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Supporting school persistence : an examination of student experiences in an alternative high school

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SUPPORTING SCHOOL PERSISTENCE: AN EXAMINATION OF STUDENT
EXPERIENCES IN AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

A Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Educational Specialist

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ABSTRACT

Many researchers have investigated the problem of high school dropouts and the role of traditional schools in supporting students' academic persistence. Despite traditional schools' efforts to support academic persistence, they are not meeting the needs of many students. Alternative schools have become increasingly available to support the needs of at-risk students. This is a qualitative case study, which examines how the experiences of students have been supported at a Midwestern alternative high school. Four themes emerged as being important to supporting student's academic persistence: (a) positive relationships with teachers, (b) classes structured to meet needs, (c) student empowerment, and (d) future goal. These themes and implications for their use in other educational settings are described.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Educators have struggled with the problem of high school dropouts for many years. In the past, research has focused on student factors that contribute to dropping out of school (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989), often ignoring educational policies and practices within the school that may also be contributing to the dropout problem. Student factors that have been studied include poverty, minority status, family attitudes, low self-esteem, poor academic skills, economic responsibilities and pregnancy (Bryk & Thum, 1989). Because it may be difficult for schools to change the risk factors that students are exposed to when they are outside of school, the emphasis should be on changing structures and policies within the school setting that may be pushing students towards dropping out. Alternative high schools have become one option for students who are at-risk of dropping out of the traditional high school setting (Wehlage et al., 1989).

Increasingly in the United States, the emphasis is on higher performance standards and the focus is on improving students' skills and achievement (Education Commission of the States, 1996). The intended goal of the standards based movement is to improve students' academic abilities. One potential drawback may be a decrease in the resources allocated for students who are low achieving and at-risk for dropping out of school (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000). This could have harmful effects on the education of students who are at-risk academically.

Research has found poor academic performance to be the greatest predictive factor for students who dropout of school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Many students who are at-risk for dropping out also face other stressors outside of school that may contribute to their low academic performance. These stressors include living in poverty, larger family size, low levels of family support, and lower levels of maternal education level, self-esteem and education (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). By focusing on increasing academic performance and by reaching for and maintaining high standards, U.S. education may be leaving behind the students who are at the greatest risk for low academic performance and dropping out of school. In effect, this new emphasis on increasing performance standards could be taking away resources from the students who need help the most.

Now that school policies are emphasizing standards-based reforms and a one-program fits all approach, the needs of many students may not be being met (Downing & Harrison, 1990). Downing and Harrison found that many students face overwhelming barriers to reaching high school graduation. According to Lehr and Lange (2003), hundreds and thousands of students in the United States drop out of school each year without earning a high school diploma. It seems clear that simply setting high performance standards is not enough to improve academic skills and increase achievement for all students. One goal of the 1990 national education goals was reaching a 90% high school completion rate in all states (National Education Goals Panel, 1999). Yet Lehr and Lange (2003) note that the dropout rate changed very little during the period between 1990 and 2000 (National Center for Education

Statistics, 2001). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 17 states had achieved a 90% high school completion rate by 1999 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

The dropout problem is complex and multifaceted. The category of school dropouts includes a diverse group of students who report a variety of reasons for dropping out of school. Alternative schools are recognized as an effective dropout prevention strategy. This has been documented through research and anecdotal records since the 1980's (Cash, 2004). Alternative schools can be effective in preventing school dropout because the programs are designed with specific students, situations, and aims in mind. Since the programs can be individualized and specialized, they may be more successful than broad, general dropout prevention programs found in traditional school settings (Wehlage et al., 1989). According to Cash, "Alternative schools have been shown to be successful with potential dropouts by reducing truancy, helping them accumulate high school credits, helping them to improve attitudes toward school, and reducing behavior problems" (p. 168).

Since traditional high schools are not meeting the needs of all students, many states have begun using alternative high schools to help more students earn their diplomas (Lehr & Lange, 2003). The population of students in U.S. schools is expected to become more diverse in culture, social experiences, learning styles, and language (Fletcher & Cardona Morales, 1990). Teachers now face the challenge of educating students who have a wide mix of native languages and backgrounds.

Many traditional high schools may not have the time, energy, or resources to meet fully the needs of the diverse student population (Brown, Higgins, & Paulsen, 2003). They may struggle to meet the needs of students because of shifts towards larger schools, increasingly specialized staff and segregated academic departments. The number of alternative high school programs have increased to help meet the needs of students who are not succeeding in traditional high schools (May & Copeland, 1998). Now, alternative schools are found in virtually every school district in America (Cash, 2004).

Definitions

The Department of Education defines an alternative education school as:

A public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside of the categories of regular, special education or vocational education" (US Department of Education, 2002, p.55).

High school dropouts are commonly defined as students who leave school and do not graduate with their class (Hayes, Nelson, Tabin, Pearson, & Worthy, 2002). This definition is useful in examining students by cohort because it allows for examining a dropout's school experiences with the school experiences of others in their class. It is difficult, however, to obtain accurate information using this definition because students may move, change schools, or be retained. The U.S Department of Education uses the event dropout rate to keep track of the number of high school dropouts (U.S. Department of Education, Educational Research, 2004). The event dropout rate measures the proportion of students who dropout in a given year,

regardless of their cohort (Hayes et al., 2002). Some limitations of this definition are that it does not account for students who earn a high school diploma by returning to school, students that transfer to another school, students who go on to earn their GED or students who dropout before 10th grade.

Another definition developed by the U.S. Department of education is the status dropout rate. This is used to measure the percentage of students who are not enrolled in high school and who have not earned a high school credential, regardless of when they dropped out (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a). This rate is helpful in examining general questions about education achievement, but does not account for within-group differences because it ignores a student's cohort over time. It also does not account for students who drop out before the age of 16 (Hayes et al., 2002). It is important to understand the differences in definition of "high school dropout" because many schools and researchers use different criteria for determining who is identified as a dropout. A common definition is needed in order to improve the accuracy and reliability of data on high school dropouts.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that support students' school persistence in an alternative high school setting. In light of the importance of finding ways to support all students in education, this study explores the experiences of students at a Midwestern alternative high school to gain a better understanding of what factors are supporting their academic persistence in this setting. It is important to interview students who have left the traditional school setting and enrolled in an

alternative school. Hearing about their experiences in both settings may lead to a better understanding of factors supporting their persistence in the alternative school that may not have been available in their traditional high school. Hearing their experiences told in their words will provide insight into how they view school and what they value. The research seeks to answer the following question: How do these students' experiences in this alternative school support their persistence?

This study addressed the issue from an ecological perspective, attempting to understand students' experiences within the context of their school. By looking at the experiences of students within alternative schools, valuable knowledge is gained about how these settings support students and allow them to persist in school.

