Georgia Southern University

Digital Commons@Georgia Southern

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate Studies, Jack N. Averitt College of

Fall 2016

Characteristics of Effective Alternative Schools in Georgia: Leaders' Perceptions

Janet L. Poole

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd

Part of the Education Commons

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS IN GEORGIA:

LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS

by

JANET POOLE

(Under the Direction of James E. Green)

ABSTRACT

Educational leaders and district decision makers are faced with the challenge of providing support for at-risk students who are failing in traditional schools and are in danger of not graduating. Alternative schools are considered options for learning for at-risk students. However, limited research is available describing the views and experiences of the administrators who lead them. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand leaders' perceptions of characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia, as well as challenges associated with leading them. Ten face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate what eight male and two female alternative school leaders in Georgia perceived to be characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia. The results from this qualitative study define characteristics of alternative schools that contribute to student success, explain challenges incurred by the leaders and the students in alternative schools, and describe the benefits of alternative schools. Conclusions and recommendations are included for consideration by educational leaders and decision makers who are planning new alternative schools in their districts or seek to improve practices in existing alternative schools.

INDEX WORDS: Alternative Schools, Alternative School Leaders, Characteristics of Alternative Schools

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS IN GEORGIA:

LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS

by

JANET POOLE

B.S., Armstrong Atlantic State University, 1998

M.Ed., Georgia Southern University, 2005

Ed.S., Georgia Southern University, 2008

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS IN GEORGIA:

LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS

by

JANET POOLE

Major Professor: James E. Green

Committee: Paul Brinson, Jr.

                           Cordelia Zinskie

Electronic Version Approved: December 2016

DEDICATION

When I began this endeavor three years ago, I had no idea how much my life would change from then until now. Through three life-changing events, the completion of this project became the light at the end of the tunnel. As I reflect on the journey, I easily visualize the people who kept me focused and kept me going. Therefore, I dedicate this dissertation to my son and daughter-in-law, Jason and Joannie, whose very existence got me through the storms; to Daddy, who told me how proud he was of me in every conversation we had, but sadly passed away before he could see me finish; to Mike, who has been my biggest supporter and encourager; and to my family, friends, and all of the new people in my life who have helped me turn heartache into celebrations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With sincere appreciation, I acknowledge the dedication, guidance, and encouragement I received from my supervising committee chair, Dr. James Green. I am beyond grateful for your willingness to serve, not only as my chair, but also as my guide through this endeavor. Your encouragement, positive outlook, and confidence in me kept me focused until the completion of this project. To my other two committee members, Dr. Paul Brinson, Jr. and Dr. Cordelia Zinskie, I am grateful for your helpful feedback and specific recommendations that provoked me to think beyond my original thoughts in this project. Your willingness to serve on my committee and to see me through to the end means so much to me.

To my cohort of doctoral students who went through this journey with me, I thank each of you for the ideas we bounced off of each other, the emails and texts filled with encouragement, and for the friendships we formed that will always be dear to me. I will forever remember our classes together and our once-a-month Saturday lunches. I wish you all happiness and success in your lives and in your professions.

I would like to thank my supervisors and colleagues in my workplace who provided encouragement and feedback through their experiences of obtaining their own doctoral degrees. I will forever be indebted for your words of wisdom and useful tips.

Lastly, to the alternative school leader participants in my study, I thank you for your willingness to participate and to share your experiences in alternative schools with me. Your dedication to the students you serve has left an impression on me that will not be forgotten. My hope is that this study will impact other educational leaders, as well as decision makers, who wish to support at-risk students in alternative school settings.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPENDICES

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Alternative forms of schooling continue to receive the attention of researchers and education policy makers, in part due to the persistent problem of high school dropouts (Barr, 1981; Caroleo, 2014; Edwards, 2013; Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011; Kronholz, 2012; Marsh, 2010; Raywid, 1983, 1993, 1994; Roberson, 2015; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Research shows that the traditional classroom is not working for disengaged students who are at risk of not graduating on time or completely dropping out (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Slaten, Irby, Tate, & Rivera, 2015). The Georgia Department of Education (2015a) reported that more than 20% of Georgia's students did not graduate from high school with their peers in 2015, and Stetser and Stillwell (2014) reported that more than one million U.S. students drop out every year. Numerous studies (e.g., Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Foley, Gallipoli & Green, 2014; Rahbari, Hajnaghizadeh, Damari, & Adhami, 2014) reported several factors that may contribute to a student's decision to drop out of school before graduating (e.g., academic difficulties, intellectual disabilities, behavior problems, a lack of engagement, peer influences, housing conditions, parent and community valuation of education, and unpleasant school experiences). However, close scrutiny of these factors have prompted school leaders to question whether the school itself is at risk of failing students. The school structure and lack of educational options may relate to a student's decision to drop out (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Smith & Thomson, 2014).

In an effort to increase graduation rates and improve educational experiences for all students, alternative schools have expanded throughout the nation as a means to educate students whose needs are not being met in traditional schools. Alternative schools, generally defined as

specialized educational schools, commonly operate outside of traditional schools. Raywid

(1983), an early researcher of alternative schools, described alternative schools as those which do

not charge students additional costs to attend, are open to all students who wish to voluntarily

enroll, and have administrative independence. More recently, however, alternative schools are

described as schools for students who are at risk of failing and dropping out of traditional schools

as a result of absenteeism, early parenthood, learning difficulties, and/or discipline problems

(Slaten et al., 2015; Zolkoski, Bullock, & Gable, 2015).

