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A School of Choice: A Case Study of an Instructional Learning Model in a Public School System

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by

Samuel Jefferson Davis McCord

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ABSTRACT

A School of Choice: A Case Study of an Instructional Learning Model in a Public School System

by

Samuel Jefferson Davis McCord

This case study focused on the understandings of the administration and teaching staff with regard to the implementation and student academic growth of the B-L Upward program. The understandings were formed from data collected through structured, face-to-face interviews. The questioning of the staff members assisted in determining an understanding of the instructional model of the B-L Upward program. The experimental nature of the B-L Upward program allowed students, primarily those graduating from eighth grade and heading into high school, to choose an alternative to the traditional secondary learning environment. The current case study is an examination of the B-L Upward program through the interview process involving the administrative and teaching staff with regard to program implementation and student academic growth. Four members of the administrative staff directly responsible for the management of the B-L Upward program and eight members of the teaching staff currently employed at the school were interviewed regarding their understandings of the BLU program. The case study approach provides a detailed picture of the understandings of these staff members. Recommendations for practice and for the continuation of further research were included at the study's conclusion.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In his book, *Creative Schools*, Ken Robinson emphasized the importance of the personalization of education for student success. Personalization, according to Robinson, is an acknowledgement of the differences between students and permissions for flexibility within the curriculum to address common standards while making allowances for students to pursue individual strengths and customized problems (Robinson, 2015). This type of educational construct forms the structure of B-L Upward, the Kingston City school (KCS) system's blended learning high school. The program has been allotted an informal trial period in which to implement this curriculum model. B-L Upward was provided a two-year drafting period by the Kingston City school system. The initial plan of the program took place within the system's alternative school facility, Reinvent Academy. Students assigned to Reinvent Academy for behavioral infractions reported to a different section of the campus, allowing for a small population of approximately 30 students and four teachers to experiment with the development of the B-L Upward program. The purpose of this case study was to examine the main research question: What are the understandings of the KCS administration and the teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and the student academic growth?

The first two years of the program focused on the development of a blended learning model. Teachers developed online courses and participated in weekly professional learning sessions that focused on an understanding of "blended learning." These professional development sessions were further supplemented with introductions to technologies that assist in the individualized online lesson design. The first two years were a pilot period and tested the program's purpose from the understanding of student interest. Essentially, answering the

question: what type of students could the BLU program serve? The B-L Upward program's population went from 30 students in the fall of 2015 to a student population of 180 in the fall of 2016. The increase in student population created a change in the school's facilities and physical location, and in the spring of 2017, the program was formally launched. Given a new campus, an allotment for more teachers, and safeguards for the enrollment, the BLU became a new option in secondary education for the Kingston City school system. The addition of the B-L Upward program provided Kingston City students with a choice in their high school experience. The school system's guiding tenets for the B-L Upward venture were derived from an understanding that education is an "adaptive system" that forms and reforms to meet the individual needs of the student while adhering to the public agencies that determine school success, in this case the Tennessee State Board of Education (Wadham, 2015).

Background of the Problem

The approaches of blended and personalized learning both offer students a different type of education, where the instruction is facilitated more by the student's own decision making, and thus changing the teacher role from the primary source of knowledge to a facilitator of content; a type of guide outlining the personalized routes within each course offering (Wainwright, 2011). The experimental nature of the B-L Upward program allows students, primarily those graduating from eighth grade and moving into high school, to choose an alternative to the traditional secondary learning environment. Due to the newness of the program, evaluations for the school's effectiveness are in its infancy. The development of the B-L Upward program evolved from the understanding of Kingston City schools' administration that the Kingston City school system (KCS) needed to be competitive not only with other public programs, but that the school system also needed to provide educational options that combated the allure of the private sector of

educational choice. In essence, B-L Upward was KCS' forward thinking response to potential changes in education (Administrator, 2017).

With the drafting stage of the program being located within the Reinvent Academy facility, the alternative learning environment for students with behavioral infractions, the student population demonstrated specific trends. In essence, the single high school in Kingston, Dover-Bledsoe, used the B-L Upward's open enrollment as an opportunity to transfer students who were behind in credits, experiencing minimal behavioral infractions, as well as students who were considered "overwhelmed" by the high school's population of over 2,000 students (Administrator, 2017). Although some of the students maintained a satisfactory academic record, the majority of enrollees displayed academic indicators that warranted academic and behavioral interventions. At the end of the second year of the program's drafting period, the ACT average for 11th and 12th graders at B-L Upward was less when compared with the scores of Dover-Bledsoe's 11th and 12th grade ACT average (Administrator, 2017). Furthermore, end of course examinations also presented a consistent pattern with the students who were enrolled at B-L Upward during the pilot period. Essentially, the academic pattern indicated that the students who were sent to B-L Upward during the period of open enrollment, based on academic averages determined by ACT scores and the Tennessee state standardized testing system, struggled academically when compared to the academic average of the students at Dover-Bledsoe.

Despite the academic obstacles within the student population, the open enrollment provided the program with 180 students, a number that the KCS administration had suggested would provide leverage and warrant the funding necessary to move B-L Upward into a new facility more conducive to the blended learning structure that had been envisioned by the administration and teaching staff. Due to the growing student population, the physical space was

purchased and the school was outfitted with large investments in new technology and mobile furniture. Over three million dollars was invested in the physical space, and on January 4, 2017, the program moved into a space that catered more toward the vision of the implementation of a blended learning program.

Statement of the Problem

The B-L Upward program, especially as a new investment from the KCS school system, would benefit from a case study examining the understandings of the administration and teaching staff of the BLU program. The processes that govern student admittance into the school remains newly developed and as such the determinations by the Tennessee Department of Education about individual school success provide a limited understanding of the work that is being done by the administration and staff of the BLU program (Administration, 2017). While the flexible nature of the program creates room for student choice and a modified pace, students are able to work at their own pace within weekly modules that can be opened early or closed later. As such, even the TEAM rubric that governs teacher evaluations is less likely to represent accurate markers that illustrate an effective educator inside of a secondary environment (TEAM, 2017). The role of the teacher as the direct instructor is less accurate and growing more obsolete, as students take ownership of their coursework through a myriad of resources created by teachers and housed through online platforms. While there are aspects of the TEAM rubric that are pertinent to teacher success, the holistic approach of the rubric lacks appropriate descriptors of evidence for successful instruction, based on the inaccuracy of multiple sections specifically directed at the success of a classroom teacher. Furthermore, the assessments that evaluate the traditional secondary environment present gaps and create inaccuracies when trying to understand whether the BLU program is successful. The current study investigates the

understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and student academic growth.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to examine the main research question: What are the understandings of the KCS administration and the teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and the student academic growth? The goal of the case study is to ascertain a better understanding of the BLU program through interviews with the staff about the environment and the strategies implemented within the program that facilitate and develop student growth. Results from the case study may assist the school system and the BLU administrative staff in developing a practical understanding of the new program. The study holds a further potential in the use of the BLU example as a model for improvement, practice, and the possible opening of similar programs throughout the surrounding systems.

Research Questions

The following questions were used to examine the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and the student academic growth within the instructional model in a school of choice. The overarching question for this study is: What are the understandings of the KCS administration and the BLU teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and student academic growth?

1. How do the participants describe student success at BLU?
2. What factors contribute to the student's choice to attend school at BLU?
3. What factors contribute to the teacher's choice to attend school at BLU?
4. What factors of the BLU program contribute to the BLU's student's success?
5. What factors facilitate student learning within BLU's blended learning model?

6. What factors obstruct student learning within BLU's blended learning model?

Significance of the Study

The key to school success can be understood through the fostering of a safe learning environment that challenges the student, creates a positive culture where learning motivates learning, and provides an intentional curriculum (Goodwin, 2011). The case study is an examination of the B-L Upward program by determining the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff that work within the school. The case study approach provides a detailed picture of the staff understandings with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and student academic growth.

Research Method

Qualitative research holds the potential to derive meaning about concepts of which only a limited amount of information exists (Creswell, 2012). The case study format of this research used a structured, face-to-face interviewing process that examined the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and student academic growth. The case study used a series of interview questions (see Appendix) that explored the perceptions of the four administrative staff involved in the formation and governance of the workings within the B-L Upward program and the eight members of the teaching staff currently in charge of instruction at B-L Upward.

Definitions

For the purpose of the study the following terms assist in the explanation of concepts that determined key components of the BLU school structure. These terms are repeated throughout this case study and warrant a clear understanding.

1. Blended Learning – The definition of blended learning is an educational program that combines a variety of modalities, primarily a combination of online or virtual learning with a physical "brick and mortar" environment. (Horn, 2015).

2. Personalized Learning – The definition of personalized learning refers to a customized learning curriculum formed for the individual student that accounts for "what they learn", "when they learn it", and "where they learn it". Personalized learning ii the effort to tailor the academic content and create academic pathways that meets the individual needs, skill, and interests of the student (Childress, 2014).

3. CANVAS – refers to the learning management system that operates as the platform from which teachers design online curriculum, and this system also provides the interactive interface that students work within to access curriculum and daily learning activities.

4. Alternative Learning Environment (ALE) – refers to an educational program or even a singular classroom that deviates from the traditional brick and mortar program. ALPs are traditionally known to deal with students that exhibit behavioral issues; however, the term has expanded to encompass non-traditional schools, such as STEM or charter institutions and the B-L Upward program (Morettini, 2014)

Limitations of the Study

Possible limitations to this study include the population sample of 12 participants for the interviews that serve as the sole provider of data for this case study. The sampling selection restricted a greater number of participants, as the requirements for the process mandated the administrative staff and teachers be directly involved with the BLU program, and as such these individuals are not intended to represent the understandings and experiences of all secondary

administration and staff members. Possible understandings and pertinent themes may have been

overlooked based on these requirements. Another limitation of this research is bias, or a variation

from truth in the data collection based on the personal agenda of the researcher (Chenail, 2011).

Bias can involve a manipulation of the responses based on a desired outcome, or a manipulation

of the methodology to exclude contradictions to the study's findings. One other possible

limitation is present in the participants' direct employment within the program under study.

Overview of the Study

This case study examined the understandings of four administrative staff and eight

members of the teaching staff directly involved with the B-L Upward program with regard to the

implementation of the BLU program and student academic growth. Chapter 1 provides rationale

for the purpose and significance of the case study. The study presents the understandings of the

B-L Upward program through the lenses of the faculty and the administration. Chapter 2

provides an overview of the program's development and the research that supports the

implementation of the BLU program. Chapter 3 provides detailed account of the research

methodology supporting the process by which the study was conducted. Chapter 4 provides a

detailed reporting of the study's findings. Chapter 5 outlines the conclusion and the implications

of the study's findings.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to examine the main research question: What are the understandings of the KCS administration and the teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and the student academic growth? Chapter 2 provides a broad overview and analysis of scholarly literature pertinent to the significance of alternative learning environments and the components that make these schools successful.

 "Education and social change are facets of experience that affect our lives in dramatic fashion." (Rury, 2002) The discourse of the text combines the impact of both education and social change as having a symbiotic influence on one another. The effect of social change, such as the transformation that the technological era has had on education in schools, has a visible influence on state policies, classroom procedures, and even in the evaluation of a teacher.

Likewise, the influence of education has always been a foundational factor in achievements that spark social change. One specific example of the impact education has on social facets within the local communities throughout Tennessee is in the educational policy enacted by the Tennessee State government. Community colleges across the state are "seeing a dramatic uptick in freshman enrollment as a result of the governor's Tennessee Promise program, signed into law last spring." (Anderson, 2015). As a result of this educational reform, young adults are moving into two and four year post-secondary programs, and local communities throughout the state of Tennessee are expecting an influx of young and skilled workers within the areas of both trade and medicine.

The relationship between social factors and education create change within both institutions; the mechanics of one have the influence to create both direct and indirect alterations to current practices. With an understanding of this phenomenon, educators, administrators, and policy makers should recognize the importance of experimentation within school systems. The willingness to test new schools of thought has been a pillar of practice for some of society's best educators. Although Anne Sullivan, Jaime Escalante, and Ron Clark remain current markers for such innovations, contemporary examples of minor educational experimentation find numerous footholds throughout school systems everywhere; one such example comes in Daniel Xerri's 2012 experiment with Dogme.

In sum, Dogme is a teaching structure that holds English language learning as a skill that results from emergence rather than acquisition; essentially the process of learning English as a non-native speaker is an organic process given the right classroom environment (Xerri, 2012). Using a three-part template, Xerri produced an ESL course created class content that was conversation driven, light on actual classroom materials, and focused on the emergence of language development, instead of acquisition through the use of perfect models. While this type of classroom shift was uncomfortable for Xerri, due to its seeming lack of structure and materials, the results of this work created a more comfortable environment for emergence, and students showed improvement in the development of English language emergence (Xerri, 2012).

The courage shown by Xerri to change even the small amount of dogma that has traditionally driven the structure of his course, is an authentic example and a staple trait of an effective educator. Taking the understanding that experimentation and honest revision are necessary to enact a productive change amidst the ebb and flow of the social and educational

change, the following review of literature is arranged to provide context for the necessity of honestly understanding the case of KCS's newest program - B-L Upward.

The following chapter is an overview of the B-L Upward program, and Chapter 2 outlines the research supporting the vision, research, design, and current implementation of the program.

The Vision of the B-L Upward Program

The principal of the B-L Upward program, referred to as Administrator 1, understood the B-L Upward project to be a form disruptive intervention; a phrase suggesting the importance of challenging the status quo of formal education by providing students with a deviance from the traditional curriculum design. The work of Administrator 1 was redirected from her post as an elementary principal by KCS's effort to start the planning and oversight of what would eventually become B-L Upward. Subsequently, a visioning committee was formed between Administrator 1 and Administrator 3, the districts eLearning Coordinator. According to Administrator 3, the duo's partnership was the second attempt at the districts formation of a focus group responsible for drafting a vision for the new program. The first group was too large, and while there were plenty of great ideas, consensus was hard to reach, and so the two locked themselves in an office for two weeks. Afterwards, on a Friday afternoon in late June, we had a practical design for our school, since then the school design has made minor alterations, but the original plans remain similar to the visioning plan that is still governing the program's current operations (Administrator 3, 2017).

The vision of B-L Upward if formed from the KCS's core values. The formation of these foundational attributes guides the program, staff, and student learning (Administrator, 2017). The core values provide the belief system from which the KCS system operates. The following

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indicators makeup this belief system: exemplary student learning, guaranteed and viable curriculum, collaborative professional learning communities, engaged families and community, data-driven decisions for continuous improvement, and a culture of shared leadership.