Summary

This chapter calls attention to need for alternative schools to support students who are at risk of dropping out in the traditional high school setting. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature regarding the importance of earning a high school diploma, the limitations of traditional schools in supporting all students' academic persistence and a history of alternative high schools and factors that have been found to support academic persistence in these settings. Chapter 2 also examines the need for future research in this area. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology. Chapters 4 and 5 present the results of the study, discussion topics, conclusions and areas for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter addresses the important role that alternative schools play in supporting the school persistence of students. When examining alternative schools it is useful to gain an understanding of how students' experiences at the alternative school may differ from their experiences in traditional high school. Alternative schools typically have different policies and instructional methods than traditional schools. These policies tend to be more successful at supporting students in their persistence (Cash, 2004). First, this chapter will discuss the importance of earning a high school diploma and the problems of dropping out. Second, the role of traditional schools and their failure support academic persistence for all students are addressed. Next, a history of alternative schools and their role in dropout prevention are examined. Then, an overview of the factors that help students persist in alternative schools are described. Finally, this chapter will address the need for future research in this area.

The Dropout Problem

Despite the recent emphasis on reducing the number of high school dropouts, the dropout rate changed very little between 1990 and 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Currently, it is estimated that 10% of 16-24 year olds are not enrolled in high school and they have not earned a high school credential. In 2003, approximately 10.9% of African Americans and 23.5% of Hispanics dropped

out of school without meeting graduation requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

The consequences for students who dropout are costly to both the individual and society. High school dropouts typically have fewer employment options and usually work in low-skilled, low-paying positions (Guagliardo, Huang, Hicks, & D'Angelo, 1998). The median annual income for high school dropouts is significantly lower than that for adults with a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a). Further, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts is significantly higher than that for adults with a high school diploma. The unemployment rate for adults without a high school diploma is 8.5%, compared to 5% of adults with a diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2004b)

Additionally, dropouts are more likely than are high school graduates to experience health problems and engage in criminal activities (Guagliardo et al., 1998). Because many dropouts experienced disengagement from school and alienation during adolescence, they are at an increased risk for participating in gang activity, violence, vandalism, absenteeism, and truancy and other forms of deviant behavior (Brown et al., 2003). Adolescents who are alienated are at-risk to become socially alienated as adults. As adults, they are more likely to experience poverty and become dependent of welfare and other government programs (Guagliardo et al., 1998).

Researchers have given much attention to the negative consequences of dropping out of high school, but the voices of students who dropout are often silenced

or ignored. It is common for schools to collect data from recent graduates about their school experiences, but schools rarely seek to gather information about the experiences of dropouts (Gallagher, 2002). Without listening to these students, it is hard to understand why they decided to dropout or what factors may have helped to support their persistence. Research has focused on how traditional high schools can support school persistence, but from the increase in enrollment at alternative schools, it is clear that the traditional school setting is not meeting the needs of all students (Wehlage et. al., 1989). Since research has found alternative schools to be successful at supporting academic persistence it is important to gain a better understanding of how student persistence is supported. First, limitations of support from traditional schools are explained. Then, the history of alternative schools and factors that support persistence in alternative schools are examined.

Concerns about Limitations of Traditional Schools in Supporting Academic Persistence

Many traditional high schools do not have the time, energy, or resources to meet the needs of today's entire student population (Brown et al., 2003). They are struggling to meet the needs of students because of shifts towards larger schools, increasingly specialized staff, and segregated academic departments. Often, a portion of students in today's schools feel alienated and detached from school. These students experience feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation or estrangement (Brown et al.).

Many alienated students are critical of the authority of school and its official representatives, teachers and principals (Rafalides & Hoy, 1971). They may feel that

teachers and other school officials do not care about them and that they have little personal influence on their future in school. Traditional high schools also assign homework and activities that many times seem meaningless to students. When students are unsure of the value of what they are learning and how it will affect their future they may begin to view the work as meaningless and further disengage from school (Brown et al., 2003). Many students also feel socially isolated in traditional high schools. When they feel estranged from the school, they begin to reject the goals, values, and beliefs of the school. This increases the risk of students dropping out (Rafalides & Hoy).

Because schools are complex and diverse environments, they are not easily influenced by subtle, isolated efforts to bring about change (Sugai & Horner, 1999). According to Foster and Martinez (1985), students will continue to feel alienated in school and remain at risk for dropping out until school personnel examine their policies and procedures, teacher and administrator attitudes and actions, and peer relationships. Systems level, rather than surface level, changes need to be made to effectively support all students. Within the past decade, there has been a rise in the number of alternative education programs designed to meet the needs of students who have not been successful in the traditional high school setting (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

History of Alternative Schools

According to Young (1990), alternative schools first began during the 1960's and 1970's with the goal of providing innovative education with a progressive orientation. During the 1980's and 1990's the purpose of alternative schools shifted

towards addressing the needs of students who were not successful in the traditional school setting. They were designed to provide supportive learning environments that met the needs of specific groups of students (Wehlage et al., 1989). Most students in alternative schools meet at least one of the following criteria for being at-risk of academic failure: behind in academic credits, a history of truancy, behavioral and substance abuse problems, serious family problems, pregnant or parenting, and involvement with the juvenile justice system (Grunbaum et al., 2000).

Some alternative schools are mandatory placements for students and seen as a last resort. Others are voluntary programs designed to meet the needs of students who are struggling in the traditional school (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Students tend to choose voluntary alternative schools because of their varied curriculum, smaller class sizes and less authoritarian teachers (Richardson & Griffin, 1994). In both types of alternative schools, the goal is to address the needs of students at-risk for leaving school early and to help them stay in school (Wetzel, McNaboe, Schneidermeyer, Jones, & Nash, 1997).

Factors Contributing to School Persistence in Alternative Schools

A variety of students with different interests, backgrounds, and abilities have benefited from enrolling in alternative schools (Lehr & Lange, 2003). They are seen as effective programs for helping students complete school. In a study on the outcomes of students in a second chance academic program in Minnesota, Lange and Lehr (1997) found that more than half of the students in their study on alternative programs had dropped out of school at least once before enrolling in the alternative

school. Alternative schools provide supports within the school setting that can help students succeed. This approach to dropout prevention is systemic because the needs of students are met through altering the educational structure of schools (Capuzzi & Gross, 1989). Kushman and Kinney (1989) write that the systemic approach recognizes the difficult-to-change factors like race and poverty that are risk factors for dropping out, but this approach does not use these factors as an excuse for failing to successfully educating all students. Unalterable factors are taken into consideration in designing a school that is responsive to the whole student and to all students (p. 360).

Alternative programs are designed to include individualized and flexible programming, high expectations, an emphasis on care and concern, and small school size (Lehr & Lange, 2003). The philosophies of alternative schools are often different from those of traditional schools. According to Coyl, Jones, and Dick (2004):

Korn (1990) described these differences in the following manner: students are encouraged to further personal interests independently; lesson plans are flexible and adapted to the varying needs of the students; a less obvious power differential exists among teachers, staff, and students; and students are encouraged to set goals and compete with themselves instead of peers. (p. 40)

By focusing on individual students' needs and interests and by decreasing the power differential between staff and students, alternative schools help create a more accepting atmosphere where students can feel that they matter, are important, and belong.