Alternative schools offer unique options for learning to students who do not function well

in the traditional brick-and-mortar school (Barr, Colston, & Parrett, 1977; Caroleo, 2014). An

understanding of the characteristics of effective alternative schools is needed for educational

leaders to implement and maintain such schools. Subsequently, by identifying these

characteristics and providing the same dynamics to students within districts who do not offer

them, student success and the high school graduation rate should increase. This qualitative study

employed semi-structured interviews of ten school leaders of Georgia alternative schools which

have demonstrated success with student academic achievement and graduation. The study will

explore these school leaders' perceptions of the characteristics of effective alternative schools.

Background

Dropping out of school is a critical challenge to one's livelihood, not only for the

individual, the school system, and the community, but also for society. Students who quit school

usually find employment in low-income jobs or depend on welfare or other government

programs, and are more likely to participate in criminal behaviors (Fan & Wolters, 2014).

Chapman, Laird, and KewalRamani (2010) indicated that the average income for individuals

between the ages of 18 and 67 who did not finish high school was approximately $23,000 in

2008. In contrast, persons between the same ages who did graduate with at least a high school diploma earned roughly $42,000. This translates into a loss of approximately $630,000 over the lifetime of a person who dropped out of school as compared to someone who did not drop out. In the work force, a higher percentage of adults who dropped out are unemployed when compared to adults who earned their high school diploma (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). High school dropouts also make up higher percentages of the nation's prison population (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2012). Comparing those who dropped out of high school to those who graduated, the average high school dropout is correlated with nearly $240,000 of costs to the nation's economy over his or her lifetime with lower tax subsidies, higher dependence on Medicaid, Medicare, and welfare, and higher levels of criminal actions (Bowers et al., 2012; Petrick, 2014). The Economic Opportunity Act (1964) stated that the nation can only attain its full economic and communal possibilities if *every* person has the chance to fully participate and add to the efforts of society. Without education, this cannot be accomplished.

In Georgia, the issue of providing the best education for all students has produced a considerable amount of new guidelines and procedures in the educational realm. During the past five years, educational improvement initiatives have increased as higher accountability measures are being required. The College and Career Ready Index (CCRPI), Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES), the new Georgia Milestones Assessments, and new graduation requirements are just a few of the new improvement plans and strategies that are being implemented in Georgia in order to promote high levels of student achievement and teacher effectiveness (Georgia Department of Education, 2015c; Georgia Department of Education, 2015d). Nevertheless, some students are not reaching academic success and are not completing high school. The Georgia Department of Education (2015a) provided evidence of this by presenting Georgia's

2015 public high school graduation rate of 78.8%. Although the graduation rate has increased since 2011—an 11.4% increase, 21.2% of students either dropped out or did not complete high school with their four-year cohort of students in 2015.

The traditional approach of teaching has worked well for many students over the past; however, today's system is failing to serve the needs of many other students (Sullivan & Downey, 2015). In an effort to reduce the dropout rate and promote student academic success, a number of educators and officials have argued that alternative, nontraditional options should be offered for students who are at risk of failing school. Supporters contend that educational opportunities for students to be enrolled in nontraditional settings are crucial in order to meet the needs of all students (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Marsh, 2010; Pharo, 2012). Hence, there is a need for research to identify the characteristics that contribute to the success of alternative schools, and ultimately, the elements that promote student success.

Effective Alternative Schools and Student Success

Flower et al. (2011) defined *effective alternative schools* as those that implement practices that are (1) appropriate for meeting the needs of students, (2) feasible for using in a school setting, and (3) proficiently able to produce positive student results. Early researchers of alternative schools, Barr et al. (1977), as well as current researchers, Porowski, O'Conner, and Luo (2014), suggested that effective alternative schools increase the educational performance of students who are at risk of failing school so that they can successfully meet academic standards and graduate. Wilson, Stemp, and McGinty (2011) considered effective alternative schools as those that actively re-engage students in the learning process. As the definitions may vary to some degree, they all relate to increasing student success.

Student success in alternative schools, as defined in the literature, is linked to increased self-esteem, greater autonomy, a sense of belonging, positive feelings about school, better attendance, and improved behavior (Hemmer, Madsen, & Torres, 2013). The most common definition, however, is academic achievement (e.g., reaching educational goals) which leads to high school graduation (Caroleo, 2014; Pharo, 2012; Roberson, 2015; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Sullivan & Downey, 2015). Though the structures of alternative schools may differ from one school to another, the main purpose is to promote student success and academic achievement by meeting the needs of each and every student. In order to understand how alternative schools can provide the support needed—in relation to serving at-risk students, it is first necessary to recognize factors that directly relate to the dropout rate and the reasons students leave school before completion.

Why Do Students Drop Out?

