaff, 2010; Caroleo, 2014; Dods, 2013; Hendrickson, 2012; Johnston et al., 2004; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lind, 2013; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Smith, & Thomson, 2014; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Stronge, et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2011). Additionally, these researchers have shown student to teacher relationships that are teacher driven, individualized, and in tune with students' emotional conditions and are caring and respectful are essential in meeting the needs of students in an educational environment who have experienced trauma. The quality of these relationships simply includes meaningful and interpersonal interactions with the educators that support them through their difficulties (Caroleo, 2014; Edgar, 2014). These relationships contribute to learning environments that are engaging because students feel staff understand and individualize their situations and learning abilities. When these relationships are established, the needs that were neglected resulting from the trauma can

be reestablished such as safety, self-worth, trust, interpersonal connections, and control. Connectedness to school has been associated with decreased emotional distress, minimized violent and disruptive behavior, reduced absenteeism (Dods, 2013) lower drug use, greater social belonging and social skills, and higher academic achievement (Stronge et al., 2011). Furthermore, according to Hendrickson (2012), the lack of these school based relationships and connections contributes to students disengaging from school.

Teacher Impact

It is difficult to have school based relationships without teachers being a vital piece to the puzzle. Student to staff relationships was a common theme in the literature that contributes to the effectiveness of engaging students in their learning and subsequently, leading to their academic and non-academic success. "The teacher to student relationship stands at the heart of the formal educational process" (Cooper, 2011, p. 4). Because alternative education programs operate differently than traditional high schools, researchers have shown that there is a different approach to working with the population of students who attend these schools. Teachers are in a position where they observe the impact social and emotional needs have on the lives of the students. The amount of time a student spends in school provides an opportunity for a teacher to have a positive or negative influence on social and emotional challenges. In a study by Edgar (2014), a teacher witnessed depression in a student and had a conversation about what was contributing to her mental health. The teacher assured her that she understood the day she was having which was followed with a life lesson based on what the student shared. It is this type of personal conversation where teachers make connections with

students and begin to learn how factors in their life contribute to their social and emotional challenges (Caroleo, 2014). Additionally, the formation of a relationship and insight into the life of a student allows a teacher to effectively plan for success (Popp et al., 2011). It is these relationships that sends messages to students that teachers care about them which is when students begins to care about what the teachers are trying to teach them (Caroleo, 2014; Edgar, 2014; Hendrickson, 2012). Once this relationship is established and a student is engaged, they can accept when a teacher challenges them to do better and begin to give more of themselves in the classroom (Lind, 2013). This notion is supported by Popp et al. (2011) who found a positive relationship between emotional security and academic engagement in students where the teacher facilitated a social and emotional classroom environment. When referring to students in alternative education programs, many researchers discuss the idea of growth and development of a student but rarely did any researcher speak solely of academic success as a measure of success. It is suggested that without connecting and understanding on a social and emotional level, a teacher cannot engage a student in their learning (Edgar, 2014). A teacher who realizes that their role is to connect the academic world to that of the student will begin to understand that it takes more than teaching from a curricula to engage a student (Caroleo, 2014; Edgar, 2014; Popp et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2011).

On the list of best practices for effective alternative education programs includes: (a) staff who voluntarily cultivate relationships with students, (b) a relationship focused on developing mutual respect not changing the young person, (c) celebrating the student,

and (d) employing strategies to actively engage the student (Edgar, 2014; Lind, 2013; Smith, & Thomson, 2014).

Dods (2013) conducted a case study and found the following elements of teacher effectiveness as contributing factors to support an emotionally safe learning environment needed by young people who struggled in school academically and non-academically. One, students stated the desire for teachers to discern their needs for a connection, initiate conversations, and invite the students to a connection. Two, students wanted genuine care that included listening, understanding their difficulties, and validation. Three, students needed active interaction in a supportive manner in order for their needs to be met. Last, teachers needed to individualize their interactions with students and form a continued relationship. The students in the case study were not expecting the teacher to counsel them, solve their problems, nor probe into their trauma, but to offer a supportive and caring relationship that was lacking in their daily lives. Similarly, in a study by Edgar (2014), students summed up the care of a teacher by stating following:

> She has that spark. She listens to your ideas. She'll let you explore; If she doesn't like something, she'll tell you, she's not a pushover; She wants perfection out of me; Ms. J's been the best for me; She shows us that she cares by always bein' there; She goes the extra mile for us; Most teachers will yell at you to get their emotions out and hope that you understand why they yelled at you without even telling you. She took the time out to write a letter and that showed that she cared; She's like a second mom; If she didn't show me that she cared, I would have just ignored her; If you're ever down, she'll try to cheer you up, no matter

> what you're dealing with; She'll help me practice singing if it's not going right. We'll have these deep talks and it makes me feel better. Most teachers give up, but she'll have a conversation 50 times if she has to, until I get it. She'll make me feel better about myself; It's not even respect anymore, it's just love. (p 106)

With 50% of young people displaying emotional or behavioral problems dropping out of school, there can be a disconnect in bridging the gap to achievement if the teachers are not invested in the students and the program. Stronge et al., (2011) discussed the worsening of behaviors in students who had negative relationships with teachers. Some teachers in alternative education program understand the difficulties students face outside of the classroom and believe it is their job to understand those difficulties and attempt to diminish the stress inside the classroom in order for them to learn (Caroleo, 2014; Edgar, 2014).

Sewell (1985) found that 98% of teachers in Florida felt an obligation to assist students in forming their identities and understanding themselves yet only 15.2% had a background in counseling. Despite this, administration in schools attribute effectiveness of teachers to their academic credentials and ability, classroom style, and test scores (Bickerstaff, 2010; Geronimo, 2010). While evidence suggests caring for at-risk students is important in understanding healthy child development, it is not a value considered to be as important as teaching for test assessment scores (Bickerstaff, 2010; Edgar, 2014).

Researchers have shown that educators have different perspectives and levels of motivation when working with at-risk students that can be seen an "unconventional" in an educational system. Perry et al. (2015) and Stronge et al., (2011) conducted case

studies where educators stated connecting with the students involved providing a school culture that would mimic a home. This school culture included providing the space and opportunity where outside partners can meet students for visits, having a telephone number where students can be reached for important matter such as jobs, viewing success of students on an individualized basis that may not include academics, and understanding that first addressing the mental health and basic needs of students is just as important (if not more) than academics (Perry et al., 2015; Popp et al., 2011). A participant in research conducted by Perry et al. (2015) in discussing communicating with other teachers at professional development days stated that other teachers will say

> I don't understand how you guys can have a program that the kids only come for three hours a day! I don't understand how a school can run where they expect the kid to come one hour a day! We just make our kids come! I had to actually bite my tongue, we had a student who was prostituting herself out on the street, and that's why her coming to school the next day is a success. (p. 25)

Factors that are seen as aiding in the success of students by effective educators working with at-risk students are not understood by educators in traditional high schools. One teacher in an alternative education program stated the lack of importance in receiving "a math sheet" if a student is having a bad mental health day and not having parental involvement (Perry et al., 2015). Lind (2013) suggested that the responsibility of building the abilities of students lies in those educating the students and not on the students.

Studies have shown that effective teachers make informed decisions to work with specific populations of student based on intrinsic professional factors (Edgar, 2014; Rice, 2010). In Lind (2013), students were assigned to teachers who served as mentors to provide direct support and promote the student-teacher relationship. This practice is great in theory. However, it is important to consider the impact of a teacher who does not choose to have this relationship and provide this type of support or if a teacher who does not know how to be a mentor. This is critical and past studies have not addressed this concern. It is important to understand how to identify the best teachers qualified to work with disadvantaged students. With this in mind, one must also consider if this lends support that factors related to how a teacher is effective be considered in hiring teachers to ensure student success. With that said, I explored what educators, who are willing and able to engage in these relationships, identified as personal factors that contributed to their motivation, interest, and eagerness to be effective with at-risk students in an effective alternative education setting. This question is one that past studies have not answered but deserved a scholarly understanding.

Summary and Conclusions

With varying degrees of program functionality, there is no one model or common standard that gives direction for working within an alternative education program or universal practices contained in each program. Although evidence suggests that by implementing developmental, holistic, and inclusive strategies to alternative education programs will improve outcomes, these efforts are executed differently at every program or not at all. Each alternative education program has its own goals, curricula, practices,

and model. Some school districts put the same students in different settings, without changing any paradigms for learning and expect change. The data proves the need for effective alternative education programs and researchers have presented components contributing to the effectiveness of the programs. However, data in the literature also highlights the ambiguity and lack of consistency in alternative education programs, hence, leading to some programs being more effective than others. As long as the inconsistencies persist and no real understanding to what makes certain components more effective, beyond the fact that they just "do", there will be inconsistent outcomes to serving this population of students. There is a need to further explore specific elements contributing to effective alternative education programs in order to create evidence based programs and practices that work. If students are given the opportunity to be motivated by well-prepared teachers, achievement can be guaranteed (National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools, 2005).

Chapter 2 provided a considerable amount of research that has been conducted on the factors related to effective alternative education programs and student engagement. On the other hand, less attention has been given to the factors related to what effective teachers understand as contributing to their impact and effectiveness and even less attention to effective teaches in alternative education. Much of the literature on alternative education focuses on student perceptions of their experience in the schools and what matters to them in engagement. Edgar (2014) attributed the most common characteristic contributing to a positive relationship with the student is the teacher who chooses to care. Yet, none of the studies in the current literature I found for this review

studied what factors contribute to teachers who are willing and able to work through the challenges that at-risk students and alternative education programs have. The literature answers how teachers are effective but does not address what makes them more effective and willing than others. Although the literature I used for this review included articles that are peer reviewed, many of them are opinions of researchers and models of effective programs that included the need for further research. By exploring the personal factors that teachers identified as contributing to their motivation and interest to work with at-risk students, I have added to a body of literature on what contributes to an effective alternative education program. Additionally, I have contributed a new lens on things to consider when recruiting effective teachers that can meet the needs of these students.