Supportive Relationships between Students and Staff

Dropout prevention research has found that building supportive relationships between teachers and students is one way to help students persist in school (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). Setting individualized goals and educational plans for students is one support provided by alternative schools, but these schools also focus on strengthening relationships between teachers and students. Research done on at-risk students in a traditional high school found meaningful relationships to be a critical factor for fostering persistence to stay in school. Knesting and Waldron contend that:

Even as students were developing their goal orientation and willingness to play the game, they still depended on other people to support them in their quest towards graduation. While different students described different combinations of teachers, friends, family, school counselors, and school deans as people who helped them stay in school, teachers were the most consistently cited people. (p. 606)

Engagement in academic tasks and relationships with others are necessary for encouraging attendance in alternative high school settings. Students' perceptions of their teachers' commitment and involvement is also related to school attendance (May & Copeland, 1998).

When students feel their teachers care about them, are involved in their education, and respect them they are more likely to persist in school and reach graduation. Knesting and Waldron (2006) found, "Students wanted teachers who seemed to care even if they themselves did not. Students wanted teachers with clear, realistic expectations and control of their classroom, teachers who expected them to be the best students, the best people, they could be" (p. 21). Coyl et al. (2004) describe the relationship between students and staff at the alternative high school they

studied. They found that alternative school staff understood that many of their students have had trouble with adult authority figures (past teachers, principals, and police officers). School staff wanted to earn the students' trust and ease their transition back into school. They tended to take a more informal, less authoritarian approach to their roles as teachers and administrators. For example, students were allowed to refer to school staff by their first name. School staff also encouraged students to discuss their opinions and objections openly with teachers, the counselor, and the principal. They wanted the students to feel that their thoughts and experiences mattered and were important.

Because alternative schools are smaller and emphasize relationship building between students and staff, they may be more successful in meeting the needs of students who were at-risk of dropping out in the traditional school setting. One student interviewed in Wehlage et al.'s book (1989), *Reducing the Risk*, talked about the difference between teachers at his traditional and alternative high schools:

Everybody seemed so nice and everything, and I liked the fact that they call [teachers] by their first name instead of Mr. Blah-Blah-Blah, and you can't pronounce the last name. At Nevada Union, some of the teachers are really nice, but most of them are snobby...It seems like they care more about the rules and regulations than they do about students. (p. 152)

Developing positive relationships between students and staff helps students at alternative schools persist in school and change their attitudes about school.

Positive Atmosphere and Supportive Peer Culture

Alternative schools also have a different climate than traditional schools which may contribute to the success of students enrolled in them. A study on the factors that

contribute to academic success for students with behavior problems found that students who had improved academically or experienced positive change after enrolling in an alternative high school attributed their success at the alternative school to a positive, caring school climate (Gregory, 1995). They viewed the climate and their experiences of traditional high schools as negative and unsupportive (Gregory, 1995). Coyl et al. (2004) found school climate to be an important factor in developing a sense of inclusion and acceptance in student experiences. School climate appears to have a key influence on students' aspirations, motivation, and school attainment (Plucker, 1998).

Peer relationships are one aspect of school climate that may often improve when students begin attending an alternative high school. Wehlage et al. (1989) state that fostering feelings of inclusion and membership is particularly important for those students who have histories of school failure and who lack the support of strong homes and communities outside of school. In Coyl et al.'s (2004) study of peer status and relationships in alternative high schools they found that the majority of students and staff viewed the climate of the alternative school as more friendly than a traditional school. Peer groups and acceptance play a critical role in developing positive feelings about school and persisting in school. The friendlier, more open and more accepting climate of alternative schools may help students feel like they fit in, which may not have been how they felt in the traditional schools. An interviewee said, "Almost everyone says 'hi' to you and asks about you" (p.53). All interviewees said it was much more difficult to make friends and fit in peer groups at their previous

schools. They also reported that their peers at alternative school supported their efforts to stay in school, complete assignments, and graduate (Coyle et al., 2004).

Wehlage et al. (1989) found that acceptance by teachers and peer groups in alternative schools led to increasing student involvement in school. In their interviews with students in alternative schools, they found that students described their teachers and peers as caring and accepting. Students' positive view of school climate, along with peer and teacher relationships, led them to reciprocate with participation in school activities and helped them conform to school norms. Wehlage et al. (1989) state that, "It is this reciprocity between students and teachers that distinguishes most of the schools we studied. And it is this reciprocity that provides the context for membership that appears lacking in the previous school experiences of at-risk students" (p. 114).

Non-traditional, Individualized Curriculum

A fundamental philosophy in alternative schools is that "all children can learn if they receive the support, encouragement, and resources that match their learning style and situation in life" (Cash, 2004, p. 173). Based on this philosophy, alternative schools use individualized instruction and have small class sizes. Cash (2004) recommends a teacher to student ratio of 1:10 in alternative programs. This allows teachers to have more one-on-one instructional time to work with students to meet their needs. Research has found individualized instruction to be an effective teaching strategy for working with at risk students (Cash, 2004). In individualized instruction, the teacher uses flexible teaching strategies that allow for student differences. These

strategies include offering flexible time limits so that students can work at their own pace, opportunities for students to ask questions, one-on-one assistance, continual monitoring of student progress, and consistent feedback (Hamby, 1989).

Alternative schools also use more experiential instructional techniques involving real world work (Kushman & Kinney, 1989). The purpose of this is to make school knowledge meaningful to students. At-risk students are typically disengaged from learning because the dominant learning processes in traditional schools are highly abstract and controlled by others (Wehlage et al., 1989). Students are more engaged in learning when experiential and constructivist instructional techniques are used. Wehlage et al. (1989) found that alternative school students benefit when learning is viewed as a socially shared process. When learning is viewed in this way, teachers encourage students to work together in a cooperative framework to produce socially valued outcomes. Using cooperative learning allows students to feel ownership of the knowledge they are generating. The goal of cooperative learning is to increase the chance that students will find intrinsic rewards in their work. This will help to enhance student engagement (Wehlage et al., 1989)

Cooperative learning may be especially effective with at-risk students because it provides students with peer interactions designed to build caring relationships. This minimizes social isolation as a dropout factor (Foster & Shirley, 2004, p. 198). Strategies for teaching students who are at-risk academically focus on encouraging students actively to construct knowledge. Instruction should be designed to

encourage the student to work towards producing knowledge, rather than have students simply receiving knowledge (Switzer, 2004).

May and Copeland's (1998) study on academic persistence in alternative high schools found that an active teaching style was a necessary component in maintaining students' attendance. Foster and Shirley (2004) provide an example of the effectiveness of active learning for at-risk students from the Union City Public Schools in New Jersey. In Union City the administrators, teachers, parents, and students embraced active learning strategies and turned their failing school system into a successful system. By increasing the use of active learning in the curriculum they were able to increase attendance, decrease dropout and absentee rates, and increase the number of students who met state standards by 50%.