The decision to drop out of school is not one that is made quickly, but rather a progression of events that occurs over a period of time. Since the early 1970s, many demographic elements have been linked to dropping out of school (Rumberger, 1987) including higher rates among males, African Americans, Hispanics, and families of low socioeconomic standing (Bowers et al., 2012; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). Other characteristics identified include lack of motivation, social seclusion from peers, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, school attendance, and behavioral problems (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Khalkhali, Sharifi, & Nikyar, 2013; Lemon & Watson, 2011; Petrick, 2014).

Smith and Thomson (2014) grouped dropout risk factors into three categories: (1) socio-economic elements; (2) personal elements; and, (3) school-related elements. *Socio-economic elements* commonly involve limited education of the parents, economic hardships, volatile home

lives, single-parent homes, and an absence of parental support. *Personal elements* generally include students working outside of school, legal issues, pregnancies, drug use, and language difficulties. *School-related elements* include attendance issues, being retained in one or more grade levels, lacking necessary credits for graduation, poor academics, learning debilities, and behavioral problems. Branson et al. (2013) agreed that social, personal, and academic elements all play a role in a student's decision to drop out. Both Branson et al. (2013) and Smith and Thomson's (2014) studies found, however, that elements related to school experiences often affect students' decisions to drop out of school to a measurably higher degree than socio-economic and personal elements. Poor academic performance, low test grades, changes in schedules, retentions, behavior problems, and a lack of engagement are some of the leading motives they cited for dropping out.

While many demographic variables for quitting school seem to be out of the control of school systems, school related factors can be adjusted. Khalkhali et al. (2013) noted that schools play a significant role in helping students by providing engaging and relevant opportunities which sustain all students' abilities. Doing so involves offering choices and providing flexibility that regards students' lives and their diverse needs. A basic reorganization of the educational program may be necessary to ensure that schools are providing a quality and supportive education that meets the needs of today's diverse students. As traditional classrooms and teaching methods may have contributed to the factors associated with school dropouts, it is clear to see that non-traditional, alternative options and methods are critical to ensure academic success for all students.

Alternative Education Schools and Programs

A student's decision to drop out of school can be influenced by a number of elements and is often the result of a long process of disengagement from school. As the reasons may vary, traditional brick and mortar schools are often unable to meet the needs of many students, leaving them with very few options. Educators may use the same standards to teach and assess students, but it must be understood that students are diverse; they are not "standard." All students come with their own distinct strengths and difficulties. A traditional learning environment may work well for many students, but there are many students who do not function well in such a setting. Alternative schools offer different opportunities for learning and acquiring an education to those students who do not function well in traditional classrooms (Caroleo, 2014; Smith & Thomson, 2014).

Since the beginning of education in America, alternatives have been provided to different sectors of people based on race, gender, and social status (Young, 1990). Those options framed the ever-changing makeup of the educational system. For decades, alternative methods of education have been offered to students who struggled in the traditional classroom setting, including students with disabilities or students with chronic discipline problems. Recognizing that not all students have the same ambitions and that not all students learn the same way, alternative schools have progressed to meet the needs of the students they serve (Slaten et al., 2015; Smith & Thomson, 2014). By providing smaller class sizes, more one-on-one teacher/student interactions, a higher level of flexibility in scheduling, multiple means to earn credits, differentiated instruction, and a supportive atmosphere, these non-traditional alternative schools are designed to meet those needs and promote student success for those who experience

problems in the regular school environment (Barr, 1981; Hemmer et al., 2013; Pharo, 2012;

Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2014; Slaten et al., 2015).

Because individual states or school systems define and establish the aspects of their

alternative schools, setups may differ in key characteristics, such as the student population,

facilities, support services, and organizational structure.

Types of Alternative Schools in the United States

According to the National Dropout Prevention Center (2015), there are many forms of

alternative schools being offered today which are designed for students who are at risk of

dropping out of high school. Each school has varying distinctive characteristics dependent upon

the students being served, the curriculum and its delivery methods, and the structural makeup.

Some of these schools include the following:

School-within-a-school. These schools are located within the home school, usually in

their own distinct wing, and are created for students with academic or behavior problems.

School without walls. These schools house students at various sites within the

community and are designed with flexible schedules to accommodate students needing special

educational and/or training programs.

Separate alternative learning center. These schools are located at different sites within

the community and are established for students with special circumstances such as the need for

parenting skills or job skills.

College-based alternative school. These schools are usually located at colleges or

universities and are intended to assist students who need additional high school credits. They are

staffed by public school teachers, but provide students with services that boost self-esteem and

individual growth.

Second-chance school. These schools are designed to give students who have been placed by the home school or legal court system one last chance to get on track before school expulsion or legal incarceration.

Types of Alternative Schools in Georgia

Some of the most common schools in Georgia offer opportunities to students who struggle in the traditional classroom setting. These schools are designed to help the student improve academically and socially and to help improve the schools' graduation rates. The Georgia Department of Education (2015b) outlined the following most common types of alternative, non-traditional schools offered in Georgia:

Alternative/non-traditional education programs and schools. Alternative, non-traditional schools work with the home school and report student achievement data back to the home school. The classroom(s) may be housed within the school, at the same locational site, or away at a different site. These alternative schools include such programs as credit recovery, attendance recovery, behavioral improvement, early college, evening school, and open campus. Alternative schools in Georgia were established to help improve high school graduation rates by referring students who are at risk of dropping out of school due to lack of credits, non-attendance, disruptive behavior, or educational failure. The courses may be offered as online courses, blended learning classes, or with direct instruction. Alternative education schools operate much in the same manner as alternative programs, except that the alternative school serves as the home school for the students enrolled.