Chapter 3 will discuss the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology including participation selection and data collection procedures, and issues of trustworthiness including credibility and ethical concerns.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of the current study was to explore what educators identified as the personal factors that support motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting. The major sections in Chapter 3 provide an overview of the research methods that were used in the study. In this chapter, the following is covered: (a) research design and rationale; (b) the role of the researcher; (c) methodology inclusive of participant selection, instrumentation, recruitment and participation procedures; (d) data analysis procedure; and (e) trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative research allows a researcher to explore ideas that have a need for further understanding, particularly due to lack of research done in that area (Creswell, 2009; 2013). The purpose of the current study was to explore what educators identified as the personal factors that support motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting. While there is literature on how teacher and staff approaches to students' overall educational experience contribute to student success in alternative education programs, there is a gap in exploration of personal factors of teachers, from the perspective of the teacher, that contribute to the willingness and ability of some to engage with at-risk students.

I developed the following research question to guide my inquiry:

RQ: What do educators identify as the personal factors that support motivation, interest and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting?

By exploring the research question, I have contributed to a scholarly understanding of educators' perspectives on what factors are related to their willingness and ability to engage at-risk students.

I utilized a qualitative collective case study research design. A qualitative case study was best suited for this research plan based on the following reasons. Firstly, case study research can be completed with an individual, several individuals, a group, an entire program, or an activity (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). This case study included an entire subgroup, educators at an alternative program. Secondly, the participant can be the subject of a case study or an issue can be addressed by multiple persons to show a different perspective. In this study, I explored commonalities of various educators at the program. Thirdly, a case study approach is selected when an in depth understanding needs to be developed with clearly identified cases (participants) or a case (Creswell, 2013). My aim was to understand what educators identified as personal factors that contributed to their willingness and ability to engage at-risk students in an effective alternative education setting.

For these reasons, a case study was the best approach. I used the research question to explore variables that contributed to their effectiveness and did not focus simply on their teaching strategies. The purpose of the study was to identify personal factors that

emerged through data collection. I explored variables such as personality, motivation, personal upbringing, life experiences, values, personality traits, and professional training.

Although phenomenology, ethnology, narrative, case study, and grounded theory qualitative approaches each include data collection, data analysis, and report write-up, there are some distinct features that separate the five approaches that determines the appropriate usage in a research study (see Creswell, 2013). As such, these features guided the rationale behind why the other four qualitative approaches were not suitable for this research plan. Firstly, because phenomenology focuses on understanding and describing the essence of a lived experience, this approach would have been less effective because I was not looking to understand the experience of working with the population of students. Secondly, an ethnography study examines a culture sharing group with a common pattern of beliefs, attitudes, processes, and systems (Creswell, 2013). Although the educators were a culture sharing group, this approach did not fit my research question because I was not looking to study the social behaviors of the subgroup. Thirdly, narrative research tells the story of an individual or a phenomenon within the context of the experience (Creswell, 2013). If I wanted to document a particular story of the educators, the student population, or the program and report on the experiences to give an account for the meaning of those experiences, this would have been an effective approach. Finally, in a grounded theory study, a researcher is seeking to discover a theory pertaining to a process containing an action involving a large number of participants (Creswell, 2013). These characteristics evidence why these approaches did not serve my research question.

Role of the Researcher

Describing the role of the researcher in a qualitative study includes understanding how researchers use themselves as the key instrument (Creswell, 2013). I collected data through face-to-face interviews and document collection. My role began as an interviewer. I asked questions of the participants to gain insight into factors they considered as contributing to their willingness and ability to engage at-risk students in alternative education settings.

I was aware that because this is my line of professional work and interest, I needed to remain aware of my biases. My professional experience in the field allowed me to have familiarity with at-risk students and an understanding of how some alternative education programs operate. For this reason, I set aside my own beliefs and research findings to avoid any possibility of bias influencing the results of this study to merely confirm my professional beliefs. I utilized an epoché approach (see Patton, 2002, p. 484), which involves seeing things for what they are and not what you perceive them to be, and I remained self-aware of personal bias and personal involvement. While I do have familiarity with working with at-risk students, I was not familiar with personal factors educators identified as contributing to their motivation, interest, and eagerness to be effective, which is what I was exploring. Therefore, embracing a new perspective in order to truly remain curious about the topic was not difficult. Nevertheless, I bracketed my professional experience as suggested by Creswell (2013) through reflective journaling.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

A researcher must be deliberate in the selection of a sampling strategy and sample size in order to produce a valid outcome. For this study, I utilized purposeful sampling, which is an intentional sampling method used in qualitative research where cases are selected to ensure the researcher receives data that has levels of depth ("information-rich cases") in explaining the topic being studied (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). In order to understand a research problem in its context, purposeful sampling allows the researcher to study select individuals and sites with which to explore the topic. Creswell (2013, p. 156) suggested using unusual cases in a collective case study, and teachers in a program for at-risk students satisfied that criteria. Researchers show that teachers working with at-risk students are underprepared to work with and support the students through their challenges (Edgar, 2014; National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools (2005). Additionally, Perry et al. (2015) illustrated that there are teachers who do not consider nonacademic student success as success, and Edgar (2014) discussed how some educators do not understand how outside challenges impact learning in the classroom. Furthermore, research shows that many alternative education programs for at-risk students are served as dumping grounds for difficult teachers and students, and some of these programs have five times the dropout rates of traditional high schools (Caroleo, 2014; Geronimo, 2010; Kim, 2010). Based on these results, educators who choose to work in a program with a population of students that have a reputation of being challenging and who provide a different outlook on student success are unusual cases. Not only are these educators

effective in working with the students towards success, they also possess a different perspective to student success with at-risk students.

This case study included educators at an effective alternative education program in a Northeastern U.S. city. The effectiveness of the program was determined by successful effort-to-outcome data. Many nonprofit organizations in New Jersey receive funding from grantors and the state that require qualitative and quantitative reports on outcomes of their programs. Efforts to Outcomes, management information systems, and the Department of Labor Management Information System are examples of grantee reporting systems that capture pre- and posttest scores, surveys on efficacy, impact evaluations, and community engagement metrics. To this end, the program I intended to select for this study would have had data that showed effectiveness through increased academic scores and the emotional or behavioral growth in its students. However, the procedure for selecting an effective alternative education program changed as will be discussed in Chapter 4. It is the staff members of a program who are responsible for producing outcome data from the students. Many researchers have suggested the teacher and staff approaches to the overall educational experience as an important component of effective alternative education programs (Dods, 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Smith, & Thomson, 2014; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Wilson et al., 2011). This research suggests that in order for students at an alternative education program to be successful, the staff have to be effective. I anticipated my access to the program to be a factor in determining the exact location for data collection. However, the procedure changed, as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

While researchers show that teacher and staff approaches to a students' overall educational experience contribute to student success in alternative education programs (Dods, 2013; Edgar, 2014; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Rice, 2010; Smith, & Thomson, 2014; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Wilson et al., 2011), they have also highlighted that the lack of teacher-student relationships contributes to student disengagement (Bickerstaff, 2010; Geronimo, 2010; Kim, 2010; Hendrickson, 2012). This data suggests that not all teachers are willing or able to connect or be effective with at-risk students. Yet, there is limited knowledge on understanding what educators identify as contributing to their motivation and interest in engaging this group of students. Based on Deci and Ryan's SDT (1985), intrinsically motivated people intentionally choose to engage in activities based on personal inherent interest, satisfaction, and positive feelings (Bassi and Fave, 2012; Deci and Ryan, 2008). Because the behavior is autonomously driven, individuals are self-motivated to satisfy their personal and psychological goal attainment (Bassi and Fave, 2012; Deci and Ryan, 2008; Van Nuland et al., 2010). This theory was the premise for selecting educators who have the motivation, interest, and eagerness to be effective with their outcomes of student success in an alternative education setting. An individual working through the challenges associated with this population of students would be motivated differently to believe in the work they do as well as their self-efficacy to implement change and outcomes. All of the aforementioned factors were the logic for the criteria for participant selection. I selected the following criteria for participant selection:

1. Alternative education program that had data to show increased academic scores and social, emotional, and behavioral growth in their students.
2. The educator must work at the effective alternative education program.
3. The educator must meet prescreened criteria for having an intrinsic motivation to work with at-risk students based on SDT factors.

Prior to beginning the study, I spoke with the executive director for most alternative education programs in a Northeastern U.S. city and he agreed to allow me to collect data at one of the sites. I met with the appointed individual to look at the data from 2014-2016 to determine which site to recruit participants based on increased academic scores and social, emotional, and behavioral growth in their students. I also identified a second site to be used as a follow up plan if recruitment at the first site was not successful.

Once I determined an appropriate site, the plan was to secure a letter of cooperation from the participating site. This letter would be submitted to Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) with the IRB application. Once I was given approval for data collection from Walden University's IRB, I would work with the appropriate contact person at the participating site to schedule a time to attend a staff meeting with the educators to discuss the study, request volunteers, and discuss the ability for educators to be interviewed during the school day in a private location. I would request that I was introduced to the staff at the staff meeting, and for the staff to be informed of my purpose at the meeting and the length of time I would be on site for interviews.

Once I discussed the schedule with the contact person, I would first present to the educators at the staff meeting. The presentation was to include a description of the study, the data collection process, benefits and risks, and confidentiality and withdrawal rights. Thereafter, I would discuss the participation of the participants to be interviewed and submit a guided writing document in the form of a "letter to self". All educators would then receive the informed consent form which included the following: (a) restatement inclusion criteria, (b) description of study purpose, (c) procedures of the study, (d) voluntary nature of the study, (e) risk and benefits of the study, (f) confidentiality of participants, and (g) my contact information. I would then give the attendees the option to immediately agree to participate up until two weeks after the meeting. However, the procedures changed as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Upon contact with me, all interested participants provided their contact information and option of telephone or email as a preferred method of contact. At that point, I screened the educator to ensure they met the inclusion criteria of intrinsically motivated based on previously discussed characteristics provided through literature sources. I asked the following questions:

1. Did you choose to work with at-risk students at an alternative education program?
2. Do you experience positive feelings as a result of working with at-risk students at an alternative education program?
3. Do you consider working with at-risk students at an alternative education program interesting or satisfying?

It was, at that point, when I informed the educator if they met the criteria. If the criteria was met, I moved forward with scheduling interviews with each participant until the anticipated sample size number was reached. The interviews took place at the program site in a private location and I collected the consent forms at that point.