May and Copeland (1998) also recommended in-service meetings for teachers on engaging students in the learning process. Student engagement is critical in instruction for alternative programs. Wehlage et al. (1989) wrote that students who are school members and engaged in school work are more likely to have higher academic achievement and to develop the personal and social characteristics that are valued by society compared to students who feel alienated at school or are disengaged in the classroom.

Committed, Well-trained Teaching Force

Committed teachers are a key to the success of alternative schools. Teachers need to be committed to the philosophy and goals of the program and must develop close, workable relationships with their students (Wells, 1990). Teachers need to be

flexible in their approaches and aware of how students' backgrounds may be affecting their school performance. In a study on academic persistence for at risk students in a traditional high school Knesting (in press), found that having teachers who are committed to students and who genuinely care about them is a more important factor to increasing a students' school persistence than programs that are designed to support at-risk students. The teachers who sought a context for understanding students' behavior were especially able to help at-risk students stay in school. These teachers accepted the students for who they were and continued to believe that all students have the ability to be successful in school. By accepting students' world views, regardless of whether the teachers saw them as completely valid, teachers were able to develop a better understanding of the students' behavior at school.

Alternative programs have a higher rate of students with behavioral and emotional disabilities than traditional school settings (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993), so teachers need to be trained to work with this population. According to Cash (2004), alternative schools need to be staffed by experienced teachers who have a lot of insight into the lives and beliefs of at-risk students. The teachers need to be dedicated and have a true desire to get involved with the most demanding students. As Cash (2004) points out, teaching is a very rigorous profession and alternative school teachers are working in more demanding systems with a population of students who require a lot of time and commitment to help them reach their goals.

Having committed teachers is necessary in order to provide individualized instruction, allow for flexibility in the curriculum, and to build trusting relationships

with students (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Teachers also need to be well trained and have adequate licensure to be effective in teaching students who are at-risk. Successful alternative schools have school staff that is caring and involved in continual staff development pertaining to students at-risk, have high expectations for student achievement, and a total commitment to have each student reach their goals and be a success (Schargel & Smink, 2001, as cited in Cash, 2004).

Successful alternative programs have teachers that hold high expectations for all of their students. In Knesting and Waldron's (2006) research on at-risk students in a traditional high school, they found high teacher expectations to be very important to supporting students. They explain that:

Students want teachers who not only believe they can succeed but who accept nothing less than students' best. They want teachers who pat them on the back while they kick them on the butt, having consequences for misbehavior while still believing in their potential for success. (p. 24)

When teachers in alternative schools are committed to the program and well trained for working with at-risk students, students can have positive gains. It is important for these teachers to stay flexible, use individualized instruction, and communicate their care for students.

Continued Need for Research

Research has found alternative schools to be effective in supporting school persistence by providing supports within the school setting that help students succeed (Lange & Lehr, 1997). Although much research has been done on the factors contributing to school persistence in alternative schools, more needs to be learned about what these students value and how they believe their education has been

supported. Many students enrolled in alternative school programs have previously dropped out of traditional high schools (Lange & Lehr, 1997). Because the voices of students who dropout are often ignored or silenced by traditional school educators much is unknown about how students experiences differ between traditional and alternative school settings (Gallagher, 2002). It is important to learn about how students are supported in alternative schools in order to better understand their experiences. By hearing about students' experiences, in their own words, a better understanding of their views of school, what they value, and how alternative schools support their persistence can be gained.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This research examined the experiences of students in a Midwestern alternative high school. The focus of this research was exploring how students' experiences at this school have helped them persist with their education. The design follows a qualitative and interpretive (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) paradigm and will be centered around understanding a particular instance rather than on generalizing to similar situations. This methodology was chosen because it allows for exploring the particularity and complexity of phenomena. The design is a qualitative case study, with the assumption that a greater understanding of how an alternative high school supports student persistence can be found by exploring experiences of students at this particular school.

This research design was adapted from an earlier study conducted by Knesting and Waldron (2006). This design was chosen because the research topic was similar to that of interest here. Knesting and Waldron's study sought to understand factors that contribute to academic persistence of students who are at-risk of dropping out of a traditional high school setting. The method was qualitative and focused on interviews and observations for data collection. This method is appropriate for the present study because it examines academic persistence from a similar qualitative approach, but has been adapted for students in the alternative high school setting.

Setting

This research was conducted at a medium-sized, alternative high school for students in the 9th through 12th grades. Approximately 230 students were enrolled during the two quarters when the study took place. The curriculum was structured to meet the educational goals for the community school system graduation requirements, but the delivery of instruction incorporated alternative methodology such as differentiating based on student needs, emphasizing relationship building with students and making connections between class work and the real world. The school uses a point system that monitors students' attitude, effort and behavior. Students need a certain number of points to register for classes and to come to school all day. The average class size was 10.4 students and the average daily attendance was 94%. Sixty-two percent of students qualified for free and reduced lunch, compared to 38.3% in the district. The school employed 24 licensed professionals including administrators, teachers, a counselor, two social workers, two special education teachers, two reading specialists and 15.5 support staff members including secretaries, teachers' aids and janitors. Approximately 78% of the licensed professionals had a Master's Degree and 22% had a Bachelor's Degree. The staff to student ratio was 1:10.9.

The alternative high school was located in the fifth largest school district in the state. The district enrollment was approximately 10,500 students. The district provided a full range of educational services to students in kindergarten through grade 12. Besides the alternative high school, the district also operated two traditional high

schools and one alternative middle school. During the 2004-2005 school year, the district had 10,472 students enrolled. Approximately 34.7% of students were from minority groups and 65% of students were Caucasian.

The school was located in an older, two-story brick building in the downtown area of the medium sized Midwestern city. The neighborhood around the school consisted of many older, single-family homes in poor condition. Many of the houses around the school had boarded up windows and appeared to be unoccupied. A trailer park and industrial buildings were located within a few miles of the school. The school had a small parking lot and entrance through the back of the building. The inside of the school was well maintained. The office area had new carpet and included a conference room and large offices for the principal and counselor. The classrooms were also well maintained and had desks, tables or lab areas depending on the class. Each teacher had a computer at his or her desk and students had access to computers in the library and computer design classroom. Classrooms were found on both floors of the building and the gym and computer design classrooms were located in the basement. There was no cafeteria in the school so students ate lunch in classrooms or left the school building to eat. Overall, the outside appearance of the school and the neighborhood that surrounded it stood in contrast to the inside of the well-maintained and updated building.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling. The principal identified two core teachers who were willing to participate in the study. In the

school, the core teachers act as the students' scheduler, disciplinarian, and connection to home. They have a very close relationship with their students. The core teachers who volunteered to participate ensured that their students came from a variety of backgrounds, were in different grade levels, and had different levels of academic achievement. The researcher attended the two core classes and described the interview requirements to the students in the class. One core teacher identified three other students outside of his core class who were willing to participate in this study. In total, eight students participated in the study. All students who volunteered to participate were included.