Exemplary learning is a term that KCS uses as an expression not only of the systems competitive test scores within the state leaders, but also as a reflection of the methods by which a Kingston City student learns (Administrator, 2017). The utilization of multiple teaching strategies, especially through the use of technology as a platform from which students can access a variety of information is the newest effort within this module of the vision plan. B-L Upward is an avenue that system leaders are exploring with regard to new techniques that are implored alongside the advances in educational technology. Although technology opens the door, especially for today's student, educators must step aside as the source of information, and provide students with guidance in both the determination in the validity of information, critical thinking skills, and an understanding of the necessity of revision and reflection (Administrator, 1).

The second value that characterizes the values upheld by KCS, which remained the mechanism for the BLU program development was a "guaranteed and viable curriculum." While the necessity for a curriculum that challenges students, develops critical thinking skills, and provides an understanding of the value of a humanist student product, remains a logical component of any academic institution, the process of maintaining a guaranteed and viable curriculum is an "ongoing and ever-changing" effort (Acedo, 2013).

The B-L Upward program was located for the first two and a half years in a compartment of the alternative school - Reinvent Academy: the alternative school for students with behavioral infractions. The B-L Upward program was housed within the campus of Reinvent Academy. In

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order to increase the student population, the B-L Upward program was opened in enrollment to all students with interest, and Dover-Bledsoe, the traditional secondary school, sent students and effectively doubled the BLU population. While the boost in population was appreciated, there was a definite correlation between the students who joined the program during the open enrollment period (Administrator, 2017). BLU's principal further explained that the expansion, while a necessary move for the program's continuation, brought with it a large population of students with academic and behavior considerations. The boost in student enrollment was a necessary milestone for the BLU program, but the students that were inherited were provided a new type of challenge; while, at that time, the BLU program and staff members were a great fit for this type of student given the developmental stage of the program and the flexibility this iteration afforded efforts within scheduling and the virtualization of the coursework, the trend needed to be changed for the true implementation of a blended learning curriculum (Administrator, 2017). The trend has since changed with enrollment due to the significant changes in the school population caused by the advancement of technology and the enhancement of academic rigor. To create this change, the BLU teaching staff spent at least one day a week, every week, in some form of professional learning related to the development and implementation of blended learning, while writing their own online courses with the resources of the KCS system's discipline teams and the guidance of the district's curriculum coaches.

The necessity of a viable curriculum is solely dependent on the classroom teacher's ability to individualize the learning for each student (Longo, 2016). In essence, blended learning offers a flexibility to students and delivers a platform from which learning can be more individualized, as the process is grounded in a technology that allows students to move through modules at a teacher guided student-pace. Student works within the learning management system

(LMS) CANVAS. This system is currently utilized by regional universities, and provides state-of-the-art tools for assessment, assignment creation, discussion, and student submission. (Administrator 3, 2017) Students work within 1-2 week modules at their own pace, but the BLU teachers set the ultimate parameters by opening and closing modules based on the class progression. The customization options within CANVAS offer a variety of technological functions that assist in the individualization of the course for a single student (Meinel, 2013). Administrator 3, the districts electronic learning coordinator, expressed that the guiding tenet of a guaranteed and a viable curriculum provides a constant reminder to the teachers and administrators operating for the students at BLU that the coursework must not only be "the right amount of challenging, but needs to be aimed at the skills and mindset necessary for student success after the completion of their high school training is complete (Administrator 3, 2017).

The third faction of the guiding tenets that provide the framework for the BLU program operation is the formation of collaborative learning communities. Collaborative learning communities, whether formal or informal gatherings, can provide a platform for teacher growth and the acquiescence of new classroom strategies. The true value of the collaborative learning community is measured by the efficiency of these meetings and the effectiveness of the practices and content developed within these gatherings. However, the ideal products of these collaborations are characterized, in essence, by educators and administrators possessing an open-mindset and a solution-focuses agenda (Goodwin, 2011). During the first two years of the program, the collaborations predominantly occurred on a weekly basis between the internal staff of the BLU program. These meetings were supplemented by speakers or professionals of varying qualifications invited to speak on topics ranging from project-based learning to informational support for the utilization of educational technologies. Teachers worked on their individual

courses and found support through content area group meetings at Dover-Bledsoe. With regards

to the teaching staff at BLU, Administrator 1 stated:

> The staff at BLU is the most professionally developed group of teachers in the state of Tennessee. While there may be times when the teachers find the data meetings, content collaborations, professional learning conferences, and whatever else I can dig up a bit cumbersome, there is always some value in these collaborations, especially if the teachers go into these opportunities possessing a growth mindset.

The viability of the curriculum design and the course content is a product of the process of

teacher collaboration and data driven revision. Due to the infancy of the program, a quantifiable

judgment of student progress will provide an inaccurate representation of the curriculum design

and teacher instruction. Eventually, the numbers will provide an accurate representation, and

they are already trending in the direction of recognizable progress. At this point, a decision about

the future of this program based on the quantitative data organized by the state would be more

valid (Administrator 1, 2017).

While the current school data maintains, at best, an average school success performance,

the markers that determine the program's success are a relative understanding of the intervals of

improvement since BLU's startup. "The improvement, from even last year, is noticeable through

observations of student engagement and the expansion of the program's course offerings."

(Administrator, 2017)

The next pillar of guidance for the BLU program is the understanding that an engaged

family and a supportive community can assist in a variety of ways, starting most importantly

with student motivation. Parental involvement, a dynamic term, as the number of broken homes

and interim guardians continues to increase, is one of the greatest assets to student development

(Nunn, 2014). The system of home support is a two-fold process: parents are asked to understand

that motivation plays a huge role in their student's achievement, which benefits test scores and

ultimately the school, which in return, benefits their student. As a valuable asset, parents may have the ability to influence the student intrinsically. As an ingrained member of the student's daily life a parent's or guardian's impact may be vital in making strides within student learning (Goodwin, 2011). In light of this understanding, the BLU program has made an effort to create a parent support association – the goal to bring a group of parent leaders into the program's operations as a positive influence; this group is in charge of school socials and mainstreaming major parental concerns to the attention of the school administration through a single mouthpiece. The goal of this latter function is to provide the necessary transparency within the program's operations to generate a bridge of communication that keeps the academic cogs aware of social circumstances that can prove problematic in the future (Administrator 1, 2017).

Leveraging parental involvement not only assists in student motivation, but also creates a foothold within the community. The steps taken to further integrate the local community into the BLU program's academic culture is the second facet of the effort. The partnerships that BLU is attempting to solidify with local businesses, colleges, and industry partners assist in both boosting academic culture and post-secondary student connections. The relationship between schools and local business has a proven effect on the academic involvement of the student, and even the perspective of the school as a contributor to the local infrastructure. The benefit of these efforts is illustrated in the through impact that active partnerships with businesses are having on the schools throughout the state. These partnerships, such as offered by opportunities, such as work-based learning programs, assist students and teachers through an extension of the classroom into the community (Tennessee, 2016). Partnerships give students the opportunity to learn about careers, while reinforcing a basic curriculum. For example, a partnership with a grocery store can teach students what it's like to work selling a product that everyone needs. The

rewards of providing food for the community, coupled with the challenges of a retail operation can underscore the concepts of math, science and economics. As a program, BLU has only scratched the surface of these efforts, starting predominately with the resources provided by Eastman Chemical Company and the local community college, Northeast State. However, with the expansion of the course offerings and the flexibility offered by the blended learning model, the possibilities are "optimistically endless" (Administrator, 2017).

The importance of expanding these connections between the B-L Upward program and the community remains a primary effort of the BLU administrative staff. In any school system, the success of the students can be augmented by the connections made within the home and within the community (Gonzalez, 2013). The connectivity within these sources of support for students makes the parental involvement and community support a pillar of the BLU program's development.

Another key tenet of the BLU program is that of data-driven decision making for continuous improvement. The necessity of decision making based on data is a vital component of the BLU program. Not only in the traditional sense of post and pre assessment, but also in the understanding of the implementation of the blended learning model. For students to benefit from a blended environment, the curriculum has to be flexible and individualized for each student. The advances in technology have created opportunities for classroom teachers to realistically alter the mastery pathways for the individual student. However, the decision making behind these modifications must be founded on valid data (Wolfgang, 2012).

The blended learning model is not solely a substitution from paper and pencil to computer. The difference is much more than taking a paper quiz and transposing the assessment

to a computer. The medium by which students participate in academia is only transformational if the student is exposed to greater opportunities for enrichment – and the potential for enrichment is increased exponentially in the blended learning model of learning (Paulson, 2014). However, the process is halted if the instructor does not vary pathways of student learning in both content and in rigor. The mastery pathways, or levels of rigor, can be altered using learning management systems, such as CANVAS. However, these alterations must be made using the correct decision making process, and for education the correct process is through a triangulation of data. The combination of state, district, and classroom data in summative or formative form can provide a baseline for student mastery of skills and content areas. The process of using data for decision making within the classroom remains a foundational tool for the successful implementation of blended learning, which is a primary goal of the BLU program.

The last tenet, which is important to the overall success of the BLU program, is that of a culture of shared leadership. In essence, the understanding of administrators, teachers, and students that school success resides within the individuals that makeup the school's population. Success within the classroom starts and ends with the leadership of the students; moreover, the success of the school and the BLU program rests on the shoulders of the teachers and administrators (Administrator 1, 2017). As to the leadership philosophy that governs the BLU program, Administrator 1 stated:

> The developmental of the program started three years ago out of a facility that presented obstacles for the type of learning we were trying to implement, but it did provide us with the opportunity to work with curriculum templates within specific disciplines. The teachers were exposed to weekly training sessions, heavily encouraged to take on leadership roles within the school system, and we even recommended a few teachers to attend and even present at conferences with neighboring systems.

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The principles of shared leadership extend success from an individual perspective to a stakeholder of the group (O'Shea, 2005). Essentially, teachers extend their understanding of success from teacher effectiveness data to a greater understanding of what school success embodies: a combination of cultural identity and academic inquiry.

Blended Learning Research and Findings

The study of education is constantly changing. From alterations to student performance assessments, breakthroughs in educational research, and societal changes that impact student lives, innovation is necessary to appropriately educate the student who exists in the present system. Factors impacting student achievement, such as socioeconomic status or cultural differences, create an uneven platform for student learning in a singular and traditional classroom (Danielson, 2002). Therefore, change within the realm of education, especially for student-focused emphasis, remains a constant effort. One potential opportunity for educational change is presented through the blended learning paradigm. Current research within this new methodology has yielded many possibilities for enhancing student achievement.

Blended learning is a development within the field of education that has naturally occurred due to the technological age. The tools produced by the developments of this time have augmented the potential for academic student growth. This assertion provides greater optimism when educators understand that the educational programs and opportunities provided by the technological developments of the current era are supplemented by the students who were raised within these understandings (Jonassen, 2004). This type of platform is based on an understanding of the students of this time period. Research has been conducted on the method by which students learn not only in the consumption of the lessons delivered by the teachers, but also in the method of delivery. The recognition that technology possesses a greater ability to present and

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assist students in the synthesis of the standard-based curriculum is evident in both the development of the rubrics and assessment platform that guide the observations and evaluation of both the school systems and their teachers; the rubrics that dictate the scoring of the teacher's classroom observations, and now the assessments that provide the quantitative analysis of student proficiency and teacher improvement through year to year benchmarks are to be delivered on computer-based assessments rather than the paper-pencil approach that has marked the traditional routine (TEAM, 2017).

The blended learning approach utilizes technology as the primary source of learning. Technology is not solely the substitution for paper-based materials, but the management of these technologies for the interruption of an antiquated curriculum poorly serving a student population in need of resources and not solely the potential knowledge of a single educator (Wainwright, 2011). Once again the methods of the blended learning platform rely on the use of technology for the purpose of introducing the students to a mode of learning in which they are already equipped with the tools necessary for acquisition due to their upbringing; students are brought up in an age in which technology and the utilization of its supplementary devices are the primal form of informational acquisition (Cerezo, Sánchez-Santillán, Paule-Ruiz, & Núñez, 2016).

The devices of technology, the functions of algorithms and patterns, assist not only in the categorization of student data and the intervals that assist in the potential for student improvement, but the presentation of information in multiple modes for student interaction. Blended learning institutions host a variety of learning management systems that assist in the presentation of information, and through these interactions, the activities and assessments that are presented alongside a variety of direct instruction provide more opportunities for student learning, in most cases, than a single educator can provide (Cerezo et al., 2016). Opportunities

for a single classroom of students, such as mastery paths or individualized lesson modules offer

students the opportunity to complete lessons at their own pace with the understanding that these

lessons are based on student academic benchmarks. These modules or paths offer a chance for

individualized student learning, as student achieve and select content based on their own abilities

and interests (Paulson, 2014).

The blended learning model of education can assist the individual needs of the students,

and while the individualized learning model has been mentioned as an answer to a variety of

educational obstacles, the accessibility of the actual acquisition of this strategy is made possible

through the blended learning platform (Paulson, 2014). Students utilize the facilitation of the

educator through the course setup. The teacher works as a guide through a myriad of

technological resources directly related to the discipline, and the platform from which students

access these resources also carries out the evaluation of student knowledge through a

combination of activities, quizzes, tests, and projects all housed within the same computer-based

program. While many of these school systems have tested a wide-variety of programs, the need

for a consolidated system that houses a variety of educational applications and organizational

programs are continually developing into what will eventually be the solution to an

organizational system that fulfills the needs of the blended learning initiative. Colleges and

universities have experimented with these online systems for years, calling them a variety of

different names. Even within the regional systems of Eastern Tennessee, online platforms, such

as Blackboard, Angel, and D2L have been used by prominent universities to organize student

grades and the presentation of online materials to the partial or fully virtual student; however

technologies have advanced and one of the current systems of choice has been found to be an

LMS that can organize student learning, host educational content, and provide tools for

assessment and the evaluation of student results (Cerezo et al., 2016). The necessity for a

learning management system that fulfills these requirements provides a necessary foundation for

a successful implementation of a blended learning model within a classroom.

The Implementation of Blended Learning at B-L Upward

Alternative learning environments (ALE) possess the potential of reaching different

students through different methodologies. For instance, learners not thriving in a traditional

environment may find a smaller or even a blended environment not only more comfortable, but

an environment that can create a more complete interval of student progression. Teacher

oftentimes within these type of program has a wide range of experiential and programmatic

incentives to invest within their respective alternative learning programs (Morettini, 2014). The

current ALE provided by B-L Upward is both a smaller option to the traditional high school and

a blended learning option for students looking for a distinction from the traditional block

schedule and classroom setup. Research of successful blended learning facilities has determined

some key factors that contribute to the program's achievement.