Through purposeful sampling, the sample is strategically chosen to ensure the exploration of the topic gets as much thorough information necessary to support the purpose of the study. According to Patton (2002), researchers' observation and analytical abilities are more meaningful in qualitative inquiry than selection of sample size (p. 245). While there are no rules for determining sample sizes in qualitative research, there are considerations based on approach and saturation. For this case study, I obtained a sample of four ($N = 4$) through purposeful sampling, that was subject to change as needed to ensure saturation (see Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2009). Selecting a sample of four has been suggested by Creswell (2013) as the minimum number of participants for case studies. A sample of four participants allowed me to interpret the data to understand similarities, patterns and themes, and to minimize the weakening of the information. However, data collection would continue until saturation was reached.

Instrumentation

In order to generate an in depth understanding of the case, I utilized two forms of data (see Creswell, 2013; 2014). One form of data collection was through interviewing. The initial procedure was to conduct individual face-to-face interviews with the educators at their program sites in a confidential meeting location utilizing hand written notes and audio recordings if possible. The process for securing a location of the interviews was

changed as will be discussed in Chapter 4. The open-ended questions captured the intrapersonal qualities these educators possessed and made way for emerging themes related to personal identities, turning points, and self-reflection. By interviewing the educators, I was able to capture common themes in what they identified as contributing to their effectiveness. This interviewing allowed me to explore cognitive, feeling, value, and background that was used to explore similarities amongst an intentional sample population specific to their experience with at-risk young adults. I developed the interview protocol (see Appendix) using guidelines suggested by Creswell (2013). The following will discuss how I developed the interview questions.

One, many teachers in high poverty schools and those that work with at-risk students are generally underprepared to handle the challenges that come with working in these schools and with this population (Edgar, 2014; National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools, 2005). Even so, academic credentials and ability is what determines the effectiveness of teachers without looking at other qualifying factors for specifically working with at-risk students (Bickerstaff, 2010; Geronimo, 2010). As such, questions one to three of my interview protocol explored the professional and academic background of the educators in this study.

Two, researchers discuss the social, emotional, and behavioral challenges that at-risk students present in school which interferes with their learning ability as well as their behavior. When teachers recognize these influences, they can utilize this understanding to engage the young person from a nonacademic relationship towards academic success. Several studies have shown the impact that school-based relationships have on student

success. Questions four through six explored this nonacademic thought process and understanding of student success.

Three, questions seven through nine explored topics related to the theoretical foundation of the SDT. Based on Deci and Ryan's SDT, intrinsically motivated people intentionally choose to engage in activities based on personal inherent interest, satisfaction, and positive feelings (Bassi and Fave, 2012; Deci and Ryan, 2008). Because the behavior is autonomously driven, individuals are self-motivated to satisfy their personal and psychological goal attainment (Bassi and Fave, 2012; Deci and Ryan, 2008; Van Nuland et al., 2010).

Four, as discussed in Donaldson & Johnson (2011) and Rice (2010), low income schools and at-risk populations are not the preferred placement for teachers due to a variety of reasons. Also, the trauma history of a student can impact the ability of an educator to teach a student and manage their behaviors. Researchers have shown that effective teachers make informed decisions to work with specific populations of student based on intrinsic professional factors (Rice, 2010). As a result, questions 10-12 explored the reasons educators decide to work in alternative education.

Lastly, questions 13-16 were specifically related to the research question to further explore commonalities that exist within effective educators who have the intrinsic desire to work in alternative education settings. As stated in the literature, students with emotional and behavioral challenges who enter alternative education settings must be met with effective practices to aid in their success (Flower et al., 2011).

My interview protocol was guided by my central question and sub questions. I utilized an interview guide that had my questions and space to write down the responses given by the participants (see Creswell, 2013). My protocol also included: reminder instructions for myself so that each interview was comparable; a heading; concluding questions for me to follow up from the interview, especially to ensure participants I am looking to move forward with my exploration; and a thank you statement (Creswell, 2009, p. 183). Prior to, during, and exiting utilization of this technique, I kept in mind the following: determined an appropriate place within the setting conducive to confidentiality and quietness; consent forms; remained respectful and courteous; determined the amount of time that would be needed; and a reminder to be a listener rather than offering advice (Creswell, 2013, p. 166).

Lastly, the participants were asked to write a letter to self as if they were speaking to their inner self; yet the letter was submitted for data collection. The guided writing assignment asked participants, "Why do you do this and why do you wake up in the morning and return to work?" By educators reflecting on what allows them to do the work they do, it offered another avenue of data for the research. Participant diaries or participant journal writing offer an additional perspective from the point of view of the participant (Jacelon and Imperio, 2005). The guided writing gave the participants the opportunity to write for their benefit to tell their voluntary stories and gave the researcher rich data. Tuckett (2005) discussed participant journals as an additional means of triangulation as well as addressing trustworthiness. I informed the participants to submit the writing within seven days of the conclusion of their individual interview by email or

picked up by myself. The means of communication they preferred was decided upon at that moment. This procedure is explained further in the next section.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The data collection for this study was proposed to take place from an alternative education school in a Northeastern U.S. city but that changed as will be discussed in Chapter 4. There was a sample of four teachers (*N*=4) through purposeful sampling that was subject to change as suggested by Merriam (2009) and Creswell (2013) as needed by saturation (Patton, 2009). In order for the results of the study to relate to the literature, the alternative education program had to be an effective alternative education program. Part of the literature review for this study entailed alternative education programs serving as dumping grounds for students who are considered at-risk. Therefore, any alternative education model would not benefit the results of this research. The success or the outcome rate of the alternative education program was the determining factor for the selection of educators as determined by the data of school. However, the procedures for selecting an effective alternative education program changed as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

I spoke with the executive director for most alternative education programs in a Northeastern U.S. city and he agreed to allow me to collect data at one of the sites. I met with the appointed individual to look at the data from 2014-2016 to determine which site to recruit participants based on increased academic scores and social, emotional, and behavioral growth in their students. I also identified a second site to be used as a follow up plan if recruitment at the first site was not successful.

Once I was granted approval from Walden University's IRB, the plan was to begin with the interviews and participant journaling. I worked with the appropriate contact person at the school to schedule a time to attend a staff meeting with the educators to discuss the study, request volunteers, and the ability for educators to be interviewed during the school day in a private location. Also, I requested that I was introduced to the staff at the staff meeting and for the staff to be informed of my purpose at the meeting with the length of time I would be on site for interviews. However, due to difficulties in securing a time to meet with the staff, there was a change in procedures and that process is discussed in Chapter 4.

The initial plan was the following. Once I discussed the schedule with the contact person, I was to first present to the educators at the staff meeting. The presentation would include a description of the study, the data collection process, benefits and risks, and confidentiality and withdrawal rights. Thereafter, I would discuss the participation of the participants to be interviewed and submit a guided writing document in the form of a "letter to self". All educators would then receive the informed consent form which would include the following: restatement inclusion criteria; description of study purpose; procedures of the study; voluntary nature of the study; risk and benefits of the study; confidentiality of participants; and my contact information. I was to give the attendees the option to immediately agree to participate up until two weeks after the meeting. As previously stated, the procedures changed as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

As interested individuals began to make contact for participation, I asked for their contact information as well as their option of telephone or email as a preferred method of

contact. At that point, I screened the educator to ensure they met the inclusion criteria of intrinsically motivated. The following questions were asked:

1. Did you choose to work with at-risk students at an alternative education program?
2. Do you experience positive feelings as a result of working with at-risk students at an alternative education program?
3. Do you consider working with at-risk students at an alternative education program interesting and/or satisfying?

It was, at that point, I informed the educator if they met the criteria. Once the criteria was met, I moved forward with scheduling an interview with each participant until the anticipated sample size number of four educators was reached. The plan was for the interviews to take place at the program site in a private location and collect the consent form at that point. However, the process for securing the interview location changed and will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Once the first four participants were selected, I informed any further individuals that the maximum number of participants had been met but requested to keep their contact information if more participants were unexpectedly needed.

There was one interview scheduled per educator for a 45-60 minute window and was to take place at the program site during the school day in a private location. Again, this process changed. Individual interviews were based on a semistructured, one-on-one format, with open ended questions developed by the researcher (see Appendix). The interviews were tape recorded and I recorded participant answers on an interview

protocol. I informed each participant that if I needed clarification in reviewing interview answers, I would make contact for further questioning to determine reasons for discrepancies. Additionally, I informed the participant of their option to request to view the interview transcription to ensure their story was told correctly.

At the conclusion of the interview, I asked each participant to write a letter to self as if they were speaking to their inner self; yet the letter was submitted to me for data collection. Participants voluntarily free wrote using the guided questions, "Why do you do this and why do you wake up in the morning and return"? I asked the participant to submit their letter within a week of the conclusion of the interview as well as their preferred method of submission of email or pick up. If pick up was their preference, the participant and I would decide the date of pick up at the conclusion of the interview. However, if email was their choice, I provided a deadline date to request the letter, which was a maximum of seven days from the date of the interview. I thanked the participant for their participation in the interview and participant journaling. The proposed plan was to inform the participants and the administration at the site that a follow up presentation would occur to present the final results of the study. However, this plan changed as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process for this study imitated what has been suggested by Creswell (2013; 2014). This process included organizing the data, a read through of the data, coding and organizing the themes, representing the data, and interpreting the data. First, to organize the data, I created and organized the files. Second, I read through the

field notes, transcripts, and letters. Also, I included notes to create initial codes to begin making sense of the complete picture followed by the details. Third, I created codes and themes of the data by describing the case and the setting in which it occurred (e.g. the classroom or program space). Fourth, I analyzed the data searching for specific themes, aggregating the information into large cluster of ideas, and providing details that supported those themes. Fifth, in interpreting the data, I used categorical aggregation to look at relevant meanings within the subgroup of educators and discuss what was learned.

I analyzed, annotated, and coded the transcripts for the presence of emergent themes. Within this process, I checked, verified and altered the themes which led to the identification of higher order themes across participants. I finalized master themes and related subthemes and created a table of the themes. I audio recorded all interviews with participant permission and transcribed verbatim. In reviewing participant responses, further questioning took place with the participant if there were any discrepancies that arose to determine reasons for discrepancies.