The participants were a diverse group of students with varied backgrounds and personalities. Two male students and six female students participated. The students ranged in age from 16 to 20. All students had been previously enrolled in a traditional high school before enrolling at the alternative school. Two students had been previously enrolled in three or more traditional high schools before they began attending the alternative school. Their reasons for enrolling included the following: three students had been expelled from other high schools for attendance reasons, two students were too far behind on credits at their previous high schools to be able to graduate on time, one student left the traditional high school because she did not have enough academic support there, another dropped out because of family issues and peer conflicts and one student became a parent and wanted to attend the alternative school because of the daycare facility that was provided. See Table 1.

Table 1

Student Characteristics

Student Name	Age	# of high schools previously attended	Reason for leaving previous school
Erin	18	1	expelled for lack of attendance
Sarah	17	2	lack of academic support
Dan	19	1	expelled for lack of attendance
Liz	18	4	expelled for lack of attendance
Cris	18	1	family issues and peer conflicts
Tia	16	1	too far behind on credits to graduate on time
Sam	20	3	too far behind on credits to graduate on time
Tony	18	2	became a parent and wanted to attend alternative school for daycare

ProceduresInterviews

Individual interviews were conducted with all eight students who participated. Interviews took place in a quiet, private setting at the school. They varied in length from 15 to 30 minutes. Interviews began with a review of the purpose of the research, an assurance of confidentiality and a description of their rights as participants. After gathering background information students were asked seven open-ended questions: (a) If I were a new student here, what would you tell me about this school? What would you show me? (b) Tell me some things I might like about this school, (c) Tell me some things I might not like, (d) If I were a student at this school who was thinking about dropping out, what advice would you give me? Is there anybody here

at school that you would suggest that I talk with about my decision? (e) How are your experiences at this school different from your experiences at the school you previously attended? (f) How did you decide to attend this school? How do you feel about this decision? (g) What kinds of things keep you motivated to come to school?

Additional interviews were conducted with the school principal and the counselor to get a better idea of school culture. These interviews began with a brief review of the research purpose, an assurance of confidentiality and a description of their rights as participants. They were then asked about the school's services for at-risk students, the supports for students considering dropping out, the school's dropout rate, and how they believe the alternative setting differs from a more traditional high school. These interviews took place in the principal's and counselor's offices and were from 45-60 minutes in length.

Interviews were semi-structured and used a combination of open and closed-ended questions to gather more detailed and specific information. The interviews were conducted by the author. The interviews with the counselor and students were audiotaped, transcribed, and returned to participants for feedback and clarification, if needed. Additionally, the author wrote field notes in order to clarify and reflect on conversations.

Observations

The author observed in classrooms during instructional time, in the hallways of the school, and before and after schools. Detailed notes were taken during all observations and field notes were written soon after observations were completed.

Observational data was triangulated through the use of multiple observation sights and by students' and teachers' descriptions of their experiences.

All personally-identifying information was excluded to ensure confidentiality for participants. Pseudonyms have been provided for the names of participants and the name of the school.

Data Analysis

Data analysis started early on during the research process. After each interview and observation at the school the author recorded her thoughts and ideas in a reflective journal. This journal was reread several times throughout the course of the study and additional notes were added through the process of rereading and reflecting on past observations. From the beginning, steps were taken to organize information from different sources including information from observations, interviews, school documents such as the student handbook and website, and the author's previous knowledge of alternative schools.

The goal of the author was to work with the data as it emerged to help the author shape the direction of the study and to formulate themes and conclusions about what she was learning. It was important for the author to work on data analysis at the same time as data collection in order to be able to make adjustments to interview questions and observation variables such as time and place. As information was revealed through the data analysis process, the author was able to identify different areas to explore and areas where deeper examination was needed.

Different files of information were created throughout the data analysis process. These files were different folders that had category labels and were used to sort quotations and observation data into different categories. After each interview was transcribed, quotations from the interviews were coded. As the author looked through the quotations and reflected on her observations and experiences at the school, important themes emerged. The files were used to sort quotations into appropriate categories based on the themes of what the participant was saying and what the author had observed. Throughout the process of coding, sorting and organizing data, different themes were described, changed and redefined until the final themes emerged. Data analysis was complete when it appeared that all data had been used and incorporated into an appropriate category. The themes seemed to include the complete list of categories that emerged throughout the study.

Trustworthiness of Data

The following steps were taken to ensure the credibility of the data gathered in this study. First, data was collected over approximately four months. Having an extended time period for data collection contributes to the credibility of data. Next, different data-collection methods and different sources of information were used to allow for triangulation of data. Finally, throughout the course of the study the researcher kept a reflective journal to write her reactions to interviews and observations, new questions she developed, and possible hypotheses to be recorded and considered. This provided a way to explore and clarify assumptions and biases regarding the research, including the possible effects of these on data interpretation.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Four themes emerged that lead to school persistence for the students in this study: (a) positive relationships with teachers, (b) having classes structured to meet their needs, (c) student empowerment, and (d) having a goal for the future. First, every student interviewed cited relationships with teachers as being critical to their motivation to persist in school. Next, each student identified at least one of the following aspects of class structure as being important to their persistence in school: small class size, one on one attention, engaging learning in class, and academic help. Third, throughout the interviews many students cited personal choice and freedom as factors that were important to their academic engagement and success in school. Finally, all students interviewed had a goal for the future that motivated them to persist in school.

Positive Relationships with Teachers

All students interviewed identified positive relationships with teachers as an important factor that helped them persist in school. All students felt that the school was a safe place and filled with teachers who genuinely cared about them. Some students compared their relationship with teachers to that of a family. For example, in her interview, Erin said, "Teachers aren't like teachers; they're like family to you." Another student explained how she felt that teachers cared more at the alternative school. Sarah said, "The teachers are more helpful. They help us outside of school."

And I've made honor roll since I've been here. Teachers just seem like they care more about us."

At the alternative school, each student had a core teacher who knew the student very well and knew what was going on in the student's life outside of school. From observational data in the classroom, the researcher noticed that core teachers talked with students about their jobs outside of school, their families and other personal interests. During the core class, teachers spoke to each student at least two times as noted during the author's classroom observations. Because of their frequent communication with students, teachers were able to understand how other life factors outside of school could be affecting the student's academic performance. One student, Sarah, explained how the core teacher is there to help students out:

Like teachers here, like if you're running late or you don't have a ride and you call and let a teacher know, they will come and get you or find you a ride. Compared to at the other high schools they'll just tell you you're screwed if you can't make it. But here, they do what they can to help you get through it.

Dan described his relationship with his core teacher:

The teachers are more understanding than at other schools ...and you have a core teacher who is basically your person that you go to if you have trouble or if you need help with something. If you have to leave home or if you have to miss school for the day, you call your core teacher.

Students seemed to value how the teachers at the alternative school actually knew them and took the time to understand who they were. One teacher interviewed shared how he felt it was his job to earn the trust of the students. He knew that most students at the school had previously had problems with authority figures. He worked hard to build a relationship with each student in his core class. Many students pointed this

out as a major difference between the alternative high school and more traditional high schools that they had attended. Tia said, “The teachers are easier to talk to around here. It’s not like at other schools where you address them as Mr. or Mrs. Here, it’s like they’re not an authority looking down on you. Here you’re on the same level and it’s easier to talk to them.”