Community-based alternative education/non-traditional schools. Community-based alternative schools offer opportunities for students to be involved in educational learning experiences which are applicable to their work interests. The curriculum is incorporated with

work-based learning through partnerships with businesses, the government, the community, and schools. One well-known example of community-based alternative schools is Performance Learning Centers (PLCs), also known as Communities in Schools. Offering on-line courses, face-to-face instruction, or blended learning approaches, PLCs offer alternatives to at-risk students by helping coordinate services such as housing, child-care, medical, and job plans (Kronholz, 2012).

Credit recovery programs. Credit recovery programs allow students to retake courses in which they did not previously earn credits.

Attendance recovery programs. Attendance recovery programs are designed to give students a chance to make up any absences by attending classes outside of the normal school day, such as on Saturday. The instructional time and the curriculum is equivalent to the time the student missed during the regular school day.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Alternative Schools

Alternative schools offer other opportunities to learn through more individualized methods to students who are not performing well in the traditional classroom. For at-risk students who struggle, alternative schools can provide a different environment that allows them to succeed. Research has shown, however, that there are arguments about the advantages and disadvantages of alternative education that must be considered.

Caroleo (2014) noted that advantages of alternative schools and programs include a flexible curriculum, smaller class size, and a more relaxing environment. Alternative education is typified by its tailored curriculum that can be modified to meet the needs of the students. The class size is usually smaller than that of the traditional school, which allows for students to receive more one-on-one instructional time with the teacher. It also gives the teacher more time

to focus on corrective behaviors that may usually be ignored or amplified in a larger class setting. Research also revealed that the atmosphere and learning environment of alternative schools is non-threatening and supportive of the students, improves responsibility in academics and behavior, is able to be flexible and work around students' social issues, and creates a sense of safety that many at-risk students had not experienced before (Caroleo, 2014; Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012; Hemmer et al., 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Morrissette, 2011; Slaten et al., 2015; Zolkoski et al., 2015). On the other hand, some researchers argue that alternative schools lack student population diversity, affecting how the student may socialize in the future (Caroleo, 2014). Some researchers also contend that because alternative schools are typically located off-campus from the mainstreamed schools, students will feel segregated from their peers in the general population. Researchers argue that alienation is a major issue for at-risk students (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Researchers in favor of alternative education argue that the type of learning that takes place in these alternative settings better fits the needs of the students. The flexibility, the individualized curriculum, and the instructional strategies employed focus on the students and their needs (Wilson et al., 2011). Other researchers who do not favor alternative settings argue that the quality of education in these schools is not comparable to the education being provided in the regular school setting. They maintain that the emphasis on academics is not as high as it should be, and that higher academic gaps exist in graduates from non-traditional schools (Bryson, 2010; Caroleo, 2014; Wilson et al., 2011).

As disputes have arisen about the quality of education in alternative schools, some education officials are pushing for an aligned curriculum between the alternative schools and home schools (Caroleo, 2014; Wilson et al., 2011). However, according to Caroleo, others

contend that because it is the at-risk student population that attends alternative schools, the learning styles, the curriculum, and the instructional methods must continue to be flexible in order to meet the students' needs. They also insist that the different, separated, and uniqueness that alternative schools offer is what gives the schools their value. They maintain their perspective that not all students learn the same way (Caroleo, 2014; Wilson et al., 2011). Since alternative schools cross over outside of the traditional classroom methods, students are allowed to find a learning environment in which they can be successful, providing them with the equity and excellence in which the American education system was built upon (Sagor, 1999; Wilson et al., 2011).

Statement of the Problem

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2015) noted that the high school graduation rate in the United States is estimated to average around 81%. While the graduation rate has improved over the last decade, the nation still has a dropout problem; many states are graduating less than 70% of their high school students. Over 20% of Georgia's high school students did not graduate with their peers in 2015 (Georgia Department of Education, 2015a). When considering the individual, social, and economic costs, the dropout crisis has become an escalating concern to educational leaders, government officials, and business managers (Bowers et al., 2012; Petrick, 2014). The need for effective dropout interventions and non-traditional schools for at-risk students is high for many school districts.

In order for district leaders to develop effective alternative schools, there is a need to first identify the characteristics of effective alternative schools and to understand those characteristics that are necessary for success. Edwards (2013) explained four qualities and theories educational leaders should consider when designing alternative schools: (1) identify characteristics of

successful alternative schools; (2) consider the leadership strategies that will enable a completely

different structure for the alternative school design; (3) utilize the state accreditation standards to

support the new school; and (4) evaluate and assess the school for effectiveness during the

development and implementation, and throughout the entire process and delivery. The first

topic—identifying the characteristics which support effective alternative schools—needs to be

studied thoroughly by school leaders when first considering developing non-traditional optional

schools for at-risk students within their districts.