The first component necessary for the implementation of a blended learning model,

especially with students brought up through traditional schooling is that of working and intuitive

technologies (Simmons, 2013). The technologies that assist in the emergence of successful

blended learning programs have to be reliable in the sense that the technologies must be updated,

working, and be as streamlines and singular as possible. Technology checks are vital for the

keeping the students on-track; if the technology does not work than the students cannot learn

(Simmons, 2013). Furthermore, if the students are not equipped with the proper understanding of

how to access the technology and trained in the supplementary skills that are necessary for the

execution of the coursework, the student's learning will be obstructed, as will the ultimate

purpose of the program (Tseng & Walsh, 2016). Within a blended learning environment students will spend an average of approximately sixty-five percent of their learning online, whether working virtually or on-campus working independently or in peer groups (Tseng & Walsh, 2016). While the percentage of online learning versus direct instruction remains in the developmental stages of implementation, the BLU ratio is currently right around the averages suggested by this research. The understandings of the procedures and policies surrounding the proper utilization of the technology remain a foundational component of the blended learning process. The technology holds the potential for not only a vast amount of resources, but for the appropriate individualization of the leaning starts with an integrated, intuitive, and data-producing learning management system.

The second integral component that can stunt the effectiveness of the blended learning program, if not managed effectively is the placement and enforcement of procedures that deal with the unique process of learning online. The students are used to the technologies, and in many ways more capable of handling the operating procedures; the school procedures within the BLU school structure are implemented for the development of the soft skills surrounding online learning that students need the most guidance with, especially secondary students (Tseng & Walsh, 2016). The soft skills of online learning often come in two forms: goal setting and pacing. Student can learn the technology when it comes to accessing instructor feedback or finding links to additional resources for learning support. The CANVAS learning management systems of the BLU program assist in a variety of functions that typically take up a lot of the traditional instructor's time; however, what the instructor becomes aside from a virtual monitor is an instructional coach or someone who maintains student development and progress for each specific individual (O'Connor, Mortimer, & Bond, 2011). In order to accomplish this effectively

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the student must take ownership of their own academic progress by setting weekly goals and understanding the minimum amount of work necessary for reaching the targets identified. To achieve this goal, BLU students work through a checklist of technology interaction, a separate course within CANVAS completed before students becomes engaged with the actual course content. The teachers at BLU make sure the students understand where they are within the course by having them access their course calendar, assignment list, or grade book to identify the completion or incompletion of past and future work. This simple awareness can assist in the determination of what should be completed and at what pace. While these actions seem like simple understandings, procedures and technological policies must be in place to ensure that students understand the process to staying on their academic track (Fayaz & Ameri-Golestan, 2016).

Another important understanding to the blended learning process is that not everything is done online or through the primary utilization of online resources; some of the most important teachers and instruction come through physical interaction (Thompson, 2015). There is a reason that the time-honored brick and mortar educational model has been around for centuries, and some of the most important lessons students can learn is through the interaction with others, and as such a key component of blended learning is live events. These events stress a community of peers and the social and academic values that this curriculum can provide. These types of events can be created by project or problem based learning modules that ask students to work together to solve a problem or create something tangible using multimedia or industry tools. At BLU these scheduled times for virtual students to collaborate online are managed through CANVAS and direct instruction or face-to-face group work is carved out during scheduled class meetings, but the ultimate goal of this live curriculum is to introduce students to real-world team scenarios

along with the assessment of the soft skills necessary for students to succeed in post-secondary institutions. Furthermore, the break from the online platform allows for differentiation within the classrooms, and while students may be working at their own pace within a specific module – the pacing at BLU is monitored by the instructors to allow for students to understand key concepts and demonstrate mastery through virtual, individual, group, or whole class avenues (Thompson, 2015).

Ultimately the need for a live curriculum brings the educator to more of a traditional role; and while the course content is primarily driven by the online platform, the physical presence of an educator and peer interaction remains a vital function of the blended course design; an actual educator must formatively assess students through observations, a function yet to be achieved by any technological medium (Thompson, 2015)

Lastly, the development of school culture remains an integral part of the secondary learning experience. The recognition that students need to identify with the school, the system, and the community in which they exist, is a primary source of intrinsic motivation (Wadham, 2015). With this understanding, it is important for the school administration, teachers, and even community partners to find ways to enhance school culture. Activities, such as pep rallies, sporting events, and academic clubs, are not always typical within these blended learning environment, such is the case with the B-L Upward program. Due to a lack of traditional programs that naturally generate student connectivity, creative solutions to student assemblies, clubs, and extracurricular activities have been found in the formation of extracurricular clubs and opportunities for student gatherings outside of the normal school hours.

An important key to successful forms of these community builders is in the understanding of the student's interest, an understanding that changes from school to school.

Polls or informal observations of students have yielded to the formation of these activities within the BLU program. Ideas that have been successful in the past include: academic pep rallies, low-budget athletic clubs, student-run academic or advisory teams, STEM activity days, and even viewings of popular events at the school for students, parents, and community partners. The necessity of forming connections between students and teachers within a school's identity is important for the perception of the school as students are a recognized population of the local community, and the formation of a complete school culture can go a long way into the preservation of the program and the students it serves (Barclay, 1958).

Personalized Learning Research and Findings

B-L Upward, within the blended learning model, offers a personalized learning design. The term personalization refers to an educational program that provides a curriculum that adapts to the skill set and interests of the student. As such, a personalized courses targets a specific learning outcome by providing students with multiple levels and topics for mastery based on student interest and the initial performance levels of the individual (Jacobs, 2107). Personalization of learning is often referred to as the individualization of a lesson to meet the learning needs of the student. The personalized approach opposes the more traditional system that adheres to the conformity of students to a more singular lesson design and pace. For example, a course that offers the same lecture, assignments, writing prompts, or any other platform hosting student work that lacks differentiation in both skill level and in student choice is without personalization. The term personalized learning is also substituted with the term student-centered learning, a term that expresses that the focus of learning starts with the student's interest and performance level (Powell, 2011). The primary goal of this type of learning design is the

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modification of the learning and lesson based on the student's individual learning needs, such as performance level and student interest.

This type of learning design is commonly associated with online schools and companies selling online learning programs (Simpson, 2003). While there are many intersections between the characteristics of "personalized" and "blended" learning there are points of divergence. The major distinction between the two design formats are best explained by the intended purpose. For instance, "blended" learning references the method by which student's access and manipulate learning. The mode by which students access academic information is "blended" as student learning is facilitated both virtually through a learning management system and accompanied through intermittent classroom instruction. "Personalized" learning, in contrast, is primarily concerned with the student learning needs, and not primarily concerned with the format of delivery, such as in a blended learning design. Personalized learning takes into consideration student baseline indicators, such as pre-test, state achievement, and consistent observational data to determine the academic level of students. Once academic indicators have been identified, lesson planning to manipulate course content adapts to the student achievement with the focus on increasing the interval between the student baseline and the student's final learning artifact (Making, 2015).

Personalized learning requires more than performance data taken from the student's classroom work. To accomplish personalized learning, school's teachers, and counselors, and the rest of the educational team members constantly collaborate for the ever-changing needs of the students. The term personalized learning has many implications as the label incorporates a number of educational practices and strategies, as such it can be a problem in understanding what exactly a program offers when it advertises such a term.

Further examples that characterize a program implementing a personalized learning program include educational initiatives, such as reconfiguring a larger program into smaller components to host students with understood learning needs and provide teachers and educational team members that assist the student academic growth. The formation of these small-learning programs, also known as a-school-within-a-school are common indicators of the increased personalization within a school or system (Cavanagh, 2014).

Another form of an augmented personalization system of learning comes in the increased differentiation of student grouping, also known as heterogeneous grouping. The lessening of different academic pathways or tiered courses also indicates an increase in personalization, as mixed-groups indicate an increase in a single classes opportunity for the individualization of the curriculum within a single course (Cavanagh, 2014). Programs with dynamic student populations within classroom courses qualifies as increased personalization within a school.

Personalization of a school or program may also resemble multiple pathways or plans for students learning. These avenues for learning occur at both the program and at the individual class level. For instance, a student may have the opportunity to select learning pathways that govern the types of courses and electives that they will take. For instance, a vocational training pathway would have the student taking classes for the purpose of entering into a trade, or obtaining an apprentice certificate within a specific post-secondary program of studies. At the classroom level, mastery pathways are designed for the purpose of differentiating the learning based on the academic baseline for the students in a class. With the development of new learning management systems, mastery paths built through modules that are accessed after a pre-test which determines the lesson plan. Students can be working through similar content, at different

levels of rigor, or through different content at similar levels within a single class, where the instructor works as a facilitator of learning rather than the source (Jacobs, 2017).

Another characteristic that demonstrates the utilization of personalized learning within a program is the replacement of traditional home rooms with study halls or advisory periods. These time slots offer students the opportunity to meet in small groups to work on coursework and group projects (Cavanagh, 2014). In advisory periods students are provided with a session with a teacher or counselor to get assistance with academic needs, such as scheduling, tutoring, and other aspects of academic planning.

Increasing the level of student choice and allotting students responsibility with goal-setting and content-choice is another marker of personalized learning. The idea of "student voice" refers to the student identity having influence over the type of instruction offered within courses. The student voice allows for an increased level of input within the course design and the plan of studies for program completion. This creates an alternative to the traditional methods of instruction in which educators make one-sided decisions that allow for little or no input from the students who will be enrolled in these courses. The introduction of student choice in a program, in the classroom, and even in overall program design provides another method from which to introduce personalization of learning into a school.

The personalization of learning can also be identified by the scheduling options available for the student. This distinction crosses into characteristics of "blended learning." While the mode of learning is characterized as "blended", the purpose for this design is considered personalized, as the individualized needs of the students require that the student be able to work through coursework in a variety of environments: virtual workspace, instructional labs, traditional classroom, or in a collegiate program aimed at providing a head start for high school

students. In regards to the distinction between the personalization of learning and the blended

learning model, a program can hold one label without the other (Making, 2015). For instance, a

program can deliver the same content at the same level within a blended model, and

personalization can occur within a traditional classroom; however, the D-B EXCEL program

claims to have both the "blended" and the "personalized" model.

While personalization has many appealing features, there is still much to debate

surrounding the implementation of this learning model. Criticism surrounding personalized

learning rises as the label of "personalized learning" is commonly associated with for-profit

virtual schools and online degree programs that offer virtual programs that have customizable

options, but have been accused of offering low-quality education in that a canned, virtual

program offers only small amounts of group work and peer interaction, relying solely on

exposure to instructional materials accompanied by online quizzes, discussion boards, and

formal written responses (Fisher, 2016). Although the canned educational programs provided by

the for-profit systems offer a limited opportunity for student learning, the personalization

provided by the D-B EXCEL program offer a personalized program continues to develop for the

maximization of student learning with the accompaniment of the blended learning model.

The Implementation of Personalized Learning at B-L Upward

The understanding of the importance for a personalized curriculum throughout the core

disciplines remains a key effort within the design of the BLU program. The progression of

learning for the entirety of the student population relies on the differentiation of the course

content. The understanding of student achievement within a class is triangulated through a

variety of elements; academic baseline, development, and choice can both determine and

enhance the academic growth of a student using the ideas of personalized learning

(Administrator 1, 2017). The goal of the BLU program is to make the content more personalized; an effort that stems from the realization that student choice within the curriculum design of the courses in which they are enrolled has the potential to enhance student investment and an increase in the interval between pre and post assessments - a state statistic that governs teacher effectiveness data (TEAM, 2017). The implementation of personalized learning within the B-L Upward program design is an effort that is best outlined through an in-depth observation of three components: relationship building, CANVAS, and project-based Learning.

Student relations, between peers and instructors, is a point of emphasis for the BLU program. The efforts to improve student relations by the administration and teaching staff are motivated by the understanding that student performance directly correlates with the motivational drive of the students, and student performance within the school system can open opportunities for furthered development and self-sustainability (Administrator 1, 2017). Efforts to enhance student relations occur specifically in the advisory period offered at the beginning of every school day, and through the staff sponsorship of extra-curricular activities.

The advisory period, is characteristic of a home-room offering found within the traditional secondary environment. The difference is that within a traditional setup, the class is typically offered at the onset of new terms and during special events. At BLU, advisory occurs every day for the first 45 minutes and is organized through administrative updates and a curriculum that is geared toward the enhancement of successful student norms and student relationships. Topics for discussion, team building activities, and scheduled speakers offer the curriculum for the majority of the morning startup period. When the morning agenda is not provided by the administration, students and teachers meet through the guidance of a weekly

schedule to discuss both academic and social needs, providing the students and teachers with opportunities to enhance or repair the current events of the school day (Administrator 4, 2017).

Apart from the morning period of the school schedule, student relations are also strengthened with the teacher sponsorship of extra-curricular activities. Although the smaller student population is allowed admittance to all of Dover Bledsoe's extra-curricular offerings, the administration and the teaching staff understood the necessity for after school programs that were solely created within the BLU program. As such, multiple after school activities were created and sustained by the staff members of the BLU program. Programs such as the MATE Robotics Team, STEM in the Gym, and the Gamers Club have allowed for the continued development of student and staff relationship building.

The development of staff and student relationships mirrors the research suggesting that student academic achievement is improved through the creation of a healthy learning environment (Dewitt & Slade, 2014). Essentially, the environment of a school must cater to the basic needs recognized within child development, even within the secondary environment where students work through the adolescent years. Student needs can be better addressed through an improvement of relations between their peers and their instructors. Once established, understandings that impact student achievement, such as psychological, safety, belonging, and esteem, can be identified and addressed by the administrators, teachers, and support staff that interact with students on a daily basis (Aldridge & Fraser, 2017). The efforts of personalization, within the design of the BLU implementation, begins with the development of student and staff relationships.

Another aspect of the BLU program that adds to the personalization of student learning comes in the utilization of the CANVAS learning management system. The CANVAS system,

besides offering students and teachers with an online platform from which to organize and present classroom materials, also offers a variety of feature that contribute to the personalization of a student's learning. Three features that offer enhanced personalization within a variety of the courses offered at BLU are the creation of mastery paths, the integration of technological application, and the multiple modes of feedback.

The utilization of mastery paths provides students with the opportunity to access different levels of difficulty within course content based on performance. Students scoring within different bands, such as "basic", "proficient", or "advanced" would be presented with different levels of content, ranging from activities for remediation and extension. In essence, students can maintain a similar pace of instruction and make gains on a more personalized scale, thus enhancing the efficiency of the classwork and making the process of differentiation within a classroom possible for the instructor.