Teachers and students were able to have such close relationships with each other because they demonstrated mutual respect for each other. One student, Tony, said, “The teachers are way more open here. Like we call them by their first names. That makes us feel more comfortable talking to them about stuff.” The students felt they could open up to their teachers because they knew that their teachers would listen with sincerity. During three different observations, the author noted how effectively teachers were able to communicate and listen to students. This was seen by teachers using good communication skills such as maintaining eye contact and a relaxed body posture, facing the student and removing distractions so they could focus on listening to students. Both teachers the author observed demonstrated effective listening skills such as rephrasing what the student said and asking clarifying questions. When talking about communicating with teachers, Sam said, “Teachers treat you as adults, not as kids.” She really felt that her teachers listened to her instead of just telling her what to do.

One teacher interviewed felt it was important to deemphasize the power differential between himself and his students. He felt like this enabled him to have more open conversations with his students. Students felt that the core teacher was a

safe person that they could trust. A lot of information was shared between teachers and students during core time. One student, Tia, provided a good description of the core class:

It's like family. You know, you talk about stuff that happened. It's not taken out of the room, like you can say whatever you want to, whatever you feel. You can say it. You can talk to your whole core and ask them how they think about it. It's just like a meeting. You can get stuff off your chest, whatever you have.

Besides just knowing a lot about the student's life in and outside of school, the core teacher is also there to handle any discipline issues that may come up with a student. Both teachers and students felt better about knowing that there was one person who the student would go to if any discipline issues came up. From the authors notes of conversations with the core teachers who participated in the study, both teachers shared that it was important that the students would have one main contact person for academic and discipline problems. Students liked this because they already had a close relationship with the teacher so they knew they would be treated fairly. A senior, Dan, explained:

Uh, we don't have detention and we don't have in-school suspension. We just get a day off and you know, hopefully you come back with a better attitude. And um, you know it's not all about arguing, fighting and bickering. You know, its civil conversations and stuff like that.

The principal further explained how the school is set up so that students have to earn the right to be in school. She said that teachers send students home if they are being disrespectful or arguing. Students are asked to come back when they can talk things out, in a calm way, and be respectful.

Making students earn the right to be in school works well for the teachers and students. Arguing and power struggles are avoided. Also, students know that they need to be in school to learn from instruction and to get the points they need to graduate. But it is more than just staying out of trouble, because of the nature of their close relationships with teachers, many students felt like they did not want to let their core teachers down by being in trouble. One student, Erin, explained it as follows:

The school makes you a different person. Like, you don't want to be bad or you know, like some kids talk back. But here, it's not really like that. We don't really talk back because teachers treat you as adults, they don't treat you as children.

Most students interviewed liked how they felt the teachers at the alternative schools respected them.

Overall, the relationship between teachers and students, especially core teachers, appeared to be an important factor in supporting the students' persistence in school. The students felt that the teachers were caring, sincere, respectful, and fair. They felt they could trust the teachers and some students even compared the teachers to family. The students interviewed appreciated that the teachers at the alternative school took the chance to get to know them and understand what their lives were like both in and outside of school.

Class Structured to Meet Student Needs

In each interview, students noted that the unique class structure of the alternative school helped them increase learning, improve their grades, enjoy school more, and stayed motivated to come to school. Specific aspects of the class structure

that students found beneficial were small class size, one on one attention, academic help, and engaging learning in class.

Most students shared that having a smaller class size helped them stay focused and learn more. At the alternative school the average class size is 10.4 students per teacher. With fewer students in the class, students reported that it was easier for them to pay attention to the teacher without being distracted. This was a big difference compared to traditional high schools that the students had previously attended. Tony said, "The classes are smaller so I think it's easier for the teachers to get through to the class because there's not so much talking." Liz also explained, "Classes are a lot smaller and the teachers actually know your name. Other kids, there's not as many in the classes and it's a lot easier to learn and pay attention to the teachers." It seemed to be important to the students that the teacher knew who they were and had enough time to pay attention to them when the students had questions. Cris said, "The teachers care a lot about you, not like at a bigger school. There are a lot less kids to worry about here so you get more time with teachers." One student, Tony, saw another benefit to having a smaller class size. He thought it improved teachers' moods which makes the class period more enjoyable for students. He said:

There is not as many kids to work with, you know like when teachers have to check papers. The teachers don't have to check a lot of papers so it gives teachers more time and they're not as cranky and stuff like that.

At the alternative school, classes were also structured to provide more one on one attention to students. Cris said, "They have more time for one on one instead of like not being able to get to you, like if there were 30 students in a class like at other

schools.” When asked what he liked about the school, Sarah said, “I would tell you the teachers are great. The class sizes are good because there’s more one on one.” Most students interviewed really liked the one on one attention because it provided them with more opportunities to ask questions, participate in class discussions, and to get quick feedback on their progress. Liz explained the difference between the alternative school and the traditional high school she had previously attended, “I don’t think assignments seem as hard because you’re able to get help with them. Over at the other high schools you had to wait forever for a teacher, if you even got a teacher to come over to you.”

Academic help was a really important factor in helping the students feel good about themselves and good about their progress in school. Because students felt that they were learning in school and could get academic help when they needed it, they were more likely to attend school regularly. Tia explained:

I was tempted to skip at the other high school. I don’t skip like I used to. I don’t miss anywhere as much as I used to. I feel like I’m here more and I learn more here than when I was at the other high school.

At the alternative school, the academic atmosphere was very supportive. The teachers had high expectations for the students, but made assignments manageable and provided a lot of support to students. During observations, the author saw teachers doing several checks for understanding with students and repeating directions as necessary. The teachers seemed to be very in tune with their students learning. For example, during one observation the teacher noticed that she was losing the interest of the students. She stated this explicitly and then offered to try

something new. The class ended up working in small groups to make presentations on the topic instead of learning from the outline and lecture the teacher was using for instruction.

In addition to providing academic help themselves, teachers also provided emotional support and encouraged students to help each other. Tia said:

Teachers don't assign you 20 pages of homework to get done in two days. You know they help you out here with it. Overall, I like Expo's whole atmosphere. I like the way everybody gets along around here and helps each other out.

Students felt that they could rely on teachers to provide support when they were struggling. Sam said:

The teachers, they're just happy to help and if I would have trouble with one of my assignments they'd tell me, "Well just take it, just breathe, when you're ready, just start." When they say that, I don't get so overwhelmed with work and stuff like that.

Although the classes are structured to provide more academic help, students felt strongly that the alternative school had the same academic requirements as traditional high schools. They just felt that instruction was provided in a way that allowed for them to receive the help they needed, but also to have fun and to enjoy learning.