To assist in the data management, analysis, and representation as discussed, I utilized a software program, NVivo, which was useful for the study. A software program, such as NVivo, was useful for the study in a number of ways. One, it served as my organization tool in order to store and retrieve the data. Two, I was able to create nodes and code my data (reading and memoing) through the process of reading the data line by line. Three, with NVivo, external data can be uploaded to benefit the data analysis process. I was able to upload the audio of the interview transcripts and import the letter writing document. I had the ability to select an area on the letter and not only code it but

highlight it to remind myself of the key concepts. Along these same lines, I was able to edit the audio data to retain and creates codes for valuable sections. Furthermore, to aid in theme analysis, I created queries within NVivo to aid in coding by performing tasks such as; text search to find occurrences of a word or concept, word frequency to find frequently occurring words that can aid in code creations, and coding to include combining nodes that are content related. By looking at exact or similar occurrences of words and concepts, it helped me to identify the clusters.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Since the researcher is responsible for presenting an accurate account of a story in qualitative research, it is essential to employ strategies used for validation to secure trustworthiness of the study. To ensure credibility, I employed a methods triangulation (Patton, 2002). Methods triangulation involves the use of various data sources to test for consistency (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). One, in order to be confident in the data collection, analysis, and results, I checked for the consistency of findings through a flow of evidence that validated the themes and findings. Also, to ensure the final "story" sat well with the participants, there was corroboration with the participants as I reviewed the final data with the participants.

Furthermore, I utilized an additional two strategies to make sure this research plan has evidence of quality. First, I included the credibility of myself (see Patton, 2002) and guaranteed reflexivity within the study (see Creswell, 2013. Second, to ensure a high quality case study, I used a critique checklist as a criteria framework (see Creswell, 2013). This checklist was comprised of criteria to assess a good quality case study. By

utilizing the checklist through the research process, I made certain to frame the report around how it would be evaluated.

I was aware that since this is my line of professional work and interest, I needed to remain aware of my biases. I set aside my own beliefs to ensure I did not side with the participants or only provide results that confirmed my professional beliefs. I used the same questions for all participants and utilized an epoché approach (see Patton, 2002, p. 484). By utilizing an epoché approach, I ensured I remain self aware of personal bias and personal involvement. I bracketed my professional experience as suggested by Creswell (2013) through reflective journaling.

Ethical Procedures

Effective preparation to address ethical concerns during a research process is crucial. As suggested by Creswell (2013) and Patton (2002), there are several ethical concerns that a researcher can prepare for to address. Prior to the research, I would need to gain the required access to the site and participants of interest and selection of a site where I would not have a biased perspective. Beginning the study, I needed to disclose the purpose of the study, discuss the informed consent forms, share the plan for the results with the participants, and gain rapport with the participants to explore and present data that can be beneficial to the field. Next, upon the beginning of data collection, there were several steps I needed to make. One, I needed to be aware of my biases as a career professional in the line of work. Two, share how I planned to protect the participants' rights and my obligation to respect these rights and values. Three, determine an appropriate place within the setting conducive to confidentiality and quietness. Last,

discuss how I planned to use the data collected. Then, during data analysis, I needed to respect the privacy of the participants and ensure I did not side with the participants or provide only the positive results.

The following provided solutions intended to address the anticipated ethical concerns. As I have experience working with this population of students and educators in the field, I would collect data at a site that I was unfamiliar with to avoid biases and flawed perceptions and observations. However, this changed as will be discussed in Chapter 4. I met with the appropriate individual of the program site to officially express interest in using their site for data collection, informed them of the impact of my study to gain access to the site and the participants. Next, I used the informed consent to address majority of the ethical concerns: explanation of purpose of study; plan for the write up draft to be shared with the participants to ensure the story is being told accurately; liberty to ask any questions during the research process; plan for who the data is to be shared with; limits of confidentiality and the uses of the information gathered from the research (APA, 2017, 4.02); and an instruction of voluntary withdrawal from the study at their liberty.

Additionally, according to the APA Code of Ethics Standard 4.07, psychologists do not disclose in their writings, confidential and personally identifiable information concerning their research participants or organizational clients that they obtained during the course of their work. The purpose of my study was to inform and improve change, so as a result, only particular information will be published to ensure violation of this code is not jeopardized. Therefore, research participants will not be identified by their

information, as not to jeopardize their jobs (APA, 2017, 4.07). Finally, according to the APA Code of Ethics regarding maintaining confidentiality requires “reasonable” precautions to maintain confidentiality obtained through any method (APA, 2017, 4.01). As such, confidential data associated with this study will be secured in a locked cabinet in my home and information on the computer will be password protected.

Summary

Chapter 3 discussed the research design, role of the researcher, methodology, and issues of trustworthiness that will drive the data collection for this study. Included in this chapter were sections on the rationale for the research design, participant selection logic, instrumentation to be used in data collection, procedures for recruitment, plan for data analysis, and ethical procedures. Chapter 4 will discuss the data collection.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the personal factors that educators identified as supporting their motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting. I developed the following research question to guide my inquiry: What do educators identify as the personal factors that support motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting? This was exploratory research aimed at studying information rich cases. By exploring the research question, I contributed to a scholarly understanding of educators' perspective on what factors are related to their willingness and ability to engage at-risk students. In this chapter, I discuss the study setting, participant demographics and characteristics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results and provide a summary.

Setting

I interviewed the participants at a location in a Northeastern U.S. city that was convenient for their availability. Two of the interviews took place in the natural setting of the alternative education program, one interview took place at a coffee shop, and another took place in a lounge on a college campus. Participants scheduled their interviews during a time that was convenient for them. Two of the interviews took place during the school day on the participants' break, one took place after work hours, and one took place on the weekend. At the beginning of the interview, the consent form was given to each participant and the interview began thereafter. After the consent form was signed, I read

my interview protocol which included an introduction with an overview of the study. I asked each participant if they had any questions before beginning the interview and proceeded with the interview questions. When the interview questions were completed, I asked each participant if they wanted to add anything as last thoughts and reminded them of the time frame and process for submitting their guided writing assignment. I thanked each participant and concluded the interview. There were no conditions present at the time of the interviews that might have influenced the responses to the questions.

Demographics

Participants for the study had to meet two sets of inclusion criteria. First, the participants had to work at an effective alternative education program. The effectiveness of the program was determined by a score rating on the "National Alternative Education Association Research Based Practices for Effective Alternative Education Programs" assessment. Based on the assessment, a program could receive one of three ratings: needs developing, accomplished, or exemplary. If a program scores a rating of "accomplished" or "exemplary", it was considered an effective alternative education program. Therefore, to be considered for this study, participants had a prescreening interview to complete the "National Alternative Education Association Research Based Practices for Effective Alternative Education Programs" assessment. If their program scored a rating of accomplished or exemplary, their program was considered to be an effective program and they met the first set of inclusion criteria. Second, if their program was considered an effective alternative education program, they then had to meet the inclusion criteria of

being intrinsically motivated. If both sets of inclusion criteria were met, participants were able to move forward in the study.

As this study was a case study research, four participants from one alternative education program participated in the study. Because all participants were from the same program, it was only necessary to complete the "National Alternative Education Association Research Based Practices for Effective Alternative Education Programs" assessment with one person to determine if the program was an effective program. As such, I completed the assessment with the first participant and the program received a score of "accomplished," which meant it was an effective alternative education program. Because all four participants were from the same program, I did not need to complete the assessment with the following three participants. Therefore, each of the four participants moved on to the second set of inclusion criteria of being intrinsically motivated. All four participants met the criteria for intrinsic motivation. Table 1 provides further demographics relevant to the study.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	Alternative education years of experience	Education	Gender	Current work setting
P 1	10	Associate degree	F	Alternative education
P 2	25	None	M	Alternative education
P 3	8 months	Master's degree	F	Alternative education
P 4	8 years	Master's degree	F	Alternative education

I refer to participants as P1 through P4 in order of their interview dates. For example, P1 was the participant whom I interviewed first. P1 was a woman who had been working in alternative education for 10 years with the same organization. She began her career in a call center for a nonprofit organization and began in the alternative education profession as a case manager. She became an educator through advancing in the alternative education program during her career. She received her associate degree in social rehabilitation after beginning in her role and is currently working on her bachelor's degree.

P2 was a man who had been working in alternative education for 25 years. He began his career as a teacher's aide at an alternative school. He withdrew from college so he does not have a college degree.

P3 was a woman who had been working in alternative education for 6 months but had worked as a teacher for 6 years. She started her career as a funeral director and began

in alternative education 8 months ago in her current position. She has a master's degree in mathematics.

P4 was a woman who had been working in alternative education for 8 years. She began her career as an educator. In addition, she received her certification to teach in a high school setting and received a master's degree in administration and supervision as well as a second master's degree in special education.

Data Collection

Participant Selection

My IRB application was first approved on March 5, 2018. However, I had difficulties with the community partner who agreed to allow me to come into the program site for data collection. There were multiple administrators involved in the process and they were unable to effectively coordinate my visit to a site to collect data based on my approved procedures outlined in my IRB application. As a result, I submitted a change in procedures form through IRB on April 9, 2018, and was instructed to redo my IRB application due to the substantive nature of my requested revisions. My request for a change in procedures was approved on May 18, 2018.

While waiting for my change in procedures to be approved, I was informed by a member of the management team at the original community partner that I could send my data collection information to their staff for recruitment. This was an effort to assist with my data collection in exchange for not being able to coordinate me using the program as a community partner. I began the procedures for data collection on May 18, 2018, and concluded on June 7, 2018. Per my IRB approval (approval no. **03-05-18-0319145)**, I

posted an invitation to participate flyer on Facebook and Instagram as my social media avenues. Additionally, I informed the member of the community partner that my flier was posted on social media and they could circulate the flier if they were interested. On the first day of my post, I was informed that my flier was circulated amongst the staff at the alternative education program. On the recruitment flier, I included the three inclusion criteria questions for being intrinsically motivated:

1. Did you choose to work with at-risk students at an alternative education program?
2. Do you experience positive feelings as a result of working with at-risk students at an alternative education program?
3. Do you consider working with at-risk students at an alternative education program interesting and/or satisfying?