The integration of technological applications within the CANVAS platform can offer an organized presentation of assignments and exploration for students. By providing an intuitive nexus of academic resources, students can navigate the various technologies that provide variety for student assignment completion and offer explorations that provide a depth that is more expansive than simple substitution of paper materials transcribed onto an electronic platform. CANVAS provides the necessary tools for teachers to implement their own assignment creation. For instance, an instructor coming from a traditional environment can easily substitute hard materials onto the electronic medium using the tools provided by the management system within CANVAS. Instructors can also integrate tools for assignment synchronicity, such as Google G Suite, which embeds into the program for student to easily upload documents and presentations, as well as collaborate with peers on a single document from different locations. This seamless

transition between these technologies adds to the fluidity of classroom lesson design in both the brick and mortar and virtual environment accommodated by the BLU program design. Teachers can also access materials utilizing the Commons, an electronic database where teachers can share entire courses or selected course materials within the school system network or for the entirety of CANVAS users. This function allows for a variety of materials, and data-based decision for teachers showing strengths within specific standards. Essentially, teachers who show specific growth over other instructors in specific content-related domains can share their resources to assist in the growth of entire departments within a school system. The open sharing of these materials not only allows for improvement of current practices, but also is valuable in the presentation of coursework that covers multiple modes of learning and adds to the personalization of the coursework, based on the student needs. These needs are better identified through patterns and performance reviews of students analyzed within the data analytics provided within CANVAS (Administrator 3, 2017). Teachers can observe reports ranging from the simplicity of observing log-on times to patterns in student performance within specific lesson. This type of data is necessary when teachers are looking for gaps in student learning, thus assisting in the differentiation process through remediation and extension activities that are created, borrowed, or supplemented by external programs embedded in the CANVAS course design. The complete utilization of this program within the BLU program allows for teachers, students, and even administrators to be on the same page when targeting the personal needs of the students within a particular class.

Another aspect of the curriculum design within BLU that enhances the personalization of the student learning is the project-based or problem-based learning that is a mandatory requirement within the instructor's course design. The STEM initiative is a component of the

program that has been placed as a requirement within each course offered at BLU. Essentially, the STEM initiative is an approach to learning that focuses on the application of academic concepts within real-world lessons by applying science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. These real-world connections take place through partnerships with community leaders and industry professionals to assist in the application of classroom concepts within the working world of the student's community (Sahin & Top, 2015). The implementation of this effort has offered students with choices in the projects or problems that integrate multiple disciplines, and as such students are able to demonstrate mastery outside of the traditional assessments. Through presentations, interviews, job-shadowing, and internships with community partners the course content is reaching the personal world of the students, and students have choice and the opportunity to demonstrate classroom skills through project completion or within the solution design for real-world problems. The academic extension provided through the project and problem-based modules allows for increased personalization, as students select the project and the role they fulfill within team groups.

Overall, the personalization of the learning environment can be simplified, as making the classroom more suitable to the student's needs. These needs range in variety from social to academic, as the growth of a student varies from one student to another within a given classroom. The implementation and enhancement of relationships, the tools that deliver coursework, and the project and problem-based initiative is enhanced by the personalization of the BLU program.

B-L Upward Physical Facility

The physical facility of the B-L Upward facility was designed for the implementation of blended learning. The open floor plan caters to a variety of lesson plans and the blended learning

models outlined in the book *Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools.* Administrator 1 outlined the floor plan based on the research housed in this research. The current floor plan has two large student work areas and smaller breakout rooms for instruction-driven lessons that cater to the workspace and the mobility of the furniture. A Makerspace is located toward the back of the facility – the projects that drive a majority of the curriculum are created within the technology provided within this workspace. Apart from the cafeteria, the instructional design lab is the last collaborative workspace within the facility. The instructional design lab acts as an open office for all of the teachers, and can also be used as a breakout room for closed collaboration or direct instruction.

While students still report to designated class meeting areas, the classroom boundaries are less defined within the BLU campus. This type of open environment caters to the flexibility and movement necessary to adapt the physical space to the technology that houses the curriculum. Students work through an AB schedule design, essentially, students schedule changes every other day to allow for a larger course offering within the small school environment. As such, the need for a physical space that can adapt and change to the different types of lesson and classroom needs is necessary, especially as multiple classes are occurring in an open area where students are working with teachers and technology at varying paces with differing content.

Looking Forward

Within the modern era, there have been numerous innovations to education throughout history. In 1911 the first Montessori school opened thus reiterating the importance of the Maria Montessori's guideline, "follow the child." (Al, Sari, & Kahya, 2012) Dr. Montessori's timeless standard qualifies many reformations within the realm of educational practice. Notable markers

of this thinking include Lev Vygotsky's *Thought and Language,* first published in 1934, which outlines the essence of social constructivism – a reinforcement that a student's development is a combination of innate devices supplemented by the instructor's facilitation of learning through social interaction and the continued extension of the zone of proximal development. In other words, the key to educational growth for a student rests in extending the learners pre-existing knowledge into the levels of difficulty previously thought to be unattainable; however, this growth is dependent upon the individual potential for a single student (Daniels, 2005). The echoes of "follow the child" are reiterated within Vygotsky's research, and continue to unfold in the 1969 publication of Herbert Kohl's book *The Open Classroom.* This presentation of humanist thought offers a philosophy at odds with the beliefs of operant condition theorists, that for educational development it is necessary to study the person "as a whole, especially as an individual grows and develops over the lifespan." (Kohl, 1970) The humanist movement found that following the child aided in educational growth, especially when students have choice in the selection of tasks and hold governance over their own curriculum paths. While, at the time, providing an extensive curriculum that offers variance for each student's individual preference, seems overwhelming, especially as an instructor attempting to monitor progress and track proficiency for a classroom of students all working at different paces within different subject matter, although related to a specific discipline. However, the tools provided to the educators of the 21st century, offer solutions to these difficulties. The emergence of blended learning as a model for pre-collegiate academia offers up the familiar belief that success in education can occur within a technological structure that allows teachers to follow the child through student interest, student choice, individualized pacing, and regulated goal setting.

With the development of new technologies that better support educators in their facilitation of a truly individualized classroom, the expectations of the educator have shifted once again. No longer is the classroom teacher expected to be the primary source of knowledge (Simmons, 2013). The role has shifted from instructor to a facilitator of knowledge as presented or accessed by a technological medium. While trainings directed at the utilization of these new technologies, including curriculum creation and the formation of electronic student pathways, is important, the key characteristic of an effective educator within the blended learning model is the possession of an open mindset. When compartmentalizing the key characteristics of qualified teachers, the importance of an open mindset is continually stressed not only in understanding the patterns of change, but also the tools and flexibility to find solutions to problems that arise while trailblazing (Dweck, 2008). When trying to best understand how to identify educators with an open mind, a new notion that is growing in popularity, especially within the field of education, is the trendiness toward individuals possessing an aptitude for growth rather than a fixed mentality. The characterization of these people can best be determined by the individuals who challenge difficult problem with an inquisitive resilience rather than being challenged by obstacles (Dweck, 2008). An educator working within the blended learning model must be someone who is willing to change the practices of the classroom or challenge the status quo of what is comfortable for the disruption necessary for student growth. For example, the characterization of successful students does not embody the traditional notions of the ideal classroom. Students no longer need to be sitting quietly absorbing the knowledge passed down by a single educator; instead, students must be loudly questioning their peers and asking for substantiation of their claims from valid sources provided by a facilitator, or someone traditionally known as a secondary teacher (Wainwright, 2011**).**

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The B-L Upward program is a forward thinking action taken by the Kingston City school system. The goals of the program, according to the administration are to not only be competitive with the public school systems throughout the state, but the private institutions as well. The ability to offer a competitive curriculum to that of the state's finest private institutions would provide another indication for the systems success (Administrator, 2017).

The virtual platform from which coursework is designed offers a wide range of possibilities, and while many aspects of the public system may inhibit some of these creative ideas, the nature of this forward thinking program could eventually pave the way for changes in policies, such as zoning regulations for school systems, as students could assess the materials for B-L Upwards curriculum by simply having access to the internet. Currently, however the program has explored many new possibilities for its utilization in the community. One such epiphany came in the application of the program's curriculum paths for a population of home-schooled students, whose parents felt that the traditional secondary environment was not as apt for their student's development due to a variety of variables. However, the flexibility of the program's curriculum along with the ability to access the content from their home-school environment attracted these students and their parents to use B-L Upward as a satellite campus for their students if necessary (Administrator, 2017). Alongside the flexibility of physical presence and access to highly qualified educators within a variety of disciplines, the B-L Upward program found a small community of students that could be served specifically by the resources and design of the school.

The forward thinking response to the evolution of education due to the technological advance of today had not intended or specifically targeted these homeschooled students. However, the functionality of the program and the open-minded nature of the system to

experiment with the B-L Upward program uncovered applications for the program that have

provided solutions to problems that, at current, were not on school systems agenda - and these

type of discoveries make inquiry into the B-L Upward program model a worthwhile study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter 3 outlines the procedures used to investigate the main research question: What are the understandings of the KCS administration and the BLU teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and student academic growth? The data collected in the research assisted in determining an understanding of the instructional model of the B-L Upward program. Chapter 3 will focus on the study's process, the targeted understanding, and the implications of these understandings. Results from this case study will provide the school system with a better understanding of the implementation and student achievement through structured, face-to-face interviews. These interviews will aid in an understanding of the BLU program. Through understanding the experiences of the professionals closest to the program, the study seeks to better understand the implementation and academic student growth within the BLU program.

Research Questions

The following questions were used to examine the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and the student academic growth within the instructional model in a school of choice. The overarching question for this study is: What are the understandings of the KCS administration and the BLU teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and student academic growth?

1. How do the participants describe student success at BLU?

2. What factors contribute to the student's choice to attend school at BLU?

3. What factors contribute to the teacher's choice to attend school at BLU?

4. What factors of the BLU program contribute to the BLU's student's success?

5. What factors facilitate student learning within BLU's blended learning model?

6. What factors obstruct student learning within BLU's blended learning model?

Design of the Study

A qualitative approach to investigate the staff's understandings of the BLU model is most appropriate for this study. A quantitative analysis provides a broad inquiry of the student production and school success data, but does not provide a rich description of the lived experiences and understandings of the staff members closest to the BLU program. Qualitative research assists in understanding and explaining the "meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption to the natural setting as possible (Merriam, 2009). A case study was selected to properly research the BLU model. The purpose of a case study is to describe a contemporary situation within its real-life context to understand the phenomena more completely (Jacelon & O'Dell, 2005).

A case study design is appropriate for studying the understandings of the KCS administration and the BLU teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and student academic growth. The case study design is a suitable method for discovering the understandings that govern the BLU program. The use of interviews to investigate the understandings of the staff provided by observations made through a daily interaction within the program. A common method for collecting data within the case study form are structured face-to-face interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). By coding the transcriptions of these interviews, data can be gathered to assist in a complete and useful understanding the educational program being studied.

Case Study

A case study for this qualitative research was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the BLU program and the student growth within the instructional model in a school of choice (Merriam, 2009). The distinct nature of the institution is considered for this case study. The BLU program is a program of choice within the Kingston City school system. The BLU program is a smaller school of choice to Kingston's larger and more traditional secondary school, Dover-Bledsoe. The understandings of the program are bound to the administrators and teachers within the KCS system. A case study was the appropriate method to explore the thoughts, feelings, and overall understandings of staff members within the system about the BLU program. Through this research specific issues and understandings of practice within the BLU program were identified and explained by the staff members who participated in the study. The case study design is particularly useful for studying the model of this program of choice. The staff interviews will function as a criterion that accesses the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff in regard to the implementation of the BLU program and the student academic growth within the instructional model in a school of choice.

Setting for the Research

The B-L Upward program functioning as a school of choice within the Kingston City school system served as the setting for this research. The program serves as an alternative to Dover-Bledsoe, the school system's traditional high school that serves approximately 2,000 students. The BLU program serves approximately 240 students who choose the school of choice as an alternative learning environment to Dover-Bledsoe. The BLU program advertises a variety of differences to the traditional high school. The understanding of the processes and student

growth indicative of the BLU program are vital in comprehending the instructional model of the BLU program.

Participants

The sampling method for this study was formed from a purposive list, and the researcher chose participants that best represented the study's intention. The population from which the sample was selected was the administrative staff of the Kingston City school system and the teachers within B-L Upward that have a direct connection with the BLU program. The participants consisted of eight highly qualified teachers and four members of an administrative team in charge of the operations at B-L Upward and the Dover-Bledsoe programs. The purposive sampling method, which consisted of current administrative and teaching staff, was selected due to the staff's highly qualified designation, and the staff's background of experiences within the traditional secondary setting before their employ at BLU. A population is referenced as a group of people that represent a specific normalization (Jonassen, 2004). The sample representative of the researched particular norm for this qualitative research study focused on the lived experiences of the staff participating in the B-L Upward program at the onset of the program's formal launching in the spring and fall of 2017 in Northeast Tennessee.

Pseudonyms were used to ensure the participant's anonymity. In the event of a staff member withdrawing from the study, one alternate administrator and two alternate members of the teaching staff have been selected to step into the interviewee role. The administrative participants were selected based on their understanding of the factors that contributed to the school systems decision for the program implementation of BLU. Both the administrative and teaching staff are made up of educational professionals. A better understanding of their experiences will elicit a criterion for a study of the implementation and student academic growth

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within the program. The administrative staff have a detailed experience with the policies and procedures that governed the decision making behind the current implementation; whereas, the teaching staff, with their experience with the program and how the teaching operations differ from that of a traditional high school, can offer insight into the advantages and hindrances to student academic growth. All of the teaching participants selected have prior experiences in a traditional secondary setting.

The Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher within a qualitative study is to understand how people interpret their experiences (Creswell, 2012). While the researcher holds an important role in attempting to remain unbiased as they conduct and interpret the results, no qualitative researcher is without bias (Denizen & Lincoln, 2005). The reality of the study is based on the interpretation of the participants and the researcher. The relationship between these two parties provides the integrity for a qualitative study. Bias can occur through many platforms. For instance, bias can occur based on the personal and preconceived notions of the researcher. Furthermore, selection bias can occur when the data aligns with the prejudices of the researcher conducting the study (Miles & Huberman, 2013).