Teachers tried to make learning a positive experience for students. Dan explained:

People think we're just an alternative school. Well, I have learned more here than I have at the other high school. I really think that Expo is a regular school, but we don't just teach all day. We have fun while we're in class and while we're learning. And like everyday, I'm looking forward to going to school, compared to the other high school where I would dread going to school.

All students interviewed said they really enjoyed school and this was a feeling that they had not experienced before, at other schools. They felt good about the small

class sizes, one on one attention, and academic help they received. They also liked school more because they were really engaged in the learning. At the alternative school the classes were structured to have more of a real-world focus and teachers tried to make the curriculum meaningful to the students. Tony explained how the alternative school is different from traditional high schools he had attended:

Academics here is much different. They keep it more entertaining than at the other high schools. At other schools they just give you an assignment and tell you to go do it. Compared to here where teachers throw in more activities with it and they help you with it.

Student Empowerment.

Another theme that emerged that appeared to be very important to students was having more freedom and personal influence over what happened during their school day. Students made their own choices throughout the day including choosing what classes to take, when to come to school, at what buildings they want to take their classes, what to do during class, and choosing to access support from the school staff or outside agencies. Teachers and staff at the alternative school felt it was their responsibility to help students learn and become better citizens. The principal said the school tried to provide choices and to allow students to have freedom. The alternative school wanted to empower students and to help them realize the influence they have over their own lives. The alternative school believed that providing choices for students helps them become more responsible and helps students learn to advocate for themselves in an appropriate way.

At the alternative school, the day is structured to provide breaks for students and to let students take classes that will work for there schedule. Students have choices about where and when to take classes. Students can attend school on a half time or full time

basis. Students who attend half time attend either the morning or afternoon session. Tia said, "It's way better that I come in the afternoon. I just can't get here that early and that's why I got kicked out of my last high school. It's just better with your own schedule." Also, classes are available at a variety of sites including the alternative school, a traditional high school, or the local community college. Having flexibility of scheduling is very important to students who have jobs, children, or other responsibilities outside of school. Erin explained:

I like the times because I have to get out early. Well, I leave after 7th hour because I have to be at work at 2:00pm. So it is more flexible than at the other schools where they probably wouldn't let me out.

The alternative school also provides classes during May Term. May Term courses are created by each teacher to provide a concentrated learning opportunity at the end of the school year. The May Term courses are designed to be intensive study programs in one area during the month of May. These courses combine classroom instruction, hands-on activities, and community volunteer or work experiences. Students can choose which course they want to enroll in. Liz said, "For May term, it's basically just a fun month. You get to have fun while you learn."

While in class, students typically have more choices about how to spend their time or what projects to work. Dan described the alternative school as a "freelance" place where students can take some independent study classes and have some choice of what to do during classes. Another student, Erin, liked how students could eat during their core class if they were hungry or students could leave school during lunch time.

Tony said, "I like the whole atmosphere. I mean, you have more freedom. Open lunch, I love being able to take a lunch break."

Having more freedom and personal influence over their day lets students relax and feel more comfortable at school. Many students liked how they felt in control of what happened. Not like at other schools where students perceived that teachers were trying to control them. Sarah said, "It's a pretty laid back school. It's not like you'll have liaison officers or police officers. They're not as judgmental about who you are or what you do."

The alternative school also offers many services for students to choose from if they need support during the school day or outside of school. The school staff includes a school counselor, two social workers, two special needs teachers and two reading specialists who are available to work with students. The counselor described other resources that provide support for students outside of school:

We are involved with a lot of different agencies so we have the food bank, Family Children's Network , Young Parents Together, Allen Women's Health. We have all kinds of different agencies that help come in to meet whatever need. So we help with transportation and housing and clothing and food and maybe parenting classes or like substance abuse treatment or whatever it kind of falls under. Eye glasses, medical care. They kind of come to us with a lot of different needs so it depends on the student.

Students liked how the alternative school is set up to provide a lot of choices and options for them. Many of the students are 18 or older so they like having personal influence and being responsible for making their own choices when it comes to getting help from outside service agencies.

Goal for the Future

As described above, all students interviewed had positive relationships with their teachers, classes structured to meet their needs, and were allowed to have personal influence and freedom, but another key factor that kept them persisting in school was having a goal for the future. Without seeing a reason for graduating high school, the other factors may not have been enough to keep students coming to school.

All students interviewed said that graduating or getting their diploma was what kept them motivated to come to school. All students interviewed had been expelled, dropped out or chose to leave a traditional high school before deciding to attend the alternative school. Their main reason for enrolling at the alternative school was to earn a diploma. Tony explained, "My diploma. Motivates me all the way. It's my one thing that makes me get up every morning and come into class. Yeah, my diploma." All students interviewed understood the value of a high school diploma and knew how important graduating high school would be for their future. When asked what kept her motivated to come to school Cris said, "I mainly think about my future and what I've got to go through to actually be somebody and do something someday." When asked what advise Tony would give to a student who was considering dropping out he said, "Finish it out. Don't drop out because you ain't gonna get any job without a diploma so you should just finish." It was clear from the interviews that all students saw some value in getting their diploma.

Many students appreciated how the alternative school helped them develop their career interests and think about their future after graduation. When asked about her plans for the future Liz said, "I've debated about becoming an accountant. But also here at Expo I'm taking Cisco, which is a networking class, so I don't know if I'll go into networking or accounting. I'm still weighing it back and forth right now." Students liked how their teachers helped them explore career options and even get some job experiences while in school. Dan explained:

I love the fact that my core teacher is the industrial tech teacher because I'm really good with production, which is stuff with wood. I want to go to community college. I want to major in construction and architecture because I like to work with my hands a lot.

Because teachers help students relate class work to future plans, students find the work more enjoyable and they are more motivated to attend school. One student, Tia, who is interested in literature talked about her teacher, "Vicki, she does children's literature and we got to make our own children's books so that's pretty cool."

Besides just having a goal for the future, students' goals are nurtured and teachers support them when they are faced with challenges or become discouraged. A senior who was interviewed, Sarah, talked about how she almost dropped out of the alternative school, but her core teacher encouraged her to stay in school and helped her find more support so she could reach her goal of earning a diploma and going to college. Sarah said:

If there's a reason why you'd want to drop out they work with you. I was going to drop out and they helped me realize that I need it here and I need to work every day... ..Just talk to your core teacher and they will explain what their idea is and they will try to help you.

The alternative school felt it was a priority to help students reach their future goals, and this meant helping them find ways to persist in school so they could earn a diploma.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Previous research suggests that traditional high schools have difficulty meeting the needs of all students. Most research has focused on student factors that contribute to students dropping out (Wehlage et al., 1989). This study sought to examine the role of alternative high schools in supporting the school persistence of students who chose to leave traditional high schools. The design of the study allowed the researcher to examine how students' experiences differed between the two settings of traditional and alternative high schools. Recommendations for increasing school persistence follow and limitations of the study follow. These recommendations would be appropriate and useful for a variety of school settings, including both traditional and alternative high schools.