Purpose of the Study

In an effort to reduce the dropout rate and promote student success, a number of

educators and officials are exploring the concept of offering alternative, nontraditional options

for students who are at risk of failing school. The purpose of this study was to identify what

leaders of alternative schools perceive to be the characteristics of effective alternative schools,

along with challenges encountered by both the leaders and the students. The study established a

framework of common characteristics of various alternative schools in Georgia. A specific focus

was on the characteristics of accessibility, enrollment criteria, staffing, curriculum, relationships,

and student support systems within the schools. An additional purpose for this study was for the

proposal of effective instructional strategies and practices for existing alternative schools.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this research is to describe characteristics of effective alternative schools

in Georgia and to establish a framework that would be beneficial to educators who are

considering the possibility of designing such schools in their own systems. Leaders from various

alternative schools in Georgia have provided information that could be of importance to

educators who are seeking to offer alternative options to help keep students in school. The

administrators have a unique knowledge of what takes place in these schools and what has worked and what has not worked. Educational leaders may be better informed of the components needed for the successful implementation of alternative schools in their own districts. For educational leaders who already have existing alternative schools within their systems, the information may provide new innovative strategies and approaches for school improvement. Directors and leaders may use the findings from this research study to formerly assess their own alternative schools through the presentation of effective characteristics of other schools in order to improve their present practices.   Furthermore, educational leaders within and outside of Georgia may find this research to be useful when considering the design and development of non-traditional alternative schools. Leaders may be better able to identify and utilize a wide-range of instructional strategies and program approaches that will meet the needs of students who are at risk of dropping out of high school, or for students who simply do not function well in the traditional classroom setting.

A clear understanding of the common characteristics that contribute to the success of alternative schools may help educational leaders, course creators, and instructors begin, maintain, and improve alternative schools for students. The results of the study may also provide educational leaders and program directors with the information necessary to address concerns relating to the operation, funding, and support of such schools. Likewise, the information gathered in the study may help develop an awareness of all stakeholders of the available options and approaches that could be implemented within school systems to assist at-risk students, support student academic success, and improve the high school graduation rate.

Research Questions

The intent of this research was to explore leaders' perceptions of the characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia. Thus, the following over-arching research question guided the investigation: What do leaders of alternative schools in Georgia perceive to be characteristics of effective alternative schools? The following sub-questions were used to answer the overarching question.

1. How do alternative school leaders define student success?

2. What are leaders' perceptions of the characteristics of alternative schools that contribute to their students' success?

3. What are leaders' perceptions of the challenges they experience in leading alternative schools?

4. What are leaders' perceptions of the challenges students experience in alternative schools?

5. What are the leaders' perceptions of the benefits of alternative education for at-risk students?

Research Design

A qualitative research design was used in this study to answer the research questions. Qualitative research is a form of investigation that evaluates information presented through verbal communication and detailed interviewing. It also provides a method for collecting information in a realistic, trustworthy, and structured way (Berkwits & Inui, 1998). One form of qualitative research is a basic interpretive approach (Merriam, 2002). A basic interpretive qualitative approach involves learning how individuals experience their world and understanding the meaning it has for them. Interviewing provides this aspect of research. A basic interpretive

approach was employed in this qualitative research study as data were compared and analyzed in order to find common characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia. Semi-structured interviews of the educational leaders of these alternative schools provided a means to answer the research questions. Field notes, reflective notes, and a review of relevant school documents (i.e., student handbooks, mission and vision statements, school improvement plans, and school websites) helped to produce a description of the alternative school leaders and their schools.

Data collected from ten alternative schools in Georgia were used for this research study. After approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Georgia Southern University and letters of informed consent were obtained from the participating school leaders, in-depth interviews were conducted. Interview results were analyzed in order to identify and explore the characteristics of successful alternative schools.

Definition of Terms

Several terms are used throughout this report that have special meaning in connection to the topic of alternative education. Accordingly, the following definitions of terms are provided in order to establish a common understanding of their meaning in the context of this investigation.

Accountability: In reference to the national educational system, accountability refers to the obligation of the school , or school system, to accept responsibility for its actions.

Alternative educational schools/programs: Alternative educational schools and programs offer non-traditional options for students who may struggle in the traditional school setting. These students may need more innovatively-designed approaches and settings for learning (Georgia Department of Education, 2015b).

At-risk students: Students who are considered to be *at risk* are those who are apt to not complete

high school in four years or are likely to drop out of school due to grades, attendance,

behavior problems, alcohol or drug problems, family issues, or other social issues

(Bowers et al., 2012).

Brick and mortar classroom/school: Schools or classrooms housed at a physical site where

pupils attend in person on a daily basis during the school term.

Credit recovery: Credit recovery is a type of alternative program designed to allow students a

chance to retake courses in which they did not earn the necessary credits needed for

graduation (Georgia Department of Education, 2015b).

Effective alternative schools: Alternative schools designed to meet the needs of students and

increase student academic success (Porowski et al., 2014; Wilson et al.,

2011).

Flexible schedules: Flexible schedules provide flexibility in students' schedules, as opposed to

the traditional school's predetermined schedule.

Graduation rate: The graduation rate is the percentage of a school's students who complete

high school on time in four years (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014).

High school dropout: A high school dropout is a student who quits school without earning a

high school diploma (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986).

Innovative alternatives: Innovative alternatives are inventive approaches and strategies designed

to meet the needs of students. Examples include smaller learning environments, flexible

schedules, multiple ways to earn credits, differentiated instruction, and personalized

learning.