Qualitative research is aimed at gaining a deep understanding of specific organization or events, rather than a general understanding of a correlation or reaction to a stimulus (Merriam, 2009). Given the context of this aim, a qualitative researcher is interested in the perceptions surrounding a particular experience or occurrence. To understand these events, a researcher, with the utmost accuracy and objectivity, base their research on the how people understand their experiences (Creswell, 2012). While all researchers carry with them some form of bias due to their necessary closeness with the material under investigation, the familiarity of the event being

studied also adds an element of credibility to the report (Creswell, 2012). With these prejudices acknowledged, it is important that throughout the course of the study that these potential prejudices be monitored.

Potential bias is also present in the researcher of this study's position as a member of the teaching community within the study's focus. I work as an academic instructor within the B-L Upward program. Similar to the staff, I have also had experience at a traditional program before moving into the blended learning environment of the B-L Upward program. While I am on the staff, the role is strictly that of teacher, and holds no administrative responsibilities. The emic mindset, referred to as a psychological understanding that the researcher maintains an open mind separate from that of the participants (Creswell, 2012). It is imperative that I remain objective through maintaining transparency in the research method and inserting methods of ensuring the trustworthiness of the study, such as member checking.

Data Collection

The case study design provided the best method for understanding the understandings of the B-L Upward program. Data were collected during the interview process using open-ended questions (see Appendix). Each participant responded to the interview questions, and data were collected, transcribed, and organized using a transcript of the audio files. Researcher notes will also be taken to provide context and interpretations to the participant's reactions during the interview process.

Interviews are the main source of data for this study. The 12 staff members who participated as interviewees in the study were purposefully sampled. Staff members were contacted by email, telephone, and face-to-face communication. Upon the agreement to participate, the participants were given detailed information about the study, including the

purpose of the study and how the information provided would be used to evaluate

implementation procedures and educational practices that augmented or hindered student growth.

Member checking was used to ensure credibility. During the interview process, the

interviewer recorded participant responses and reviewed pertinent information in an attempt to

ensure accuracy and the trustworthiness of the study. Member checking allowed participants to

either affirm that the summaries reflected their views and also allowed for opportunities, within

the interview process, for correction and a clearer understanding of the participant responses

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

The researcher obtained detailed accounts of the understandings of these participants

though face-to-face interpretations of the questioning within an arranged interview process. Open

coding was used to categorize the data. According to Corbin and Strauss (2007) open coding is

the method of examining data, parsing the responses, organizing patterns, and categorizing

responses. These categories are closely analyzed and compared in attempt to understand the

pattern of like-responses. According to Merriam (2009), coding is simply the process of finding

patterns in an attempt to organize themes for a future understanding of the study's findings. After

the transcription of the interview process and the member checking is completed, the researcher

determined themes in the data and further categorized these segments. From these patterns,

themes were synthesized into the study's framework. Rarely is coding a linear act; the process of

coding is a cyclical process that further manages, filters, and highlights the salient features of

qualitative research (Saldana, 2013). The breaking down of the data found within the interview

transcripts occurs most effectively through multiple series of coding. Furthermore, the study

used peer examination to enhance credibility. The process involved a team of neutral

professionals within the current field. This type of examination assists in the researcher's

honesty, as the knowledge of the peer evaluation assist in identifying categories or lapses not

identified by the research questions (Anney, 2014)

Trustworthiness of the Study

The trustworthiness of the study can be influenced by the credibility of the researcher.

Essentially, the biases of the researcher, and the lack of acknowledgement for these prejudices

can impact the study's worth. Credibility can be ensured by using a variety of devices. One

simple solution to ensuring the credibility of the study is through prolonged engagement in the

field. By spending enough time interviewing and making sure the participants have ample time

to express their understandings about the program. Allotting enough time for effective prolonged

engagement allows for a better understanding of the participants and better ensures the

trustworthiness of the study. (Given 2000). Another method of enhancing the credibility of the

study is through member checking. Member checking allowed participants to either affirm that

the summaries reflected their views and also allowed for opportunities, within the interview

process, for correction and a clearer understanding of the participant responses (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). This added measure ensures that the process remains both objective and trustworthy in

that the researcher bias is limited by the member checking of the participants.

Trustworthiness of a study can be ensured using evaluative criteria, such as, credibility,

transferability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure credibility, the researcher

works to demonstrate a complete picture of the study's context. The replication of a study or the

study's replication onto other situations and scenarios can be ensured through an accurate

representation of specific details and context (Merriam, 2009). To ensure dependability,

researchers must take steps to prove that the study's findings were a result of the participant

responses, and not a result of researcher bias (Shenton, 2004). To ensure dependability, the study provides a detailed account ensuring for an accurate replication of the study's process and methodology. Other ways that the dependability of the study was ensured was through a process of re-coding and peer examination.

Ethical Considerations

The dependability and consistency of the study depends on the ethical considerations of the researcher. In the collection of data and the interpretation of the findings, ethical issues are likely to arise (Merriam, 2009). Ethical issues primarily surround the protection of the identity of the participants. As such, consent forms and confidentiality agreements were provided and discussed before and after the interview process.

Another type of consideration comes in the form of partial coercion. This occurs when the study may have direct benefits for the program and the participants causing the participant to introduce bias within their responses. (McMillan & Shumacher, 2006). Partial coercion may have hindered the responses of the participants, as the desire for a positive or progressive result could have swayed the nature of the interview responses.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand an instructional model in a school of choice. The interviews of the administrative and teaching staff cast understanding on the implementation of the BLU program and the student growth within the instructional model in a school of choice. The qualitative research used individual interviews consisting of open-ended questions for the interview template.

Chapter 3 provided an overview of the study's data collection, strategies, and data analysis. The overview of the methodology included the importance of participant safety and

confidentiality. The chapter also provided specific details pertaining to the selection of the

sample population, research design, and implementations for credibility.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to examine the main research question: What are the understandings of the KCS administration and the teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and the student academic growth? The process of data collection took place through a structured face-to-face interview process of 12 members of the administrative and teaching staff directly involved with the implementation of the B-L Upward program.

The 12 interviews conducted provided the source from which data were collected and interpreted to establish an understanding of the BLU program implementation and the student academic growth. For the purpose of this study, the four members of the administrative staff and the eight members of the teaching staff were selected due to their direct involvement with the BLU program. Each administrator was referred to as Administrator 1 through 4 and each teacher was referred to as Teacher 1 through 8 depending on his or her order of the interview. Each participant was sent a copy of the quotations from the transcripts that were presented in the case study for review.

Interview Analysis

The researcher recorded and transcribed data from the interviews. The transcription was taken by listening to a decelerated recording of the audio files using the Dragon Naturally Speaking software, and then the transcripts of the interviews were carefully typed out. The process helped to catch subtle comments and asides that demonstrated emotions and emphasis that were pertinent to the coding and categorizing of the themes that emerged from the

conversations captured in the interviews. After initial transcription, the process of open coding was used to synthesize information from the priori codes. The open coding process was a measured process by which patterns and ideas were discovered and labeled according to the data collected after the interviews and transcripts had been finalized (Given, 2008).

Axial coding was the next step in the data analysis process. The axial coding process sought to identify causal relationship between categories created through explicit connections and formed categories and subcategories (Given, 2008). Patterns were identified and presented relevant to the purpose of the case study. Relationships between the patterns were reviewed based on the repetitive statements observed within the interview process.

Selective coding was the next step in the determinations of pattern comparison between identified theme that emerged from the transcript reexamination. These themes created and finalized for an analysis of the central purpose of the study which was to understand an instructional model in a school of choice with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and student academic growth (Given, 2008).

The 12 members of the administrative and teaching staff who participated in the interview provided the data for the study. The participant selection for this study was based on the first-hand knowledge that staff members have for an intimate understanding of the program's implementation and student academic growth.

Staff Profiles

The 12 interviewees were members of the administration and teaching staff with direct involvement within the BLU program with regard to program implementation and academic student growth. The following description of each staff member introduces him or her to the reader. This introduction portrays the differences inherent in the programs administrative and

teaching staff who shared their understandings - the basis for data collection and analysis for the case study.

Administrator 1 is the principal of B-L Upward. Administrator 1 has a background in elementary and high school administration. Administrator 1 has nine years of experience in administration, and within her role at BLU, she has spent a total of 4 years developing and recruiting staff and students for the creation of the program. Administrator 1 has a Master's degree in administration and offers the primary understanding of the school's governance within the role of administration.

Administrator 2 is the principal of Dover Bledsoe, the traditional high school that serves approximately 2,000 secondary students. Administrator 1 has over a decade of experience within KCS as an administrator, and has been involved in the transition of students from Dover Bledsoe to B-L Upward. Administrator 2 has a doctorate of education and offers an understanding of the BLU program through working closely with the administration and counselors responsible for the admission process at BLU.

Administrator 3 is the eLearning Coordinator for the entire KCS school system. Her work with BLU started at the beginning of program development. Her work alongside of Administrator 1 continues to drive the effort behind the enhancement of blended learning and the progression and development of online learning. Her work with both the administration and the staff continues to provide insight into how an electronic course platform can be improved for the 21st century student.

Administrator 4 is the College and Career Liaison Specialist for the BLU program. Her work focuses primarily on the recruitment and admission of new students to the creation and continuation of partnerships that assist in student development, especially in regard to project-

based learning and student connections with post-secondary opportunities. Apart from these efforts, Administrator 4 functions as the on-site assistant principal at BLU.

Teacher 1 is an English teacher at BLU and makes up one-half of the school's English department. Her employment within the KCS system has lasted 3 years - all of which have been in the employ of the BLU program. Teacher 1 has a B.S. in secondary education, and her background prior to the KCS employment was at a competitive system within a traditional school environment at a top-level middle school for a period of 3 years.

Teacher 2 is the Digital Arts teacher at BLU and also serves as the team's expert on project-based learning. Her work within the school has been to both drive the implementation of project-based learning at BLU and also work toward the STEM designation process for the school, an effort to be finalized in the late spring of 2018. Teacher 2 has a B.S. in education, and her background prior to her work at BLU is from both a traditional elementary environment and an alternative learning environment program.

Teacher 3 is a new math teacher to the program. While in her first year of professional teaching, Teacher 3 won numerous awards as a student teacher in her program. She spent a year of student teaching with the Dover-Bledsoe mathematics department. Teacher 3 has a B.S. in education, her background and emphasis of work within the school is focused on creating projects to integrate into the BLU math curriculum.

Teacher 4 is another new member of the BLU teaching staff. Teacher 4 has spent over a year at BLU working as a History teacher. Before joining the BLU program, Teacher 4 spent a year at a neighboring system where he taught various courses within a traditional secondary setting. Teacher 4 has a M.Ed. in secondary education, and currently works with the Dover-Bledsoe staff in transitioning the paper-based assessments to the online format; a first step

toward blended learning for the traditional setting. At BLU, he sponsors a variety of extracurricular activities, and looks to expand the curriculum through the development of a blended elective focus within the course offerings.

Teacher 5 is the second member and final member of the BLU history department. Teacher 5 has earned celebration for his work within the traditional secondary environment in a neighboring county system with limited technological resources. Teacher 5 is in his second year as a professional teacher, and has been a member of the BLU program for one year. Teacher 5 has a M.Ed. in secondary education and has experience implementing a school-wide project that incorporates the major disciplines.

Teacher 6 is a science teacher at BLU, her employment started at the beginning of the school year, but her work within blended learning has been ongoing, as she has been a teacher at a neighboring program that conducts a virtual program for secondary students. Her work with eLabs and experience with the CANVAS learning management system has brought a level of experience in online curriculum design to the program. Teacher 6 has a M.Ed. in secondary education, and is the primary engine behind the blended curriculum for the biology and engineering courses.

Teacher 7 is the second and final member of the BLU science department. Teacher 7 is in her third year of teaching at BLU, and has worked within a variety of course development within the science department. Teacher 7 is also the student sponsor for the MATE Robotics program, a new extracurricular opportunity that provides students with training in circuitry and engineering. Teacher 7 has a B.A. in education, and is currently working on the ACT online training program, the school plans to unfold at the beginning of next term.

Teacher 8 is the special education teacher for BLU. Teacher 8 is also in charge of schedule development. Teacher 8 has been teaching for a total of 28 years, and has been with the BLU program since its inception. Apart from working with special education students, Teacher 8 also developed the personal finance elective at BLU. Teacher 8 has a M.Ed. in education, and works with Administrator 4 within the transition process for new applicants.

Interview Results

The interviews opened with an explanation of the purpose of the study. The participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to gather the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the BLU program implementation and academic student growth. The interview was divided into two sections: program implementation and student academic growth.

Section 01: Understandings of Program Implementation at BLU

The first question addressed the understandings of factors that determine the overall success of a school. The question was used as a startup to gage the priorities of the school staff members with regard to a clearer understanding of what governs, in part, their decision-making paradigm. Based on the preset and emergent codes the following categories have been formed to present the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the staff's understanding of school success: school culture, school success data, and the system governing school operations.

Staff members A1, A3, A4, T2, T4, T5, and T8 all mentioned school success related to aspects of school culture. School culture broadly referred to the interconnection between staff and students with the recognition of a common goal within a community that has recognizable attributes. For a successful culture to form, students and teachers must develop healthy

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relationships. The staff members' responses echoed similar understandings of this importance as

they identified the factors that assist in the creation of school culture.

Administrator 1 stated:

> The people who make up the school is the most important factor when creating school culture, specifically with regard to the staff. An effective staff resembles teachers working together that are champions for students.

Administrator 4 stated that the relationships developed between students and between teachers

was a top priority:

> For students to learn in their classes, teachers must be able to work with students who are working together. This doesn't truly happen, in my opinion, without the development of a school culture, a culture that is safe, a culture that is engaging, and a culture that ultimately points the student toward life success.

Teacher 4 continued to assert a similar statement in the following:

> First of all, a school has to look at the culture and determine if students are willing to invest into your [the teacher's] class and into the time it takes to complete assignments to the best of their ability, that all starts with culture, they [the students] aren't going to work for a teacher they don't respect, I think that relationship is a very large part when determining school success.

Teacher 5 echoed the same thought with the connection that the relationships are the primary

engine within the formation of a school culture:

> For school success, I would say it has to be student teacher relationships, because if the students don't have a positive relationship with their teachers, then they aren't going to put forth the effort to learn.

Seven out of the 12 staff members who participated in the study all mentioned the

necessity of school culture with regard to school success. With the understanding that school

culture is an intangible element within a school, these seven staff members presented the

importance of relationship building in a school and correlated this development as a method for

enhancing the culture of a school. The second category within the responses to the first interview

question was the understanding that school success data was a determiner of school success. With regard to the quantitative markers that are associated with secondary schools throughout the state, Administrator 2 stated the following in relation to the importance of the new data forming to indicate the college and career readiness data provided after a student leaves high school:

> That [school success] has changed so much over my career. From graduating from high school to now I see it very differently that graduation is not a factor of success. Can students leave your organization and be socially and financially independent an upwardly mobile in life and graduation doesn't mean success? The new benchmark is - do students leave ready to succeed in post-secondary opportunities or in job or career advancements.