There were five participants who called or texted my personal cell phone and expressed interest in participating in the study. Using Creswell's (2013) case study research design, I chose four participants as the minimum number of participants with the understanding that more participants would be added if saturation was not met. I asked the fifth individual who contacted me if I could keep their contact information should I need another participant to which they agreed. I was able to schedule three of the four interviews. The fourth individual was unable to continue with the study so I contacted the fifth individual and scheduled an interview with that person to meet my initial plan of including four participants. The final four participants were from the same alternative

education program. I debriefed each participant of the study and interviews were scheduled by phone.

The first participant, who was with the alternative education program the longest, completed the "National Alternative Education Association Research Based Practices for Effective Alternative Education Programs" assessment during her prescreening interview. The purpose of the prescreening interview was to determine the rating for the program to verify if the program received an assessment of an effective alternative education program. To reiterate, the effectiveness of the program was determined by a score rating on the assessment. Based on the assessment, a program could receive one of three ratings: needs developing, accomplished, or exemplary. If a program scored a rating of "accomplished" or "exemplary," it was considered an effective alternative education program. During the prescreening interview with P1, the program received a rating of *accomplished.* As all participants were from the same program, the first inclusion criteria was then met for all participants. Therefore, I was able to move forward with all four participants to screen for the second inclusion criterion of being intrinsically motivated, as listed on the recruitment flier. All four participants met the inclusion criteria.

Participation

I conducted the interviews over a period of five days beginning June 3, 2018 until June 7, 2018. Each interview was held at an agreed upon location. Each participant completed the consent form and was given the option to receive a transcription of the interview to ensure I told their story properly. No one requested to receive a transcription. Each participated in a face-to-face semi-structured interview that consisted of 16 sub-

questions and one wrap-up question (see Appendix). During the interview, follow up questions were asked, when necessary, in order to gain a deeper understanding of answers or to gain further clarification. The interviews were audiotaped and lasted 20 to 35 minutes.

During preliminary data analysis, no new themes evolved after the third interview. I began to hear redundant information as participants were answering questions during the third and fourth interviews. Furthermore, during the third and fourth interview analysis, codes were already present for the data and the analysis from the four participants was enough to contribute to the theoretical foundation for the study. For these reasons, no further individuals were contacted to be participants in the study. I determined four participants was enough to reach saturation as I had determined that saturation of responses to each interview question was attained.

At the conclusion of the interview, I reminded each participant to write a letter as if they were speaking to their inner self. Participants wrote the letter using the guided questions, “Why do you do this and why do you wake up in the morning and return”? Participants were requested to submit their letter within a week of the conclusion of the interview and was provided with an option of emailing their letter or me picking up the letter. Each participant opted to email his or her letter within seven days from the date of the interview. I thanked each candidate and reminded them that their identity would remain private and that further questioning would take place if discrepancies arose.

I listened to each audiotaped interview and subsequently transcribed each interview. During data collection, I was the only individual with access to the data. The

recorders used for the interviews and consent forms were locked in a cabinet at home. Transcribed interviews were kept on a password protected computer. Data for the study was managed, stored, and will be maintained as described in Chapter 3.

Variations in Data Collection

The data collection procedure varied from the plan presented in Chapter 3. I did complete my initial step one of meeting with an appointed person at my community partner program to determine which site to collect data based on increased academic scores and social, emotional, and behavioral growth. We also identified a second site to be used as a follow up plan if recruitment at the first site was not successful. Difficulties arose during step two. While attempting to communicate and work with the appropriate contact person at the identified school to schedule a time to attend a staff meeting with the educators for recruitment, I experienced a lack of consistent communication where I was not receiving any communication at times and unable to reach this individual. While working with a member of the management team, I was always told someone would follow up with me. After one month of no progress, I determined that continuing with the community partner could not continue due to the inability to coordinate data collection at a program site. As a result, I requested a change in my procedures. The following were the approved changes:

- I added an invitation to participate flyer and disseminated the flyer via social media. If I did not reach the number of four participants or saturation of data was not reached, I would use snowball sampling. This step replaced

presenting the study at the program site and recruiting for participants specifically at the site.

- Once interested applicants expressed interest, I screened each participant to see if they met two sets of criteria to participate. The first set criteria involved a screening questionnaire that ensured they worked at an effective alternative education program. This screening was done with the "National Alternative Education Association Research Based Practices for Effective Alternative Education Programs." If the program received an "accomplished" or "exemplary" rating on the assessment, I proceeded with the second step in the screening process. This step replaced receiving data from the program site on their increased academic scores and social and emotional growth to determine program effectiveness.
- The following statement was added to my IRB application: "I will remain in the role of the researcher until the dissertation is complete and will not reply to any questions appealing to my expertise or experience in this area."
- For each potential participant that agreed to participate, there was one interview scheduled per educator that took place at an agreed upon location (coffee shop, etc.). This step replaced interviewing at the program site.
- "Complete a prescreening thirty-minute interview via phone or in person" was added to the consent form to complete the assessment for an effective alternative education program.

- Changed “The interview will be face-to-face with the researcher during program hours at the program site but at a time that is convenient for you” on the consent form to “The interview will be face-to-face with the researcher at a location and time that is convenient for you.” This sentence removed “during program hours at the program site” to “at a location.”
- Removed “Attend meeting at program site for dissemination of results at the conclusion of the study” from the consent form since I was not completing the study through the community partner.
- Removed “No one at Opportunity Youth Network will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study” from the consent form since I was not completing the study through the community partner.
- Removed “Once the study is complete, I will follow up with a presentation to your organization to present the final results” from the interview protocol since I was not completing the study through the community partner.

During the period of recruitment, five individuals expressed interest in voluntarily participating in the study. One individual was not able to complete participation so four individuals were eligible to participate based on the criteria of working in an effective alternative education program and meeting the intrinsically motivated criteria. The data collection phase concluded after the fourth participant’s interview as saturation of data had been reached.

Data Analysis

Using Creswell's (2013; 2014) data analysis process, I utilized NVivo 12 software program to assist in data management, analysis, and representation. First, NVivo 12 was used as my organization tool to store and retrieve data. Second, I uploaded the interview transcripts and letter writing documents into Nvivo 12. Third, while reading line by line through each document, I created nodes in order to code my data. I used two processes for creating themes. I inductively categorized the data into themes based on participant responses. I analyzed, annotated, and coded the transcripts for the presence of emergent themes. Next, I used Nvivo 12 data analysis feature to query if other themes were established that I had not created while coding my data. Additionally, I created queries within NVivo 12 by performing tasks such as; text search to find occurrences of a word or concept and word frequency to find frequently occurring words to cross reference the themes I was creating.

In order to finalize themes, I reviewed each interview transcript and guided writing assignment three times. The first reading allowed me to begin the coding process. The coding process involved creating small categories based on the larger information from all data collection sources and assigning each idea a label, which is the code (Creswell, 2013). Next, I created a category for every theme I identified. A theme or category is an idea that consists of several codes to form a major finding in data analysis. The second reading allowed me to focus on the participants' perspective of specific factors that supports their motivation, interest, and eagerness to be effective teachers in an alternative education setting. During this reading, I immersed myself in the data and

identified prominent thoughts of the educators that were consistent among the educators. The last reading provided me the opportunity to weigh each interview equally and finalize my themes by specifically focusing on the themes that answered the research question. As the number of participants was four, I kept thoughts and ideas that were identified by at least three or more participants to create the codes. These ideas became either a theme itself or categorized with other codes to create a larger theme. I began with 25 codes that were persistent among the participant responses:

1. Reference to personal and/or professional background
2. Understanding and/or experience with dysfunction
3. Seeing selves as servants
4. Understanding the importance that social/emotional growth has on success
5. Willingness to go through student growth process
6. Truth telling with self and students
7. Teacher beyond academics
8. Personal mission to pay it forward
9. Internal fortitude
10. Focus on engagement rather than compliance
11. Naturally good at the work
12. Intrinsic
13. Understanding
14. Empathy versus sympathy
15. Active listening to hear what students are and are not saying

16. Belief in students to succeed
17. Varied backgrounds
18. Relationship building
19. Feeling lonely in previous employment
20. Different perspectives and outlook on students and student success
21. Part of job fulfills personal mission
22. Sense of satisfaction
23. Belief they have a role outside of teaching
24. Traditional versus alternative school comparison
25. Reference to students as young people

Once I identified the final themes, I created titles to capture the core of what the educators discussed. Through my data analysis, I highlighted specific statements to be used to support the themes that were created. I then combined the 23 codes into seven categories: (a)understanding, (b) defining moment, (c) perspective and outlook, (d) intrinsic motivation, (e) personal and/or psychological goal attainment, (f) teacher beyond academics, and (g) internal fortitude. Two of the codes were discarded because they did not answer the research question. Five of the seven categories began as codes and were developed into categories. Table 2 shows how I placed the codes into categories.

Table 2

Deductive Categories

Categories	Codes
Understanding	- Understanding/Experience with dysfunction - Understanding social/emotional growth - Active listening
Defining moment	- Reference to personal/professional background - Feeling lonely in previous employment
Perspective/Outlook	- Focus on engagement rather than compliance - Empathy versus sympathy - Belief in students to succeed - Part of job fulfills a personal mission - Traditional versus alternative school comparison - Reference to students as young people - Truth telling
Intrinsic	- Naturally good at the work - Part of job fulfills a personal mission
Personal/Psychological goal attainment	- Personal mission to pay it forward - Part of job fulfills a personal mission - Seeing selves as servants
Teacher beyond academics	- Belief they have a role outside of teaching
Internal fortitude	- Sense of satisfaction

Discrepant Case

There was one discrepant case regarding factors that support motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting. P1 was the only participant who did not express having any feeling of loneliness in previous employment specific to how students were treated in the environment. The other three participants mentioned how dissatisfied they were with how students were treated in other settings and that contributed to why they were motivated to work in an environment that aligned with their beliefs. With that said, it is important to note that P1 was the only participant who had not worked in any school setting prior to alternative education. As a result, P1 would not be able to make that comparison as the other three participants.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, I employed a methods triangulation (Patton, 2002). Methods triangulation involves the use of various data sources to test for consistency (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Through this study, each participant was interviewed and submitted a guided writing assignment. I analyzed each interview and writing assignment as separate data sets. Each interview was reviewed three times in addition to listening to the audiotape for transcription. This process allowed me to check for clarity and the consistency of findings through a flow of evidence. There was an adjustment to part of my credibility strategy. Originally, to ensure the final "story" sat well with the participants, there was a plan to review the final data with the participants at a meeting with the program site and administrators. Since collecting data through a community partner was removed from my data collection, this plan for credibility was removed.