Non-traditional education: Non-traditional schools or programs are those that have different

classroom settings and curriculum than traditional schools and are designed to meet

the needs of at-risk students.

Student success: Academic achievement (reaching educational goals) which leads to high school

graduation (Caroleo, 2014; Pharo, 2012; Roberson, 2015; Smith & Thomson, 2014;

Sullivan & Downey, 2015).

Traditional education: Traditional schools are established environments designed to provide an

all-inclusive education to the general public. The student make-up is usually based more

on their area of residence than on their educational needs.

Limitations

The nature of qualitative research limits conclusions to a particular sample. Thus,

findings from this investigation cannot be generalized to other alternative schools in Georgia.

Readers may, however, choose to transfer findings to other school settings based upon the

descriptions provided for the participants.

Delimitations

Delimitations with this study included using alternative schools in which were

recommended by the Georgia Association for Alternative Education (GAAE), as well as

recommendations from other alternative school leaders using the snowball technique. The

researcher contacted GAAE for recommendations of recognized successful alternative schools in

Georgia. Also, only participants and data from alternative schools in Georgia were included in

the study. This method was selected in order to better understand effective characteristics in this

region of the United States.

Assumptions

This study examined the perceptions of alternative school leaders. An assumption was

that the participants would be open and honest with their responses. An additional assumption

was that the executive officers of the Georgia Association for Alternative Education (GAAE) were knowledgeable of which Georgia alternative schools were, in fact, successful, thus providing the researcher with sources of information relevant for the purposes of the study.

Chapter Summary

Although the graduation rate continues to improve in the United States, and in Georgia as well, too many students are still not graduating on time with their four-year cohort peers, or are not graduating at all. As dropping out of school has been correlated to lower earned wages, higher dependence on welfare or Medicaid, and increased criminal behaviors for those who have dropped out, educational leaders and officials are seeking ways to keep students in school. In order to prevent adverse effects on students, improve educational experiences for all students, and increase the graduation rate, educational leaders must provide and support different means for educating students. Alternative education schools offer options for learning to students who do not function well in traditional, brick and mortar classroom settings.

The need for inventive alternatives to education has never been more critical for students who are failing and for schools that are not meeting the graduation rate accountability measures. As educational leaders begin to examine the possibility of implementing and maintaining such alternative options for students, it is important to recognize and understand characteristics of effective alternative schools. This research study was intended to provide a clear understanding of the characteristics that support student success in various alternative schools in Georgia to school leaders and course designers. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand alternative school leaders' perceptions of the characteristics of effective alternative schools that contribute to student success.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Alternative high schools continue to increase in number as educational leaders seek ways to decrease the number of students leaving school before graduation (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Alternative schools take on many forms, from virtual on-line programs to "schools-within-schools" to schools housed on their own campuses (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2015); however, the variations can be grouped by the students they serve. Students may choose to attend a school which offers a differentiated learning curriculum, they may be placed in a school because of behavioral or academic problems, or they may be mandated due to rule or legal violations (Caroleo, 2014; Raywid, 1994). Regardless of the student populations, the various schools share the recognition that alternative education offers different modes of teaching and learning than those found in traditional school settings in order to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students who may be at risk of dropping out of school (Bryson, 2010; Slaten et al., 2015; Zolkoski et al., 2015).

In pursuit of providing the best education for all students, educational leaders and policy makers are realizing that a one size education does not fit all (Bryson, 2010). Many students are not reaching academic success and are not completing high school. The Georgia Department of Education (2015a) provided evidence of this by presenting Georgia's 2015 public high school graduation rate of 78.8%. Although the graduation rate has increased by 11.4% since 2011, 21.2% of students either dropped out or did not complete high school with their four-year cohort of peers in 2015. In an effort to promote high school retention and increase academic success for those students who are at risk of dropping out, the concept of alternative education continues to

emerge as a reform strategy for keeping students in school. A number of educators and officials argue that alternative, nontraditional options should be offered to students who are at risk of dropping out. Supporters contend that providing opportunities to students to enroll in alternative, nontraditional educational schools is crucial in order to meet the needs of all students (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Marsh, 2010; Pharo, 2012; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

This review of literature was conducted for the purpose of focusing on the characteristics of non-traditional alternative schools for at-risk, underserved students. In order to understand the purpose and need for alternative schools in relation to serving at-risk students, it is necessary to recognize factors that directly relate to the dropout rate and the reasons students leave school before completion. This literature review has been organized to support the research in framing the study by concentrating on these six areas: a historical review of alternative schools; characteristics of alternative schools; at-risk students in alternative schools; factors related to the dropout rate; advantages and disadvantages of alternative schools; and characteristics of effective alternative schools.

Search Strategies

Electronic searches were performed in Galileo Scholar and Zach S. Henderson Library, with final searches completed by August 2016. The main search strategy used words and combinations of key words relating to alternative schools. Key words and/or phrases used were: alternative education; alternative school; non-traditional education; characteristics of alternative schools and programs; effective alternative schools and programs; alternative school history; alternative programs; student perceptions of alternative schools; types of alternative schools; options for students; traditional schools; marginalized students; underserved students; at-risk

students; dropout rate; average income of dropout; high school completion; graduation requirements; dropout factors; dropout risks; at-risk teens; and graduation rate.