Teacher 5 asserted that while school culture was important another crucial factor governing school success is the benchmark data provided by standardized state testing. Teacher 5 stated:

> End of course testing will always be a judgement that governs school and teacher success. It is not something that is popular, but schools, administrators, and teachers must understand this type of measurement will always be a staple of public education.

> The recognition of these quantitative measurements was mentioned by A2, T1, T2, T5, and T8 throughout the interviews, demonstrated the importance that these tests and data points made with regard to aspects involving the determination of school success. The last category within the responses to the determining factors of school success had to do with the importance of a school plan or a system that governed operations for teachers and students within a given school day. Teachers 1, 3, and 6 all mentioned the importance of a recognizable procedural system organized by school administrators. Teacher 1 stated:

> I think that the most important factor to determine if a school is successful is the implementation or the administration. It starts from the top with your head people and then the implementation and the practices and the consistency in those practices. And, follow through is very important, such as scheduling and policies and procedures for teachers.

Teacher 3 also asserted that "follow through" or the structure of the policies and procedures by the administration was important in the determination of school success. Teacher 3 stated:

> I think one of the biggest things for school success is having a plan. Having procedures knowing exactly what you are supposed to be doing when you are supposed to be doing it. I think that this is good for both teachers and students. School is a place where a lot of kids get the structure that they don't get at home. Structure can be informal, laid back, but I think having proper procedures in place for when do I go do this - if this happens what do I need to do? I think that this can greatly impact school success.

The second question addressed the understandings of factors that distinguish B-L Upward as an alternative learning environment when compared to the traditional secondary environment, especially with regard to the school structure at Dover Bledsoe. The question was used to provide an understanding of the program's structure in that BLU claims an alternative learning environment. Based on the preset and emergent codes the following categories have been formed to present the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the program implementation that distinguishes BLU as an alternative learning environment: physical observation of learning, presence of technology, and school size.

Staff members A1, T2, T4, T5, T6, T7, and T8 all mentioned that a major aspect in the distinction between BLU and the traditional environment is the physical observations of student learning. In general, this determination concerning the observations of student learning at BLU refers to a variety of aspects all related to observing student work and learning in action; these aspects include the following: the BLU facility, the mobile furniture, the use of technology within instructional areas, and the schedule for student work. With regard to observations of student learning, specific to the dynamic setup of the BLU environment, Administrator 1 states the following:

> Probably, the fact that we [BLU program] don't have classrooms… Our space is very flexible; it allows for cross-curricular projects. You [the teachers] look at the different space design, and choose the area that best caters to the lesson that you have designed.

Teacher 2 responded to how the BLU environment is different than Dover Bledsoe - a similar

statement to Administrator 1.

> All of our furniture is mobile so it can be easily moved around. And each classroom has a
> different setup, as compared to a similar setup in all of the Dover Bledsoe classrooms.
> The classroom environment allows for multiple types of learning, and this type of
> differentiation is necessary for student learning.

Teacher 2 spoke to not only flexibility of the environment, but also addresses the dynamic

presentation of course materials within a given course within the following response:

> The way we present our coursework [makes the environment different], one day we could
> be doing it all online, and then next day it could be all on paper. I know in a traditional
> environment; it is more than likely on paper standing in front of the class. Here, you can
> be doing a variety of things presenting the coursework different than in a traditional
> school. For example, projects and field trips, interacting with technology modules - is one
> thing that makes us different. Our schedule makes us different in that we provide a more
> flexible environment.

Teacher 5 states:

> You wouldn't think the flexible seating options would matter, but giving young adults a
> choice in the environment in which they want to learn matters. Also, we aren't in a
> traditional environment you [teachers and students] can't lock yourself in a classroom,
> you are forced to collaborate, and the environment moves to the students and best suits
> their needs.

Teacher 7 commented on what learning with technology looks like at BLU, a process described

in the following:

> The students have access to multiple technologies, every day, not just once or twice a
> week. The students know that technology is where they need to go for their learning, and
> so multiple technologies or programs are probably being used at the same time in a single
> classroom, that is what makes us different.

Teacher 8 addressed how the schedule impacts the day-to-day learning within the BLU program
design.

One, the school doesn't have a hallway and so transition between learning periods occurs almost instantly, so even in times of transition students are learning. Also, because of the flexibility of the schedule, on a given day or even in a given time in a day, students will be in different areas, doing different things - they might even be in a different building.

Seven out of the twelve staff members that participated in the study all mentioned that the daily student learning looks different than the traditional environment. While different aspects were mentioned, there was a consensus from these six staff members that learning within the environment was noticeably distinct, especially when compared to the traditional learning environment. The second category within the responses to the second interview question was the understanding that BLU is considered an alternative learning environment due to the presence of technology. The responses of Teacher 1, 3, and 8 recognized the utilization of technology as a distinguishing factor within the BLU school environment, as recognized in the following statement by Teacher 1.

> I think that the 1:1 technology is used more effectively and efficiently, because we rely on our technology, where Dover Bledsoe uses it [technology] as a supplementary resource. The content groups that I meet with [at Dover Bledsoe] are not even using Canvas, they are still in Google Docs, I think we are far ahead when it comes to applications of technology in the classroom.

Teacher 3 mirrored this statement with the following expression:

> I think the major factor is that the online content is used and encouraged here, I think that it makes it much more college and career ready, because everything is on a computer-based platform. They had CANVAS, but none of the teachers in my department used it. But, nobody used this even for resources, so students could access what they missed.

The recognition of the technological difference between the BLU and the traditional learning environment, predominantly emblemized by the Dover-Bledsoe counterpart provided a recognizable category within the study. The last category within the responses to the determining factors that make BLU an alternative learning environment had to do with school size as a

distinguishable factor within the school. Administrators 2, 3, and 4, and Teachers 3 and 6 all

stated that the size played an important factor within their responses. Administrator 2 stated:

> The size. That [the size of BLU] inherently students should be able to form closer relationships with adults due to the size. Positive results with adult's mentors or educators bodes well for student's long term. The size meaning, I am one of 200 - the likelihood that my needs won't fall through the cracks. I am less likely to go unnoticed in a smaller environment.

The size having impact on the development of relationships within the student body or with

teachers is echoed by Administrator 4.

> The ability for a student to work in a smaller environment, not only relinquished some of the student anxiety, but also provides students with the opportunity to develop closer relationships with their teachers.

Teacher 3 expressed that "with the smaller environment we are able to do that - to invest time

into every one of our students."

The third question paralleled question two with more focus on, not necessarily the

environment, but the presentation of course content and the impact of blended learning and the

difference of this type of learning when compared to what occurs in the traditional environment.

The question was used to inquire as to the staff's understanding of blended learning and provide

explanations for how this type of learning is implemented and how this is different than the

traditional structure, as the staff understands, of the Dover Bledsoe course delivery. Based on the

pre-set and emergent codes the following categories have been formed to present the

understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the course design of the

BLU program: the personalization of coursework through blended learning and the teacher role

determination on a technological platform.

Staff members T.2, T.6, T.7, T.8, A.1, A.2, and A.3 all stated that the major distinction

between BLU and the traditional course design was the course personalization made possible

through the blended learning framework. Teacher 2 stated the following about the role of

teachers regarding the blended learning structure:

> Students are not sitting in a row like at DB, and with the course structure, students are able to take ownership of their own learning. Our teachers here are more facilitators and they place the resources online, and guide students through a curriculum that provide a greater depth of knowledge than the average educator.

Teacher 6 added to the role of teacher within a blended learning format through the following

statement:

> The platform of blended learning provides students not only with the ability to access multiple resources and technological applications, but also with the ease that technology provides, and a curriculum design that allows for the personalization of learning.

Teacher 8 continued to confirm the distinction that blended learning provides the BLU program

by adding -

> The complete shift from the traditional lecture, and even the 'we do', 'they do' method to the platform that technology provides offers students and teachers the flexibility to serve the student product of this era.

Administrator 2 stated the following with regard to the comparison of the BLU program directly

with the course structure within Dover-Bledsoe:

> I would suspect that there is a difference in that BLU is more personalized, as with blended, the pacing is different, but still mastering the same standards and primary tenets of the course. Whereas the courses at Dover Bledsoe are going to follow the same holistic path, everyone is on the same pace, as opposed to that more personal environment.

> While the majority of the staff agreed that the blended structure offered the largest

difference of the program when compared to the traditional organization of secondary systems,

there were couple of participants that suggested that the program's technological platform was

only effective due to the instructor's role as the facilitator and creator of the coursework. With

regard to this factor, Teacher 1 states the following:

> The ability of our program is such that we can have students who are 100% virtual, and still get almost the same quality of instruction. This is due to the quality of instructional

design provided by the classroom teacher. The amount of training our teachers have in online course design allows for this to happen. I do not think that you could have a virtual student produce, such as this, without having the setup that we have here at BLU with our online work.

Teacher 3 similarly stated that "technology is not supplemental, nor is it the primary mind behind what goes on inside of class. Technology is somewhere in between - that's what blended is." The understanding of teachers that the utilization of technology as a primary pathway for the education of the students at BLU is the main difference in the course structure between BLU and the traditional setup of secondary institutions, such as Dover Bledsoe.

The fourth question, with regard to program implementation, sought to understand the motives behind student choice within the selection of BLU as a secondary pathway instead of the traditional Dover Bledsoe option. The question was used to provide the staff understanding of student choice in the selection of this new program. Based on the pre-set and emergent codes the following categories have been formed to present the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the course design of the BLU program: the school size and the different learning environment.

Staff members T.3, T.5, T.6, T.7, A.2, and A.3 all stated that the major reason for the student decision to join the student population at BLU was due to the size of the school. Teacher 5 stated:

Most of the students that I talked to like to come here because it's a smaller environment. There aren't 2,500 kids roaming the hallways - there is only 200. There seems to be less niches here, the kids seem to more friendly. There is not the social hierarchy that is a norm in a traditional environment.

Teacher 3 added to the assertion about the benefits of a smaller overall school size, and the ramifications that this has on a student's decision making.

I think that probably the biggest reason for students coming to BLU is comparing the student population. Dover Bledsoe has over 2,000 students and we have a little over 200

students. I think that this is a big factor, I think that is a huge factor for kids with social anxiety, even though the class sizes might actually be the same. To come into a place and every face be familiar can be a lot less overwhelming. You can walk into a different pod at Dover Bledsoe and see ten faces that you didn't know existed. I think that another factor to why students come here is that word is getting out about how much teachers put into building relationships and generally caring about every student's success. With the smaller environment we are able to do that - to invest time into every one of our students. People are starting to talk about it, and that its drawing kids for that personal relationship. When I was at the main campus, sometimes you [an instructor] don't invest a huge amount of time in a relationship. I can't say that one teacher I saw had feedback about caring. And, I receive a lot of feedback from parents saying that the teachers here genuinely care.

Administrator 2 expressed a mirrored response about, not only the benefits of a smaller environment, but the presentation of a new environment within the same system.

> Relationships are a large part of this decision, and at a smaller school it is easier to do this [create relationships]. This is an opportunity for re-branding, a fresh start. School should always offer hope, and some students currently feel hopeless due to bad decisions they have made, and for students who really want to move forward. We probably under-stress those kids who are looking for hope.

Six out the twelve staff members that participated in the study all mentioned that the student choice to join the BLU program was based on the smaller population. While different aspects were mentioned, there was a consensus from these six staff members that students made a decision to attend BLU based on the school size. The other half of the staff participating in the study, the responses of Teacher 1, 2, 4, 8, and Administrator 1 and 4 understood the student decision, while some mentioned the size, was based on the different learning environment offered by the program's facility and course design. Teacher 1 stated the following as an initial reason for student choice:

> Honestly, I think that the students who come here think it [the BLU program] is easier. I really do believe that our student population believes that this is an easier path. I don't necessarily believe that our students choose DBE for the correct reasoning, but once they

are here they realize it was very different than their perception, and they enjoy it once they become part of our population.

Teacher 1 continued after prompting to specify as to what the students "enjoy" about the BLU program -

Overall, I think that the excitement of the facility... they [the students] see our school, and say, I want to go here. We sell it. The problem is that our perception in the community. I think that more 8th graders want to come here than are allowed to go here. You [the students] see the Makerspace, you see the big poster makers, you see the movable bright colored desk, you see all of this open seating, and think "Wow, I want to stay here."

Teacher 2 added,

There are a lot of different reasons, some students want a smaller environment, some students enjoy technology, some students like taking ownership of their learning. They want to be able to move at a pace that is right for them. Also, some students come here for medical reasons, whether it be anxiety of things like that, but for the most part, they are invested in those 21st century skills, or just wanting something different than a traditional school.

Teacher 4 also restated the sentiment that students enjoy the different type of learning provided by the BLU program design in the following statement:

I think there is a variety of reasons - one of the main reasons is that they [the students] need a break from the traditional "drill and kill" environment that schools have been founded upon for centuries. I think that DBE provides a nice alternative to this. The learning environment is going to be different based on physical building and platform of coursework. Also, the flexibility of the schedule for students with jobs, internships, and personal reason that would restrict their physical attendance.

The fifth question addressed the understandings of factors that attract instructors to the professional environment offered by the employ of the BLU program. The question was used as an inquisitive tactic to understand the implementation procedures that govern the instructional practices and strategies that frame the student work within the BLU program. Based on the pre-set and emergent codes the following categories have been determined to present the

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understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the staff's understanding

of school success: teacher autonomy and contributing to the evolutions of educational practices.

The codes that emerged from the interviews with staff members T.1, T.7, T.8, A.1, A.2,

and A.3 all mentioned the presence of teacher autonomy as related to the rationale for the

continued pursuit of a teaching career within the BLU program. Teacher 1 stated:

> I feel like reasons teachers stay is definitely our culture, we are given more freedoms to try and fail. We can get away with more innovative and creative lesson planning, whereas at main campus they [traditional teachers] might be turned down, because here failure is encouraged as risk-taking. Whereas at main campus they are a well-oiled machine, whereas here, we are still building our machine. We are given creative liberties.

Teacher 8 added that the "teachers are allowed to try a variety of strategies within the classroom.
Also, we are able to try new things, like class creations, and clubs."