Furthermore, I ensured the credibility of myself (see Patton, 2002) and guaranteed reflexivity within the study (see Creswell, 2013). Second, to ensure a high quality case study, I utilized a critique checklist as a criteria framework (see Creswell, 2013). This checklist was comprised of criteria to assess a good quality case study. By utilizing the checklist through the research process, I was certain to frame the report around how it would be evaluated. Although no participant asked to review the copy of their interview, each participant received the offer through the reading and signing of the consent form.

To avoid researcher bias, I remained aware of my biases since this is my previous line of professional work and current interest. I set aside my own beliefs to ensure I did not side with the participants or only provide results that confirmed my professional beliefs. I used the same semistructured questions for all participants and made every attempt to utilize an epoche' approach (see Patton, 2002, p. 484). By utilizing an epoche' approach, I guaranteed my self-awareness of personal bias and personal involvement. I bracketed my professional experience as suggested by Creswell (2013) through reflective journaling. To ensure transferability, I used thick descriptions of the settings and each educator.

Results

The main research question for the qualitative case was: "What do educators identify as the personal factors that support motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting"? Key findings of the study indicated seven significant themes that educators identified as personal factors that support

motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting.

Understanding

One of the more consistent findings in the study was the importance that educators placed on understanding students as a factor contributing to being an effective teacher. What was consistent among the participants was their desire to understand the various factors related to educating the students based on the student's needs as well as who the students were as individuals. Additionally, the educators appreciated building rapport and relationships with the students during the learning process of understanding them. When asked about how an educator's perception of disengaged students contributes to their teacher effectiveness, a statement by P4 illustrates this concept:

> Just understanding students. Being able to build relationships with students and understand what their interests are, what motivates them, their family dynamics, personal goals, things of that nature. So I'm then able to build those relationships and kind of work those angles to push students to engage more.

The following were highlighted as it relates to understanding: (a) understanding that emotional support for students supports academic success and leadership building, (b) understanding that growth is a sliding scale, (c) understanding the young people they serve, (d) understanding the student's background, (e) understanding whatever needs were not getting met in their previous schools, (f) understanding when to be nurturing and when to be stern, (g) understanding that there should be a check for understanding as a means of engagement, (h) understanding that student disengagement communicates a

message beyond the student just being disengaged, (i) understanding and/or experience with dysfunction, and (j) understanding that active listening involves hearing what students are saying and what they are not saying.

Defining Moment

Each participant in this study had a defining moment in their life when they knew that working with at-risk students in alternative education was something they desired to do. Three out of the four participants previously worked in a nonalternative education program. Each of these participants had some feeling of loneliness and disconnect in their previous employment specific to how students were being treated. P2 stated:

> I think what I would define as that moment was watching our young people, primarily minority young people, be medicated at a very high level and pacified through that vehicle. It struck me that those systems were designed to hurt our young people and I could see that it really wasn't designed to support any real growth. So, I started to look, then, for vehicles that worked better and challenge young people more directly and through my growth, professionally, I was able to find this space which I think gets us there.

P4 stated:

> I started to feel like I wasn't the lone wolf trying to fight the good cause like I was in the traditional classroom setting. Where if I did something different or differentiated some stuff for young people, other staff would look at me like "what are you doing, like teach and that's it, you do not have to go above and

beyond". And once I got into an alternative setting and realized that other people were doing this as well, it kind of really help to reaffirm that for me.

P1 mentioned her defining moment as working with young people in a church and realizing she had a gift to engage with young people. Similar to P2 and P4, P3 referenced the values within previous places of employment not aligning with her personal and professional values which spearheaded her intentional search for a place that did. That place turned out to be the alternative education program.

Perspective and Outlook

The top two words that were present in data analysis are found in the word cloud (see Figure 1). The word cloud is a feature in Nvivo 12 that allows the researcher to run a word frequency inquiry to access how often words are used. This is one of the many ways for the researcher to determine prevalent codes. One of the most significant and consistent findings was the educators referencing the students as "young people". Each participant referenced the students as "young people" and these two words was mentioned 106 times.

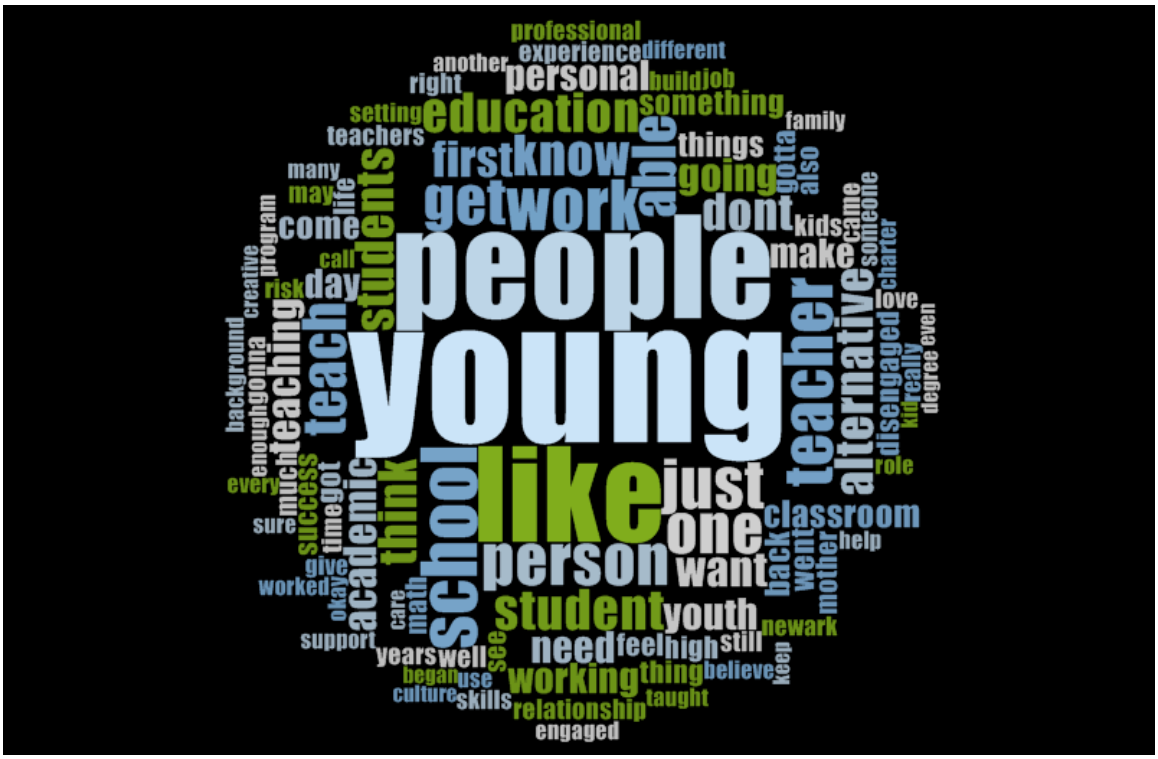

Figure 1. Data collection word cloud.

In addition, many of the educators focused on engagement with the students rather than compliance. P2 stated:

> They've (students) learned to give you the measures of disengagement because it's a defense mechanism. When they come from multi-generational traumas and dysfunction, they not gonna come and put their hands on a desk and fold them and wait for instruction from you. They are going to present differently and we need to be flexible enough to handle that challenge. So if Johnny is disengaging, what I try to do is think about what I didn't do? ….That means we aren't doing something for that young person that they need and we need to be able to ask the right questions, soul search enough, to get to that service provision, so that that young person can stay connected. Because we are looking for connection. You

> (student) can’t come in but you’re texting me, I got it. That’s connection! And that’s the level of engagement that we should be looking for.

Another consistent perspective of the participants was that students have what they need to succeed and the role of the educator is to coach them into that success. P4 stated:

> My role is kind of like kind of a cheerleader /fertilizer. They already have all these ideas and thoughts that they want to do. My job is to like, even when they don't want to push themselves, continue to push them and when they don't believe in themselves, continue to believe in them until they get to the finish line.

The participants discussed their focus being on what happened to the student and not what is wrong with the student. By understanding what happened to the students, the educators can understand how to individualize their attention to guide each student to their specific means of success which according to the educators, is different for each student. The belief that students in alternative settings have the internal ability to succeed was consistent among the participants.

Lastly, each participant compared traditional education to alternative education methods and student engagement. What appeared to motivate the participants was teaching students from methods that are unconventional but that work for students in an alternative education setting. The participants discussed the variety of ways in which the methods, attitudes, values, and experiences in traditional schools did not align with their professional and personal beliefs. As such, they were motivated by the flexibility in

alternative education to reach the student according to the needs of the student versus the needs of administration. P1 stated:

> I get to be creative . . . I get to teach in an non-traditional sense and I get to be not only a teacher, I get to be a role model . . . The fact that I get to come in to work with different challenges, I get to work with different young people and it's different. This is where I feel comfortable.

P2 stated:

> Student success means that they've achieved a level that allows them to take care of themselves, take care of the people that they care about, and hopefully continue to share forward this idea that young people can impact their community positively. That can be "I'm working 40 hours a week, I have health benefits, I got a vacation package, I can take care of my family, I can stabilize in alot of cases. We take a lot of pride here in having young people do things like get married.

Additionally, each participant discussed being motivated by educating in an environment where others share ideologies similar to their own when it comes to teaching and student development. This makes them eager to get up and return the next day to do it over again.