Alternative Education: A Historical Review

Although various forms of alternative education can be traced back to the mid-1700s with optional opportunities based on gender, race, and social status (Morissette, 2011), alternative schools began to surface during the late 1950s and early 1960s as a way to offer equal opportunities to all students to earn an effective education (Barr, 1981; Caroleo, 2014; Raywid, 1994; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, Justin, & Datar, 2016). During this period, American citizens became dissatisfied with the bureaucratic machine-like system of public education. Opposing educators, parents, and students disputed the traditional educational design and assessment of students and established a form of self-governing "free" schools. Since no state funding was obtained, these schools were able to break free from state mandates and operate with different educational organizations, methods, and ways of thinking in their schools in order to create child-centered systems for meeting the needs of students. The standard curriculum was replaced with customized courses, textbooks were chosen to meet the adapted curricula, grading systems were obliterated, and rules on student behavior were more lenient in many of these newly formed alternative schools (Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009; Hemmer et al., 2013). Although this "free" method of alternative education began to decline in the 1970s, it had an ongoing influence on alternative approaches to education: it generated the idea of more modern alternative approaches to education where few existed before.

Throughout the 1980s, alternative schools began to decline in popularity as the U.S. Department of Education released the 1983 Nation At-Risk report (Barr, 1981; Cable et al., 2009). The report articulated an academic regression in student achievement and demanded an

intensified focus on core content subject areas (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). Through this period, many of the operating alternative schools began to redesign their programs more toward students who were disorderly or those who were failing in their mainstreamed schools. However, within the next few decades, alternative options once again became increasingly widespread in order to meet the needs of students who could not learn effectively in traditional school settings, and to offer opportunities for students to learn within their own means or approaches and at their own pace (Caroleo, 2014; Morissette, 2011). Presently, alternative schools may be functioning somewhat differently than their originators, but they function because of the same belief: one model of learning does not fit all (Bryson; 2010; Caroleo, 2014; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Wilson et al., 2011).

Current Alternative Schools

Due to the lack of a standard definition for alternative schools across the nation, the student populations, school settings, and school organizations may differ from school to school. In an effort to characterize alternative education, Porowski et al. (2014) reviewed data from state and national websites and found the following information:

- Alternative education schools serve mostly students with behavior problems (35 states).

- Of the reporting states, 18 states reported having alternative education settings in separate locations; 12 states reported having schools within their regular school buildings.

- In general, the most common services offered in alternative schools include standard academic instruction (21 states), counseling (14 states), social skills (13 states), work-related skills (12 states), and behavioral assistance (11 states).

Table 1 outlines target populations in alternative education schools by the number of states; Table 2 displays settings for alternative schools by the number of states; and Table 3 shows the various services offered in alternative schools by the number of states.

Table 1

Target Populations in Alternative Schools

Population	Number of States
Students with behavior problems	35
Students with academic problems	18
At-risk students	18
Students unable to benefit from the traditional school	13
Students who have dropped out	11
Students with attendance problems	9

Source: Porowski, O'Connor, and Luo (2014)

Table 2

Settings for Alternative Schools

Setting	Number of States
Separate site or facility	18
Within regular school	12
Accredited or affiliated with accredited school	6
Other	9

Source: Porowski, O'Connor, and Luo (2014)

Table 3

Services Offered in Alternative Schools

Services	Number of States
Normal academic instruction	21
Counseling	14
Social skills	13
Work-related assistance	12
Behavioral services	11
Other	12

Source: Porowski, O'Connor, and Luo (2014)

Georgia's Alternative Education Schools

According to the Georgia Department of Education (2015b), Georgia's alternative education schools began as state grant-funded programs in 1994. At that time, the schools were named Crossroads Alternative Education Programs. When the A+ Education Reform Act of 2000 passed, Crossroads funding was removed and individual school systems were forced to provide the programs through their Quality Basic Education (QBE) funds for students in grades six through 12. In 2010, the Georgia State Board of Education implemented the name Alternative/Non-traditional Education Program (AEP) (Georgia Department of Education, 2015b).

According to Porowski et al. (2014), most of Georgia's AEPs today serve primarily students with behavioral problems and students who do not function well in the traditional classroom. Alternative school settings in Georgia vary from separate sites or facilities to

schools-within-schools to accredited or affiliated with accredited schools. Georgia districts offer services such as regular academic instruction, counseling, social skill building, and behavioral supports.

Characteristics of Alternative Schools

While a standard definition for alternative education or alternative schools has yet to emerge, a review of professional literature reveals that *alternative education* generally represents education that offers non-traditional options for students who struggle in the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom setting. Alternative schools are described as public schools that: (1) address the needs of students who struggle in traditional schools; (2) provide nontraditional educational opportunities for students; (3) can serve as a supplement to the home school; and/or (4) fall outside of the classification of traditional, special education, or vocational education programs (Cable et al., 2009; Georgia Department of Education, 2015b; Porowski et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2011). Although the structure and organization of the schools may differ somewhat, alternative schools are purposely designed to meet the needs of the students they serve. The schools serve a diverse group of students who often differ socially, academically, and emotionally from their peers in the mainstreamed schools (Bryson, 2010; Cable et al., 2009; Caroleo, 2014; McGregor & Mills; 2012).