Administrator 1 stated the following:

> Teachers should think that they are going to be able to risk take and be supported, so it's not going to be about you need to get this right or you're going to be in trouble. Just like we want a supportive environment for our students, we want a supportive environment for our students.

Administrator 2 presented a similar understanding -

> Autonomy. That doesn't often come in a larger department. Everyone goes into teaching to change lives. We fulfill something in ourselves through this vocation. Technology enhanced environments attract teachers. There is nothing about the facility or the culture that makes you not want to be there, and the collaboration across content enhances the chance for teachers to expand their skill-set.

While a majority of the staff members that participated in the study all mentioned that the teacher

decision to participate in the employment, apart from the security that full-time employment

affords, dealt with the autonomy afforded by the administrative staff. The other portion of the

staff held to the understanding that staff members hold positions within the BLU program based

on the perception of the staff members that the BLU program is the evolution of education.

Teacher 3 stated the following in suit with the understanding that the program was an attempt at shortcutting the future of the educational system, and with this effort there was a certain attractiveness to the challenge:

> I think you could teach here the entirety of a career and constantly be changing. We are always learning new things to use technology for, and I think this fact and challenge satisfies a human desire to need a challenge.

Teacher 4 added the following:

> This is the school of the future. This is why I came here. If you can be successful here, you will be able to teach anywhere. Not necessarily the fact that I need a job, but it presents a challenge, and teachers like a challenge. All schools will eventually bend toward this model, so get a head start in this age of technology to predict what the future of education looks like, or to be a part of that evolutionary shift.

Teacher 5 agreed by stating,

> I think it's the way things are going to be, not having textbooks, not having so many different classrooms, and it makes sense economically for the school system. I want to be on the forefront of this push. I think there will be certain aspects of this school that will be implemented in the future that are characteristic of our model and the work at BLU.

After categorizing the responses to each interview questions. The whole body of response categories was taken into consideration. From the comparison of these categories major and themes were developed to assist in the understanding of the implementation of the BLU program.

Section 02: Understandings of Student Academic Growth at BLU

The sixth question addressed the understandings of factors that determine the overall success of a student. The question was used as a startup for the second and final section of the interview process to gage the priorities of the school staff member with regard to a clearer understanding of what student success implies, especially as it governs, in part, their decision-making in the development of lesson plans and in the organization of the teacher protocol. Based

on the pre-set and emergent codes the following categories have emerged to present the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the staff's understanding of student success: student engagement in the classroom, the development of critical thinking, and the interval data provided by the state department.

Staff members A1, A2, A3, A4, T5, and T8 all mentioned that student success related to the level of student engagement while working on tasks or in a class area. Student engagement referred to both the observations of student focus on task and the data provided by the technology and evaluations that happen almost daily within a class. Administrator 1 expressed the following:

> When determining student success, especially in a classroom, you look at the overall level of engagement. What is the interaction between the teacher and the students and the teacher and the student?

Administrator 2 stated:

> The person talking or doing is the person learning. So I know that if I go into a classroom that is lecture heavy, I know the teacher knows their content, but I am not sure about the students. I love going into a classroom where students are working together, talking, and expressing what they are learning through questioning or peer interaction. I can tell more from observing a student than a teacher any day.

Teacher 5 echoed a similar sentiment:

> In my class specifically, its participation in the class, and discussion, and the general understanding of class operations and engagement in the content. If students are actively engaging in class operations, they will learn based on the level of engagement in my lessons.

For staff members T.3, T.4, T.6, T7, and T8 the factors that determined student success were based on the development of critical thinking skills. Teacher 3 stated the following:

> My subject is an interesting case, because when it comes down to it you can either do it or you don't know how to do it. Something that I like to use as an indicator, and a lot of times I don't place emphasis on getting the right answer. I place a lot of emphasis on how

did you try to work this problem. I try to approach everything from a problem-solving standpoint.

Teacher 4 similarly stated:

I think that number one has got to be critical thinking skills. If I can teach them to think for themselves regardless of their letter grade, I feel like they have a better shot to be successful in life. Being able to solve a problem on their own without being babied through it the entire process. If a student can do that, they will be successful in the real world.

Teacher 6 added:

Critical thinking skills in a classroom looks like questioning, students having conversations with each other about the content, and even questioning the teacher.

The last category within the responses to question six stated that student success is determined by the standardized testing scores or the benchmark assessments that measure student growth and proficiency year-to-year. Teacher 1 stated the following about student success.

EOC scores. My student's success is definitely determined by the E.O.Cs. My 9-10th [graders] definitely grew, even this year, and this shows the implementation of CANVAS.

Teacher 5 added that "our [BLU program] digital data provided by our online framework is a good predictor of student performance on the EOCs."

The seventh and ninth questions addressed the understandings of factors that assisted with student academic growth with regard to both school structure and course design. Due to the similarity of these questions, in many cases the BLU staff members also answered question nine during the question six response. Based on the preset and emergent codes the following categories have been formed to present the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the staff understanding of factors that facilitate student learning with regard to the school structure and course design: the personalization of learning, the availability of the instruction, and the relationship that the students have with their teachers.

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Staff members A1, A3, T2, T4, and T7 all mentioned that student academic success was related to the personalization that the BLU program afforded the student with regard to course curriculum and Administrator 1 expressed the following:

> Everything from the scheduling we provide for students, to the flexibility with the classroom structure and seating, and the methods and choice that we provide our students to demonstrate mastery.

Teacher 2 added the following comment about the nature of personalization as it impacts the student academic success:

> I think our flexibility helps a lot. When I think of traditional classrooms, I think of teachers having a textbook and a pacing guide, and just sticking straight to that, and without flexibility, I feel like we can hold back with some students that need our intervention, but also have enrichment activities for students who already grasp the standard. With the blended learning and the CANVAS, we are able to do that with mastery paths, and being able to publish things ahead of time that are advanced. And to have that extra time with students who need that help. Our complete reliance on technology makes this possible throughout.

Teacher 4 added a similar expression as to the impact of the personalized content and school organization:

> I think that the opportunity to present the content in different formats ultimately helps the students retain more information. Studies show that content presented in multiple ways impacts multiple learners, and you have different learners in the same class. Helping students with multiple intelligence should meet every student in the class at some point for learning. Blended learning holds the potential for the ability to personalize the content. It's not a one-size fits all approach. The individualization of the lesson plan is possible with the blended learning platform.

Staff members T.1, T.3, T.5, T.8, and A4 also mentioned aspects of the personalized design of the BLU program, but added specifically that the access to materials was the primary agent of student academic success with regard to the availability of the teachers and also the content made possible through the blended platform. Teacher 1 stated:

> The all-in everybody is doing blended learning here. Where at the Dover Bledsoe main campus, you may have a few teachers, but not every teacher, where every single teacher

is using CANVAS, every teacher is blended you have to do it [at BLU] if you are here. It's not an option, and once the students get more comfortable with blended they start to buy in and find that the process is more suitable, but the consistency of every teacher using it is valuable.

Teacher 3 added to the accessibility of the course content by stating:

The access to the material. I am still trying to figure out what blended learning is for my course. My course teachers seem to be the most traditional - how do I take my content area blended. Things that assist in student growth - I think that blended learning helps me to approach my subject form a critical thinking standpoint. I think the blended learning makes the educational platform more intuitive to how the real-world works. The curriculum focuses more on solving the problem and blended lets you access the problem solving more rather than procedural fluency. I think having access to technology, having the technology for a reference is also beneficial for student learning. If you are sick, you don't have to wait a week to have all of the material given, you can access it when you feel up to it.

Teacher 5 continued to echo these thoughts:

I think that a positive for our class, a history course, is that my students have more access to the material when compared to the traditional campus. I am sure that there are some teachers at main campus online for students to access. But, because the students aren't forced to go online, they are less likely to even access these limited material.

Teacher 6 added that "students have greater access to the teachers; this is due to size and also the transparency, not only of the content, but the actual facility."
Teacher 8 stated:

Not only do the students have access to the materials, but as a special education teacher, I have access to all of my students courses - courses that I do not teach, and this is immensely valuable for me in supporting students in other courses.

Staff members A.1 and A.4 also added through the discourse of these two interview

questions that their understanding of student success within the BLU program was due to the

school culture, and the relationships that students have with their teachers. Administrator 1

added:

Student success starts and ends with the teachers. A teacher can add to their content knowledge, but the ability to relate and motivate students is much more difficult to craft, and a student will work for a teacher they trust.

Administrator 4 also stated:

The relationships that the teachers have with the students extend beyond these walls and the coursework. This extra push adds to the school culture and also to the student's academic efforts.

The eighth and tenth questions addressed the understandings of factors that inhibited student academic growth with regard to both school structure and course design. Due to the similarity of these questions, in many cases the BLU staff members also answered question ten during the question eight response. Based on the preset and emergent codes the following categories have been formed to present the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the staff's understanding of factors that facilitate student learning with regard to the school structure and course design: facility distractions and the appropriate blended ratio.

Staff members A1, A4, T2, T4, T6, and T7 all mentioned that the physical layout of the facility provides distractions that impact the student learning aversely. With regard to the distractions that come with the physical layout of the facility, Administrator 4 stated:

The openness of the facility, while there are benefits, is a distraction. A student's focus can be completely sidetracked by a distraction, an argument, a loud lesson in another area.

Teacher 2 echoed a similar statement:

We are not for everyone, we are not a good fit for everybody, so some students that need stricter structure might not be as successful here. If students get distracted, and we don't have enclosed classrooms - they need [for students] to be able to stay focused is an obstacle here.

Teacher 4 also mentioned:

> The open environment, other teachers, and noise, just overall noise. I think that is one of the only factors, are students going to be able to block out other things that are going on in their periphery to be as successful as possible?

The distractions, as understood by staff members T.1, T.4, and T5 are not solely limited to physical facility. The technological course platforms also hosted a variety of distractions as stated by Teacher 1 stated:

> Sometimes it's easier to have paper, pencil, and a textbook. Whereas sometimes it is more complicated to organize the technology for a lesson that doesn't necessarily call for technology, but since you are forced to use it, such as vocabulary or something that needs something else. But, I try to have everything online, because we don't have any storage or easy access to paper. I feel like the lack of paper and pencil for certain things is a hindrance. Sometimes technology can complicate a simple lesson.

Teacher 5 agreed that sometimes the presence of technology can complicate a lesson, especially when attempting to shift student focus out of the technology and back to direct instruction, as stated:

> Not having a textbook can be a problem, a physical source can be valuable, but it is difficult to utilize elements of the traditional classroom, especially with the availability of technology, and our students love technology, sometimes to a point that is distracting.

Staff members A2, A3, T3, and T8 responded by stating that the greatest factor that can inhibit a student's learning is the improper ratio when incorporating the blended model into your course design. Administrator 2 stated:

> Blended learning is not always just check the boxes and get through your modules, and if your students are only interacting with a computer, they are missing out on vital parts of their education. If you have blended learning in balance, then there is very little that inhibits student learning. The only obstacle is how do we always plan for that and become overly reliant on the technology and downplaying the human experience of learning.

Teacher 3 added:

> How much do you use technology verses blended instruction? What is the correct ratio, because there is a tendency to put too much online, and then it becomes a problem when all the material is online, and students need a teacher? And there are gaps where students are passed along, and the student didn't benefit from their blended education, because it wasn't blended - it was just online. Verses if once you find that ratio then technology becomes this useful tool to create these better problem solvers. That is the obstacle with this environment is moving away from putting people away from this solely online platform. You need face-to-face instruction in high school. I could barely handle it in college. We need someone, a physical someone, to hold us accountable.

Conclusion

In Chapter 4, the staff's understandings of the BLU program implementation and student academic growth were presented. The members of the staff were interviewed in a random order, scheduled at the convenience of the participants within a two-week window. The structured interview questions targeted various aspects of the guiding research questions, and the process of open coding was used to categorize the data. The transcripts were examined, and the data were organized into codes, through the parsing of responses, patterns were identified and organized into categories. These categories were synthesized into themes which are presented in response to the research questions. The themes that emerged through the interview process were used to answer the research questions. In Chapter 5, answers to the research questions are reviewed, and the research provides a summary of the major findings and implications of the interview analysis. Moreover, the researcher compares the findings and provides recommendations of further research following this study.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to examine the main research question: What are the understandings of the KCS administration and the teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and the student academic growth? The following questions were used to examine the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and the student growth within the instructional model in a school of choice. The overarching question for this study is: What are the understandings of the KCS administration and the BLU teaching staff with respect to the implementation of the BLU program and student academic growth?

1. How do the participants describe student success at BLU?

2. What factors contribute to the student's choice to attend school at BLU?

3. What factors contribute to the teacher's choice to attend school at BLU?

4. What factors of the BLU program contribute to the BLU's student's success?

5. What factors facilitate student learning within BLU's blended learning model?

6. What factors obstruct student learning within BLU's blended learning model?

In order to answer these questions, the case study was conducted and the interviews were analyzed. Four members of the administrative staff were interviewed with direct workings within the BLU program. Eight members of the teaching staff were also interviewed who were currently employed within the BLU program, and who also had experience in a traditional secondary environment.

Summary of Findings

Research Question 1 Emergent Themes

There were two prominent themes that emerged from the interviews with the administrative and teaching staff. The first common theme relating to research question one was the level of student engagement in learning, the second common theme was the development of critical thinking skills.

Six out of the twelve staff members interviewed agreed that student success was related to the level of student engagement while working on tasks in a class area. Student engagement referred to both the observations of student focus on task and the data provided by the technology and evaluations that happen almost daily within a class. Administrator 1 summarized the groups' pivotal points by stating that **"**when determining student success, especially in a classroom, you look at the overall engagement. What is the interaction between the teacher and the students?" The responses grouped to form this theme suggested that student success determined by the level of intrigue, the focus, and the effort a student puts into the lesson design of the instructor.

The second common theme relating to research question one was that student success was based the development of critical thinking skills. Five of the twelve staff members understood that student success was based on the development of critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills referred to the development of aptitudes within the process of problem solving. Teacher 4 defined the classroom effort by stating, "I think that number one has got to be critical thinking skills. If I can teach them to think for themselves regardless of their letter grade, I feel like they have a better shot to be successful in life." The responses grouped to form this second

theme suggesting that student success was determined by the development of skills that assisted in problem solving; a development that focused more on the process than a final academic product, such as a letter grade or even a correct answer.

Research Question 2 Emergent Themes

There were two prominent themes that emerged from the interviews with the administrative and teaching staff. The first common theme relating to research question two was the school size, the second common theme was alternative learning environment provided by the facility's offerings.