Teacher Beyond Academics

Each of the educators saw themselves as having a specific role in the lives of the students, beyond academics. The educators were interested in the growth of the students beyond academics: personal, professional, and social. They were interested in providing

the skills the students need to succeed in life. They had a belief that social and emotional support for the students contributes to the academic growth. The participants identified the following as their roles: P1 stated:

> My main role is to make sure that I have a healthy relationship with them, make sure that I am modeling what I am asking of that young person, that I am balanced meaning that I am being understanding, that I am also teaching, being strict when I need to be but I am also lenient when I have to. So there definitely has to be balance. And that's my main goal.

P2 stated:

> So I like to think of myself as a mentor. So you find that lane of counsel and you stay there for as long as that person asks for…I don't have to have a deep dive into your life but whenever we check in, it could have been two years ago, it's gonna be like I saw you yesterday and I'm always driving the developmental needle, "what you need, what's next, what's happening, what are you doing, what are the opportunities". You know kind of presenting myself, too, as a resource for folks no matter what the circumstances might be.

P3 stated:

> The first thing that comes to my head is motherly affection, motherly love. That's the first thing that always come to my head when I teach. I'm a mother before I'm a teacher. And a teacher is a mother. When you are a mother, you are a teacher. That is your first true test of being a teacher. So I think giving them that motherly love and affection, attention. My role is to just be a ladder, be a rung on a ladder.

> If I can be a step on a ladder, you can climb on me to move up, I think I did my job right.

Personal and Psychological Goal Attainment

The educators each discussed how part of the job fulfilled a personal mission for them. Many of the educators referenced their upbringing and how there was someone or multiple people who made a monumental impact in their life. As a result, they felt obligated to pay it forward and make an impact in the lives of young people whose shoes they were once in. Also, there was a sense of seeing themselves as servants and serving the students they work with. They see themselves as the student's supporters and are employed to meet the needs of the students. P3 talked about serving her community, P4 discussed working with disengaged students as a personal challenge to help engage them, and P1 specifically stated "serving young people".

Intrinsic Motivation

A consistent finding amongst the participants was the absence of professional training to work with at-risk students. Each of them specifically chose to work with at-risk students in an alternative education setting. P1 stated the following in her letter to self:

> Teaching and counseling truly does not feel like work. Work does not feel like a job because of who you are and what you do not do when you are there. You are not in alternative education just to collect a check. You do not view the young people as failures or unteachable. You do not focus only on grades. You do not

walk into the doors with the intention of saving everyone and you don't walk around like a corrections officer. You come to work as yourself.

P2 stated:

I have long held the position that as an "at risk youth" myself I hold an obligation to the world at large to pay back the effort that impactful people in my life put forth to "save" me while I learned to love myself enough to do some of that work on my own. . . . But I think these kinds of spaces are open to my skill set and I get the feedback from staff and other folks that those are the things that are valuable to them that's been doing the work. So I think I'm just naturally good at those things.

P3 stated in her letter to self:

There are so many reasons why I do the work I do for at-risk young people, however, the most important reason is because I *want* to. My hearts desires the gratification and satisfaction that I am changing the life of at least one young person per day. This is my first year working with this population and every day my desire to serve this community intensifies. The young people I serve in addition to the team of service providers I work with who inspire me every day.

Lastly, P4 stated:

I feel that there are not enough educators out there who not only advocate for their students, but who also teach their students how to advocate for themselves. Many days I am tired and drained, but I know that it's important to keep going despite all of that.

Internal Fortitude

There was a consistency with the participants intertwining their own strengths and personal life into their position which enhanced their passion. A story provided by P3 highlights this point. She stated:

> This one girl, I had a huge argument with. I'm like yall come and get her… The students says "Well you think you big and bad". I said "nope, you think I'm big and bad". She says "oh with your nappy head". I say "at least I like my hair, you're wearing a weave, take off your fake eyelashes, wipe off your eyebrows". Thats literally how the conversation went. Two week ago, she's a graduating senior, she and I was in this one little office getting her math portfolio together before graduating. And she started crying and I'm like "girl, I ain't here to beat you in your head, I'm here to make sure you walk out and not be scared of math". I said "math didn't come easy to me". I was in college crying in the bathroom because I'm in a room in Calculus 3, in a room full of men, half of them were not even from new york. The only black woman in that room and I had to go into the bathroom and cry because I was overwhelmed. But, slapped my face, splash some water on my face, and I went back in. Then I went to Barnes and Noble and brought every dummies book I could find, and I did what I had to do. I just want them to not be afraid out there.

This participant withstood a challenge that some educators may not have been willing or able to. Furthermore, she possessed an internal fortitude within herself that allowed her to make that specific challenge a teaching lesson for the student. Each of the

participants discussed challenging moments and the importance, to them, to self-reflect and make it through those moments. Each of them had different ways of doing so but what was similar was the fact that they wanted to push through so they could get the students to a process of change and growth. There was emotional and mental strength that the educators possessed that allowed them to understand the student separate from the student's disengagement and behavior.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I discussed the data collection setting, demographics of the participants, data collection, data analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness. Furthermore, I presented the overall findings for what educators identified as the personal factors that support motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting. With the use of Nvivo 12, data was analyzed both inductively and deductively. The research question for this study was "What do educators identify as the personal factors that support motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting? The findings revealed a variety of factors represented by seven categories:

1. Wanting to understand the various reasons that contributes to who students are.
2. Having a defining moment in their life that supported their desire to work with at-risk students in an alternative education setting.
3. A unique perspective and outlook with reference to the students and their roles as educators.

4. Intrinsic interest in the work.
5. A personal or psychological goal attainment by engaging in the work.
6. The desire to have a role, beyond academics, in the lives of the students.
7. The internal fortitude to acknowledge and withstand the challenges of working with at-risk students and in alternative education programs.

Two tables and one figure was used to illustrate the demographics and findings. In Chapter 5, I present the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, implications for social change, and the conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what educators identified as the personal factors that support motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting. Many researchers have studied factors related to effective alternative education programs and student engagement. However, little attention has been given to the factors that effective teachers understand as contributing to their impact and effectiveness and even less attention has been given to effective teaches in alternative education. Much of the literature on alternative education focuses on student perceptions of their experience and what matters to them in engagement. Yet, I found no research in the current literature that studied factors that contribute to teachers who are willing and able to work through the challenges that at-risk students and alternative education programs present. The literature answers how teachers are effective but does not address what makes them more effective and willing than others. Although the literature I used for this review included articles that were peer-reviewed, many of them offer opinions of researchers and models of effective programs that include the need for further research. However, there was a gap in the literature in regard to exploring the views of educators themselves. The findings from this study extend knowledge in the discipline by solely exploring the views of educators to understand factors related to their effectiveness.

I conducted four semistructured interviews with educators from an alternative education program in a Northeastern U.S. city. Key findings of the study indicated seven

significant themes that educators identify as personal factors that support motivation, interest, and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting: (a) understanding, (b) defining moment, (c) perspective and outlook, (d) personal and/or psychological goal attainment, (e) intrinsic motivation, (f) teacher beyond academics, and (g) internal fortitude. The following findings support research conducted by Donaldson & Johnson (2011) that suggested it takes more than academic credentials to engage a population of students who have been previously disengaged in schools. The following findings fills in the gap of what has not been researched.

Interpretation of Findings

Understanding

One of the more consistent findings in the study was the importance that educators placed on understanding students as a factor contributing to being an effective teacher. What was consistent among the participants was their desire to understand the various factors related to educating the students based on their needs as well as who the students were as individuals. This finding confirms and extends knowledge in the literature. In Chapter 2, I discussed the impact trauma has on at-risk students in the academic environment and with relationship building (Kasckow et al., 2010; Majer et al., 2010; Popp et al., 2011; Porche et al., 2011). The literature discusses the significance of educators understanding the importance of developing relationships with students in order to best gain their trust and work effectively with them (Bickerstaff, 2010; Caroleo, 2014; Dods, 2013; Hendrickson, 2012; Johnston et al., 2004; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lind, 2013; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Smith, & Thomson, 2014; Steinberg &

Almeida, 2010; Stronge et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2011). However, the literature does not expound on what should be understood or the many ways of understanding students. The findings from this study extend this knowledge by providing 10 specific categories of understanding.

Defining Moment

Each participant in this study had a defining moment in their life when they knew that working with at-risk students in alternative education was something they desired to do. This finding extends the knowledge in the literature. Researchers have shown that effective teachers make informed decisions to work with specific populations of students based on intrinsic professional factors (Edgar, 2014; Rice, 2010). This finding now provides insight into one specific factor that allows an educator to make the informed decision to work at-risk students.

Perspective and Outlook

One of the most significant and consistent findings was the educators referencing the students as "young people." Each participant used the words "young people" when talking about the students. In addition, many of the educators focused on engagement with the students rather than compliance. Another consistent perspective of the participants was that students have what they need to succeed and the role of the educator is to coach them into that success. Lastly, each participant compared traditional education to alternative education methods and student engagement.

This category of findings extends the existing literature in regard to best practices for effective alternative education programs (Edgar, 2014; Lind, 2013; Smith, &

Thomson, 2014). Among these practices, researchers found that staff voluntarily cultivated relationships with students, and their focus was not on changing the student (Edgar, 2014; Lind, 2013; Smith, & Thomson, 2014). The findings in this study support this notion; however, the findings of this study provide insight into the perspective and outlook of the educators that allows them to cultivate these relationships and why their focus is not on changing the student.

Teacher Beyond Academics

Each of the educators saw themselves as having a specific role in the lives of the students, beyond academics. This finding supports existing research that having a school-based mentor is critical to working with emotionally challenged students (Tobin & Sprague, 2001). This confirms existing research by Cooper (2011) and Smith and Thomson (2014) who discussed the humanistic approach of social and emotional learning as intervention approaches. There is a belief that teaching life lessons and emotional intelligence is an opportunity for the educator to connect to the academic content. There is personal satisfaction for the educators when the students obtain life skills and critical thinking skills that they can implement in their daily lives. There is an interest to teach from a place of purpose and intentionality.

Conceptual Framework and Finding Interpretations

Personal and/or Psychological Goal Attainment

A consistent finding among each of the educators that confirms the SDT theoretical framework for this study was the intrinsic nature of doing the work. As mentioned in Chapter 2, SDT refers to the intrinsic motivation of an individual to

willfully engage in activities to meet their personal and psychological goal attainment (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008; Van Nuland et al., 2010). SDT suggests that individuals are naturally self-motivated, interested, and eager to succeed, and the quality of the goal is one of the important factors associated with an individual's personal investment in the goal. The educators each discussed how part of the job fulfills a personal mission for them. As a result, they feel obligated to make an impact in the lives of young people whose experiences may to some degree mirror their own.