Build Positive Relationships with Students

School staff should strive to have positive and deeply connected relationships with students. Students thrive when they feel that they are surrounded by supportive adults who have taken a genuine interest in their lives. At the alternative school in the study, teachers felt it was a priority to build trust with their students. They realized that in order to connect with all students, they needed to be flexible in their approaches. They recognized that some students may have a history of distrust for authority. Because of this, teachers need to use a variety of techniques to reach kids. A "one size fits all" approach will not work.

The importance of relationship building has been discovered in previous research on alternative high schools. In De La Ossa's (2005) study on alternative high school student's perceptions she found that personal relationships with teachers was a major factor in student's educational experiences. In another study on alternative high schools, Coyl et al. (2004) found relationships with teachers to be very important:

Although school rules are strict, and the expectation for students' compliance is clearly communicated, the relations between staff and students are warm, friendly, and family like. The staff are willing to work individually with students...because of a supportive school environment, these adolescents felt accepted, cared about, and encouraged to achieve. (p. 57)

Wehlage et al.'s book, *Reducing the Risk*, (1989) discussed how positive relationships between teachers and students could help student's persist in school and change their attitudes about school.

One good strategy for building an atmosphere of trust and caring may be to use a collaborative approach with students. Teachers should let students know that they are willing to work with them to help them succeed academically, problem solve social situations and plan for the future. In this study, having a positive relationship with teachers was the most common theme for why students persisted in school and enjoyed their time spent in school.

Increase Student Empowerment

Schools should put strategies in place to help students feel empowered. When students have choices and options they learn to be responsible for their own education and their future. They will take more ownership in school and feel more connected to

school. This contributes to academic persistence. At the alternative school in this study, the staff expected students to make choices in terms of classes, scheduling and accessing support from outside resources. Teachers explicitly taught self-advocacy skills and supported students in making important decisions for themselves. With the support and encouragement from teachers, students were able to learn to be responsible students and citizens.

Feeling empowered contributed to students' academic persistence. Wehlage et al. (1989) had found that at-risk students are typically disengaged from learning when the learning process is highly controlled by others. In the present study, students were more empowered. They realized that they were making decisions for themselves and that they would be responsible for the outcomes of their choices. They felt a sense of control over their day. This was different from their experiences at other traditional high schools where perceived that teachers and other adults were trying to control them.

In this study, students were more successful at the alternative school because they took ownership over their academic work, behavior and relationship with teachers and adults. Students had failed in their previous high schools because they did not feel responsible for what happened. Their failure at the other high schools was attributed to things outside themselves such as uncaring teachers, large class size, or unfair school policies. At the alternative school, they were empowered and learned that they were responsible for their success or failure.

The importance of student empowerment has not been thoroughly addressed by previous research on alternative high schools. In this study, it was an important variable

that lead to students' persistence in school. Other research needs to be done in this area to more closely examine this aspect of alternative schools and its effect on student persistence.

Focus on Students' Needs

Today, students come from a variety of cultures and backgrounds. They have differences in past experiences, learning needs and goals for the future. Schools need to be flexible in their programming in order to meet the needs of all students. In this study, all students had not been academically engaged during their previous high school experiences. They felt they were not supported academically and that classes were not structured to meet their needs.

The alternative school was successful in supporting their persistence and academic engagement because it was flexible in structuring classes, implementing instructional strategies and providing academic support. For example, structuring smaller class sizes helped students build and maintain relationships with teachers and other students. Smaller class sizes also helped students stay engaged in learning and provided more frequent feedback and support. Many students who are at-risk for dropping out are struggling academically. Being flexible with class structure and using a variety of instructional strategies gives teachers more options for providing academic support to students. Previous research has found that individualized instruction and the use of flexible teaching techniques can be an effective instructional delivery model for working with at-risk students (Cash, 2004; Hamby, 1989).

Make Class Work Meaningful to Students

Making class work meaningful to students contributes to their school persistence. Students are more engaged in their learning when they understand that what they learn in school will be useful to them in their lives. Kushman and Kinney (1989) found that alternative schools use more experiential instructional techniques that involve real world work. This seemed to make school work more meaningful to students. At the alternative school in this study, the teachers made explicit connections between class work and the real world. Teachers did this by first helping students develop and explore career opportunities and then explaining how the material in class would be important for their future career goals.

The school provided opportunities to blend class work with real world work experiences. For example, during May Term students could participate in classes of their interest that include a component of service learning work in the community. Many students in the study said this was the best class of the year. Other strategies the school used to make class work meaningful included adapting assignments to match students' interest areas and reducing "busy work" or worksheets. Wehlage et al. (1989) wrote that students are more engaged in learning when experiential and constructivist instructional techniques are used. All students in this study said that their diploma motivated them to come to school. At the alternative school they had the opportunity to engage in meaningful class work that was in-line with their goals for the future.

Limitations

A variety of limitations may have affected the outcomes of this case study.

First, self-report data was collected from interviews with participants and some of the issues discussed may be sensitive to them. Participants may report socially acceptable responses which may be different from their actual personal attitudes or feelings. Second, participants were comprised of volunteers. Students who were more engaged in school and found it more enjoyable may have been more likely to volunteer to participate. Third, because of the time restraints of the school year, it was not possible to conduct in-depth follow up interviews with participants. Participants may have had more information to provide after having time to reflect on their first interview. Also, the researcher would have been able to ask more specific follow-up questions to get a richer understanding of their experiences in relationship to the themes that were emerging. Fourth, only the school counselor was available for a recorded interview. Although this study was focused on student perspectives, it would have been valuable to have been able to record interviews with teachers and the principal.

However, even given these limitations, qualitative research in this area is greatly needed. As indicated by the dropout rate, the needs of many students have not been met in traditional high schools (National Goals Panel, 1999). Since research has found alternative schools to be effective in helping students maintain academic persistence (Cash, 2004), it was important to understand what specific supports were available to students at this alternative high school. The results from this study

provide valuable insight into students' perceptions and experiences and have been useful in designing recommendations for high school educators.

Conclusions and Future Research

Overall, several important themes that lead to school persistence emerged from the interviews with the students and staff at this alternative school. The students described several differences between the alternative school and traditional high schools they had attended. The recommendations above will be useful to any school system or school staff that is looking for ways to support school persistence for students. Past research has found that there are many student factors that lead to students dropping out of school. This study has found that these student factors can be overcome when schools work to meet the needs of all students. More research should be done to examine how the themes identified in this study, and possibly multiple other factors, work together to support students persistence in school.

This study has also found that listening to the voices of students who have attended high school in both the traditional and alternative school settings can provide insight into their different experiences, how they perceive school, what they value and what helps support their academic persistence. More research needs to be done to further investigate student's perceptions and values. This information would be useful in informing school policy changes or developing effective at-risk programs for high school students. Additionally, the importance of student empowerment has not been thoroughly addressed by previous research on alternative high schools. In this study, it was an

important variable that lead to students' persistence in school. Other research needs to be done in this area to more closely examine this aspect of alternative schools and its effect on student persistence.

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