Six out of the twelve staff members interviewed agreed that student choice when determining whether or not to enroll at BLU was related to the size of the school. The school's current population in the spring semester of 2017 was at approximately 240 students when compared to the over 2,000 attending the traditional secondary school - Dover Bledsoe. Teacher 3 provided a clear overview of this understanding by stating,

> I think that probably the biggest reason for students coming to BLU is comparing the student population. Dover Bledsoe has over 2,000 students and we have a little over 200 students. I think that this is a big factor, I think that is a huge factor for kids with social anxiety, even though the class sizes might actually be the same. To come into a place and every face be familiar can be a lot less overwhelming.

The responses grouped to form this first theme suggesting that the school size afforded by the BLU option is a primary factor in the student decision to enroll. While the student-teacher ratio is similar to that of Dover-Bledsoe, the smaller environment caters to greater opportunities for relationship building, and also offers relief to students anxious or overwhelmed by a larger more traditional secondary environment.

The second common theme relating to research question two was the attraction that the alternative learning environment provided by the BLU facility provides. The other half of the staff participating in the study agreed that the different learning environment offered by the program's facility provided a major motivation for student enrollment. Teacher 4 summarized the theme by stating,

> I think there is a variety of reasons - one of the main reasons is that they [the students] need a break from the traditional "drill and kill" environment that schools have been founded upon for centuries. I think that DBE provides a nice alternative to this. The learning environment is going to be different based on physical building and platform of coursework.

The responses grouped to form this second theme suggesting that the school's alternative learning environment afforded by the BLU option is a primary factor in the student decision to enroll. The layout of the facility, the technology, the course design, and the scheduling structure provide a specific allure for students choosing between BLU and Dover Bledsoe.

Research Question 3 Emergent Themes

There was one prominent theme that emerged from the interviews with the administrative and teaching staff. The first common theme relating to research question three was the autonomy provided to the teaching staff working at BLU offers teacher freedom and a challenge to uncover new methodology within the program's innovative structure.

Nine out of the twelve staff members interviewed agreed that teacher choice was related to teacher autonomy within the development of their coursework and the implementation of teaching strategies within the class areas. Teacher 5 summarized the collective theme by stating:

> I feel like reasons teachers stay is definitely our culture, we are given more freedoms to try and fail. We can get away with more innovative and creative lesson planning, whereas at main campus they [traditional teachers] might be turned down, because here failure is

encouraged as risk-taking. Whereas at main campus they are a well-oiled machine, whereas here, we are still building our machine. We are given creative liberties.

The responses grouped to form this theme suggest that teacher choice to continue the instruction offered at BLU was determined by the freedom offered by the administration to experiment within the innovative framework of the program. Teacher 3 summarized that the autonomy offered a challenge within the work, and added, "I think you could teach here the entirety of a career and constantly be changing. We are always learning new things to use technology for, and I think this fact and challenge satisfies a human desire to need a challenge."

Research Question 4 Emergent Themes

There were two prominent themes that emerged from the interviews with the administrative and teaching staff with regard to factors of the BLU program that facilitate student academic growth. The first common theme relating to research question four was the relationship that the students have with their teachers, the second common theme determined related to research question four was the presence of technology.

Ten out of the twelve staff members interviewed agreed that student academic growth with regard to the BLU program structure was due to the relationships that are formed with teacher. Due to the school size and the structural layout, teacher availability and the small school population allows for a closer relationship for students with the school staff members. Teacher 3 provides a complete summary of the groups responses in by stating,

I think that another factor to why students come here is that word is getting out about how much teachers put into building relationships and generally caring about every student's success. With the smaller environment we are able to do that - to invest time into every one of our students. People are starting to talk about it, and that its drawing kids for that personal relationship.

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The responses grouped to form this theme suggest that teacher a factor that determines student academic success is the relationships that students can form with the teaching staff due to the program's structure.

The second common theme relating to research question four was utilization and access regarding technology within the BLU program. Seven out of the twelve staff members interviewed agreed that the utilization of technology afforded by the program design was related to the student academic growth with the B-L Upward. Teacher 1 summarized an aspect of the second theme by stating,

> The all-in everybody is doing blended learning here. Where at the Dover Bledsoe main campus, you may have a few teachers, but not every teacher, where every single teacher is using CANVAS, every teacher is blended you have to do it [at BLU] if you are here. It's not an option, and once the students get more comfortable with blended they start to buy in and find that the process is more suitable, but the consistency of every teacher using it is valuable.

Teacher 3 also added a summary to another aspect of the second theme regarding the utilization of technology that adds to student academic growth by expressing the following:

> I think having access to technology, having the technology for a reference is also beneficial for student learning. If you are sick, you don't have to wait a week to have all of the material given, you can access it when you feel up to it.

The responses grouped to form this second theme suggesting that the school's utilization of technology facilitated student academic growth. The availability of technology integrated within the program and it seems a BLU expectation that technology is a primary mechanism within the school structure.

Research Question 5 Emergent Themes

The was one prominent themes that emerged from the interviews with the administrative and teaching staff with regard to factors of blended learning that facilitate student academic

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growth. The primary theme relating to research question five was the personalization offered

through the blended learning platform.

Nine out of the twelve staff members interviewed agreed that student academic growth

with regard to the blended learning platform was due to the personalization of academic content

partnered with course design. The personalization made possible through the technological

platform within BLU is the primary contributor to student academic success. Teacher 4 provides

a pivotal summary of the primary theme with regard to research question 5.

> I think that the opportunity to present the content in different formats ultimately helps the
> students retain more information. Studies show that content presented in multiple ways
> impacts multiple learners, and you have different learners in the same class. Helping
> students with multiple intelligence should meet every student in the class at some point
> for learning. Blended learning holds the potential for the ability to personalize the
> content. It's not a one-size fits all approach. The individualization of the lesson plan is
> possible with the blended learning platform.

The responses grouped to form this theme suggest that the personalization of the academic

content is the primary contributor to student success within the blended learning platform.

Research Question 6 Emergent Themes

There were two prominent themes that emerged from the interviews with the

administrative and teaching staff with regard to factors of blended learning that inhibit student

academic growth. The first theme related to research question six was the distractions provided

by the facility catered to house the blended learning platform. The second theme related to the

factors that inhibit the student academic growth was the misappropriation of the ratio necessary

for authentic blended learning.

Six out of the twelve staff members all mentioned that the physical layout of the facility

provides distractions that impact the student learning aversely. The openness of the facility

while providing opportunities for collaboration, also creates distractions that impact the students'

academic success, as summarized a variety of participant responses. Administrator 4 stated that

"the openness of the facility, while there are benefits, is a distraction. A student's focus can be

completely sidetracked by a distraction, an argument, a loud lesson in another area." The lack of

closed classrooms, the transparency of class areas, and the overall size of the facility provides a

variety of distractions that create off-task behavior and obstacles to student focus.

The second common theme relating to research question six was that the mismanagement

of the amount of technology versus the amount of direct classroom instruction, essentially a

faulty ratio of blended learning, can inhibit student learning. Four out of the twelve staff

members all mentioned that the mismanagement of this balance can inhibit student academic

growth. Administrator 2 provides an essential statement that capture the groups representation of

this theme by stating,

> Blended learning is not always just check the boxes and get through your modules, and if
> your students are only interacting with a computer, they are missing out on vital parts of
> their education. If you have blended learning in balance, then there is very little that
> inhibits student learning. The only obstacle is how do we always plan for that and
> become overly reliant on the technology and downplaying the human experience of
> learning.

The responses grouped to form this second theme suggesting a fault in the design of the blended

learning platform has the potential to undercut a student's learning if the balance between

technology and traditional instruction is misapplied.

Conclusions

This study focused on determining the understandings of the BLU school staff with

regard to the program design and the student academic growth. The most significant conclusion

is that there are distinct differences between the BLU school structure and the traditional

secondary school environment. With regard to student academic growth the program's major facilitation of this important program marker is present in the personalization of the course content made possible through the blended learning platform. Administrators and teaching staff agreed on these two major qualities of the BLU program.

The major differences that distinguish the BLU program as an alternative learning environment when observing the major and minor themes that emerged from the study are the BLU facility, the relational environment, the utilization of technology and the physical observations of student learning. Administrators and the teaching staff maintained that the differences of the program rested on these four components of the school structure. The open floor plan of the BLU facility provides seamless opportunities, according to Teacher 5, for the "collaboration and the manipulation of class areas" to create new learning environments. The size and transparency of the facility not only adds to the academic climate, but provides a natural connectivity between student and teachers. This connection builds relationships that correlate with academic success, as students have a consistent interaction with a familiar staff and student body, according to Teacher 3, that is "made possible by the school size." The technology initiative within the school extends past the simple substitution of hard materials to eMaterials, as students are introduced to applications and software that, according to Teacher 2, "deepens the level of learning." The physical observation of student learning appears different as teachers move out of the traditional role, and students, according to Teacher 8, operate technologies that "host a majority of the curriculum." The understandings of the staff members to the importance of the physical facility to the structure, the recruitment, and the implementation of blended learning relate to prior research conducted targeting the positive impacts of this educational design.

The major takeaway from the study in regard to understanding the BLU program's impact on the student academic growth is that the blended learning structure can personalize the learning. The personalization possible through the blended learning attracts teachers to the program, according to Teacher 4, "this is the school of the future. This is why I came here. / The individualization of the lesson plan is possible with the blended learning platform." The technology offered within the blended design of BLU assists teachers in personalizing the learning for each student. While the educators within the program state similar expressions to that of the statement provided by Teacher 3 in the following: "I think you could teach here for the entirety of a career and constantly be changing." The constant iterations to the process are part of the teaching culture, and in part the need to constantly revise and change practices and even content is a primary component of successful personalized learning (Jacobs, 2017). The personalization of the coursework as the major quality that distinguishes BLU as an alternative learning environment when compared to the structure of traditional secondary environments is understood as an indicator of a student-driven curriculum – a characteristic of successful programs implementing a design thinking model for student inquiry.

The results revealed that there are there are qualities within the school structure that inhibit student academic growth. The physical distractions that are a part of the day-to-day student routine are evident in the physical layout of the school's design. This obstacle coupled with the determination of the correct ratio between the technology and the traditional classroom practices is a major point of discussion when attempting to revise the program's current practices for the successful implementation. Administrator 1 stated that "when expansion occurs we are looking at attempting to form, not necessarily traditional classroom, but a section of the school more conducive to independent study and to teacher or speaker seminars." Although these type

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of major modifications are years away, the school staff have, in part, agreed and identified two major hindrances to student learning within the program's implementation.

The study was able to provide a combination of contrasting understandings evident in the interview responses to form a complete understanding of the BLU program implementation and the factors that determine student academic growth. For instance, a relationship between the facility's attractiveness, agreed on by a majority of participants to be a motivator in student choice, and the relational aspects that also attract students and assist in the academic success, another point of agreement other participants, impacts the workings of one another.

The research was focused on the understandings of the administrative and teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and the student academic growth. The emergence of the major themes addressing the research questions provide a complete picture of the BLU program implementation and student academic growth.

Recommendations for Practice

This researcher determined that there are common characteristics in an understanding regarding the implementation of the BLU program and the student academic growth. The following recommendations for practice stem from this study:

1. The administrative staff while continuing to provide a culture of autonomy for the educators experimenting with the blended learning model, should also identify stricter procedures targeting solutions to the physical distractions of the facility. These solutions should be active and more immediate than the future expansion and creation of less-collaborative learning areas.

2. When considering the solution to the factors that inhibit student learning, remember that the collaborative space, while providing distractions, is also a primary reason for the

social and relational elements that assist in relationship building and collaborative learning within the class areas.

3. The administrative and teaching staff should maintain mindset that the work within BLU will remain a process as the product that the model is striving for is ever-changing due to the needs of the students.

4. The teaching staff should reflect on the balance between technological learning and the need for a portion of the traditional classroom in order to achieve an authentic blended learning environment for the complete education of the student.

Recommendations for Further Research

This research provides a small sampling of the programs experimenting with alternative learning environments, and the impact that the implementation of these programs on the student academic growth. Therefore, recommendations for further research include, but are not limited to:

1. Further qualitative study should consider the expansion of the scope of the research to include other regions attempting to implement alternative learning programs to better determine the procedures and student success within these learning environments.

2. A quantitative approach should be considered in the future comparing the student success data and teacher success data to the markers of the traditional school system with the intent of exploring the impact the alternative learning environments are having on both students and teachers.

3. The study would have benefited from inclusion within the interview process, as the understanding of the implementation and student success would have been expanded by the added student population. Students should be included.

4. A longitudinal follow-up should be conducted to follow up with students who completed the program and monitor the student success with regard to post-secondary success.

Additional research on the topic of understanding the implementation and the student success within alternative learning environments would increase the scope of knowledge available within this area of research.

Summary

The case study was conducted within a single school by means of interviewing the administrative and teaching staff of the B-L Upward program. The purpose of the study was to examine the main research question: what are the understandings of the KCS administration and the teaching staff with regard to the implementation of the BLU program and the student academic growth? The goal of the case study was to ascertain a better understanding of the BLU program through interviews with the teaching staff. The study fulfilled that purpose by identifying several characteristics of the BLU program implementation and the factors that determine student academic growth. These characteristics include: the design of the BLU facility, the relational focus of the school culture, the utilization of technology, the personalization of the learning through the blended platform, and the inhibitors present in the physical distraction of the BLU facility, and the threat to student success due to an imbalance of the blended learning design.

The findings recommend that the BLU program offers an alternative learning

environment capable of providing a quality secondary education through the proper utilization of

both the physical space and the personalization made possible through the blended learning

model. Furthermore, the research has identified threats to the student academic growth that could

be addressed to maximize the student learning within the BLU program implementation.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

Program Implementation at BLU

1. What do you consider to be a factor (s) that facilitates school success?

2. What factors makes BLU an Alternative Learning Environment? Is this different than the structure of Dover Bledsoe?

3. Does the Blended Model offered at BLU differ from the course structure at Dover Bledsoe?

4. Based on your understanding of the student population, why does a student choose to participate in the BLU rather than attend Dover Bledsoe?

5. Based on your understanding of the blended learning structure, why does a teacher choose to pursue a career within this type of school?

Student Success at BLU

6. What do you consider to be a factor that demonstrates student success? Are these factors inherent in the BLU program?

7. What factors of the BLU school organization facilitate student academic growth?

8. What factors of the BLU school organization inhibit a student's academic growth?

9. What factors in the Blended Learning Model facilitate student learning when compared to the traditional course delivery?

10. What factors in the Blended Learning Model inhibit student learning when compared to the traditional course delivery?

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