Intrinsic Motivation

A consistent finding amongst the participants was the absence of professional training to work with at-risk students. Each of them specifically chose to work with at-risk students in an alternative education setting. The letter-to-self guided writing assignment sheds significant light confirming SDT as it relates to intrinsic motivation.

Internal Fortitude

In selecting SDT as the theoretical foundation for this study, I stated, "If teachers intentionally (*independence*) choose (*autonomy*) to work with at-risk students through their challenges, and they are effective in doing so, SDT is an appropriate theory to help understand the relationship between their interest, motivation, and eagerness and their effectiveness" (p 33). Each of the participants discussed challenges working with at-risk students that confirms the literature. The finding from this study was the ability of the teachers to acknowledge and withstand the challenges of the work, hence, confirming SDT as an appropriate theory

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this case study research was not to create transferability, as it was exploratory research. With that said, there were limitations to the study. Firstly, the participants were exclusively composed of educators. While the data from this study is intended to have an impact on at-risk students, this study did not utilize the voice of students because several studies exist on topics related to students in alternative education. Secondly, the educators were all from the same alternative education program in a Northeastern U.S. city. This is a limitation because it does not represent the general population of educators in all alternative education programs. Thirdly, the sample size for case study research suggested by Creswell (2013) is four. While I followed the recommendation of Creswell on including four participants in the case study, and I reached saturation of data, the findings from this study only represent these four educators and what they have identified as specific factors contributing to their motivation, interest, and eagerness to be effective in an alternative education setting. My intent for this study was to explore information rich cases from a purposeful sample of educators who could provide their firsthand perspective of their effectiveness. As a result, the findings of this study do not to generalize to the greater population of alternative education program educators.

Recommendations for Further Research

A considerable amount of research has been conducted on the factors related to effective alternative education programs and student engagement (Bickerstaff, 2010; Caroleo, 2014; Cooper, 2011; Dods, 2013; Edgar, 2014; Geronimo, 2010; Hendrickson,

2012; ; Johnston et al., 2004; Lagana-Riordan et al.; Lind, 2013; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Smith & Thomason, 2014; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010. In the literature review, I presented studies where researchers discussed the factors important to student engagement such as school connectedness and relationship building. Research has shown that strategies that educators employ make some more effective than others (Bickerstaff, 2010; Caroleo, 2014; Dods, 2013; Hendrickson, 2012; Johnston et al., 2004; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lind, 2013; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Smith, & Thomson, 2014; Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011; Wilson et al., 2011), but I wanted to explore why these teachers were interested and motivated to work with a population of students that are considered a challenging population. I was interested in contributing to scholarly research on the topic of the factors that teachers identify as contributing to their effectiveness because I recognized there was a gap in the literature relating to this topic. In this study, educators presented seven categories of factors that contribute to their interest, motivation, and eagerness to work with at-risk students. The results of this study are critical. By understanding factors contributing to teacher effectiveness, hiring professionals are more equipped to recruiting teachers who are best suited and adequately prepared to be effective working with at-risk students.

Recommendations for further research include data collection from educators in more than one school and even more than one geographical location. Also, further research can include more participants to represent the larger population of effective educators in alternative education programs. Further research to include comparison of educators in multiple effective alternative education programs could be conducted.

Furthermore, research could be done to compare effective alternative education programs to low performing traditional high schools. Research in these areas will contribute to a broader understanding of various factors contributing to assisting at-risk students to academic and nonacademic success.

Implications for Social Change

Social change is bringing about awareness to either a gap in the literature or general area of interest that needs addressing and acting upon that knowledge. There is a lot of literature in the field regarding much content around the same subject area. Therefore, social change is beyond the literature, beyond the evidence, and beyond the studies, but in the implementation of change as a result of the literature. Educational psychology is a great platform to inform various areas but specifically in education. Therefore, the results of this research study can be used in a number of ways by professionals or consultants to bring awareness that will create and maintain educational cultures focusing on the development of students in and out of the classroom.

This research can be used in three major ways: One, educate stakeholders on what to screen for when hiring professionals to work in their alternative education or youth development programs. Two, programs can use this information to adopt best practices and improve systems while working with at-risk students. Because educators are at the forefront of ensuring educational outcomes are met, it would be crucial to know who works best with the population. Lastly, traditional high schools will be informed of the teacher to student dynamic to decrease high school dropout rates and placement into alternative education programs.

Furthermore, professional development trainings and workshops can be developed, utilizing this and past research, on the evidenced based strategies that work to engage this group of young people to districts where drop out and disengagement rates need addressing to improve the student success rates. Also, a curriculum for professionals can be created to be used in creating or re-creating programs to fit the needs of the student. By understanding these components, administrators will ensure the direct service staff working with at-risk students are a good fit. The goal of this research is to be an agent of social change and impact the lives of marginalized students. One of the factors involved is the teachers and how and what they bring to the teaching experience.

The results of this study revealed findings that are beyond pedagogical experiences. The participants in this study bring a wealth of history and personal characteristics to the educational space. The educational background of the participants were varied from college drop out to multiple degrees. The professional experience of the participants were varied with exclusive alternative education experience to first time alternative education experience. These educators shed light on a number of factors that questions on many job applications do not ask and interviewers do not inquire about. These factors included reflective thinking, upbringing, perspective and outlook, social and emotional inquiries, and intrinsic motivation. If hiring professionals can strategically get to some of these thought provoking philosophies and discussions in interviews, it is my belief that there will be better matches of effective educators working with at risk students.

Conclusion

This study supports existing research that states the goal of alternative education programs transcends academics to include the social, emotional, and behavioral growth of students as a factor in success (Caroleo, 2014). Because teachers play a major role in facilitating the nontraditional learning environment within alternative education settings, the goal of this collective case study was to explore personal factors of teachers that contribute to their willingness and ability to engage at-risk students from the perspective of the teacher. Existing literature does not address how some educators are willing to engage disengaged students who were not successful in former academic environments leading to a gap I believed was important to explore.

The participants in this study possess different perspectives on student success. They believe that educating students begins with the desire to understand the various components that contributes to who their students are and appreciating the relationship building that occurs during the understanding process. The educators take ownership of the growth process and feel a responsibility to the students. This can be, in part, due to the educators having similar experiences of what they did not enjoy in their lives or what did not align with their personal or professional principles. These educators are motivated by their experiences, positive and negative, which leads to intentionality in their efforts. There is a desire to provide a process of development and learning for the students. In order to facilitate this process, participants in this study are first honest with themselves with a parallel process of being honest and direct with the students. This provides genuine relationship building and transparency to the students.

Key findings from this study provide insight into factors over and above pedagogical strategies that contributes to teacher effectiveness with at-risk students in effective alternative education programs. Participants in this research study have shed light into factors that will contribute to scholarly research. As a result of this research, seven significant themes emerged to provide insight into what makes some educators more effective in engaging a population of students with many challenges. The results of this study supports existing research that educators in alternative education feel an obligation to assist students in forming their identities and understanding themselves Sewell (1985). Administration in schools attribute effectiveness of teachers to their academic credentials and ability, classroom style, and test scores (Bickerstaff, 2010; Geronimo, 2010). This study offers alternative research to show that effectiveness of educators who work with at-risk students is based more on who the educator is as an individual and being intrinsically motivated as opposed to their professional background. They are intrinsically motivated to, as stated by P2, not work with a population of "at risk" students but a population of "at promise" students.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol: Teacher Effectiveness With “At Risk” Students In Alternative Education Settings

Date:

Time of Interview:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Introduction:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. The questions I will be asking are to explore the commonalties among educators who willingly engage at risk students in an alternative education program and are effective in doing so. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. If you are uncomfortable with any of the questions, you are not obligated to answer. Please just let me know if you are uncomfortable. If you do not understand something or if you have a question, please feel free to stop me and let me know. I will be taking notes during the interview and will use the content of our interview to transcribe later. If you are interested in receiving the transcription to ensure I told your story accurately or to change anything, please let me know and I will send them to you, by whatever means of communication is better for you. There are 16 questions that I will ask. Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

Central research question: What do educators identify as the personal factors that support motivation, interest and eagerness to be an effective teacher in an alternative education setting?

Subquestions:

1. Please share your professional background up until the point of you working here.
2. What is your educational background?
3. Did you receive any professional training to work with at risk students?
4. What is your belief in youth development?
5. What does student success mean to you?
6. How can an educator facilitate student success?
7. How does working in alternative education satisfy a personal passion for the work?
8. Were there any values or practices associated with traditional high school teaching that did not align with your personal and/or professional values (if participant worked in a non-alternative education program).
9. Are there any specific factors that you consider contribute to you being effective within an alternative education environment with students who are or have been considered at risk?
10. What was the reason you decided to teach in an alternative education?
11. How did you determine an alternative education setting was more appropriate for you?

12. Can you share if there was a defining moment in your life when you knew this was what you wanted to do?
13. Are there any specific factors that you consider contribute to you being effective within an alternative education environment with students who are or have been considered at risk?
14. How does an educator's perception of disengaged students contribute to their teacher effectiveness?
15. What strengths do you possess that you believe contribute to your ability to engage disengage students?
16. In your opinion, what is your role in the lives of the students in this program?

Wrap-Up (5 Minutes)

Is there anything else you would like me to include in the interview or any last thoughts before we conclude?

Thank you. The last part of your participation, as we discussed, is the letter to self that will contribute to helping me understand why you do the work you do. The question is "Why do you do this; Why do you wake up in the morning and return?" You can provide this letter by whatever avenue works best for you-email or I can pick up within the next 7 days so by the latest (*insert date*). Which do you prefer? *If pick up, decide on a date to pick up and if email, provide email address.*

This concludes the interview. Remember that your identity will remain private, and what you have shared will be treated with the strictest of confidence. Just a reminder

that further questioning will take place if there are any discrepancies that arise to determine reasons for discrepancies. Thank you very much for your participation.