Caroleo (2014) and Hemmer et al. (2013) described alternative schools as: (1) being small in class sizes; (2) providing more one-on-one interactions and relationships between teachers, students, and peers; (3) producing a positive supportive "community-like" learning environment; (4) allowing opportunities for student success applicable toward the students' future goals and aspirations; (5) providing flexible academic structures; and (6) encouraging student involvement in decision making. Although there are numerous types of alternative

schools, Raywid (1994) coined and categorized the many types into the following three distinct categories according to the program's main focus and the student population:

- Type 1: *Popular Innovation Schools* are designed to be more challenging. They are often referred to as "schools of choice" and look like magnet schools, as they emphasize innovate curriculums in order to attract students.

- Type II: *Last Chance Alternative Schools* are intended to serve persistently disruptive students who have been given an alternative to suspension or expulsion. These are not schools of choice, as they emphasize behavior adjustments and remediation.

- Type III: *Remedial alternative schools* are aimed at meeting the needs of students with academic, social, or emotional issues. They emphasize a positive, caring environment as they focus on problem-solving methods for helping at-risk students.

To meet the needs of students who are at risk of dropping out of high school, Caroleo (2014) has advocated for a fourth type of alternative school in which would combine schools of choice, innovative ideas, and remediation to form a "second chance" school which could provide another opportunity for students who do not experience success within the traditional school setting.

Characteristics of Georgia's Alternative Schools

Alternative schools in Georgia provide students who are not successful in the traditional classroom setting a different opportunity for learning. As these students may need imaginative and well-designed instructional alternatives, Georgia's alternative, non-traditional schools provide these routes to students. The Georgia Department of Education (2015b) understands that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for meeting the needs of all students in making them

ready for college and/or careers. With this recognition, Georgia's Alternative Education

Programs (AEPs) and schools reflect the following characteristics:

- a focus on student accountability and self-discipline

- a curriculum aligned to the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI)

- the creation, implementation, and monitoring of individualized graduation plans

- instructional plans designed for student needs

- a plan for effective transitions into the AEP and back into the traditional home school (if applicable)

- opportunities for students to progress toward graduation at their own pace

- guidance, counseling, social, and psychological services for students

- district support for successful programs

Georgia's AEPs are intended to allow local boards of education flexibility in their

programs and in their program types. Systems may provide: (1) attendance recovery programs;

(2) choice alternative programs; (3) community-based programs; (4) credit recovery programs;

and/or (5) any other alternative education school that meets *State Board of Education Rule 160-*

4-8-.12 Alternative/Non-traditional Education School requirements (Georgia Department of

Education, 2015b). Also, local systems may provide alternative schools that perform as single-

system programs or multi-system programs and can be situated on the traditional home school

campus or in an alternative site.

At-Risk Students in Alternative Schools

Traditionally, alternative schools have served a wide variety of students with different

interests, experiences, and capabilities, and those ranging from gifted and talented to those with

chronic behavioral problems. Presently, however, attention has grown for providing alternatives

for students who are at risk failing school and/or dropping out, those who have discipline or mental health issues, those who may be parenting adolescents, or students with academic or behavioral issues (Caroleo, 2014; Slaten et al., 2015). Whatever the circumstance may be, alternative schools are set up to meet the needs of the students they serve—the students who do not function well in the traditional classroom setting. This literature review includes research on varying populations of at-risk students who are expected to benefit from alternative education.

At-Risk Students

"At-risk" is a term used to identify students who fail academically and/or carry a higher probability of dropping out of high school. Predictors usually include disengagement, absenteeism, low test scores, course failures, grade retention, chronic discipline issues, and negative school experiences (Cable et al., 2009; Caroleo, 2014; Gut & McLaughlin, 2012; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Slaten et al., 2015; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Students who are beginning to fall behind in school or have consistently struggled need to be identified before being allowed to fall between the cracks and overlooked, and before they contemplate quitting school.

Dropouts

Alternative schools have been created across the United States in an effort to decrease the number of at-risk students dropping out of high school before completion and to serve these students through nontraditional methods and settings (Caroleo, 2014; Hemmer et al., 2013). The ramifications of dropping out of high school can be long term and create emotional problems and financial suffering for the student, the student's family, and society. As dropping out of school is associated with potential imprisonment (Bowers et al., 2012), there is also a connection to adult hardships and poverty, as well. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (as cited in Chapman

et al., 2010), the average income in 2009 for individuals between the ages of 18 and 67 who did

not complete high school was approximately $23,000. By comparison, within the same year, the

average income of persons between the ages of 18 and 67 who completed high school, including

those who earned a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, was approximately

$42,000. Over a lifetime, this converts into a loss of roughly $630,000 in income for an

individual who did not complete high school compared to a person with a high school diploma or

GED certificate (Chapman et al., 2010). Additionally, as teen parents with two or more children

already carry a high risk of being on welfare, those who drop out of high school are even more

likely to be unemployed.

Developing and operating effective alternative schools can make a significant difference

for students and society as a whole. The literature suggests, students who attended alternative

schools were more likely to complete high school and graduate (Kronholz, 2012; Morrissette,

2011; Pharo, 2012), and many of the students accredited various attributes associated with the

alternative school for their high school retention, their graduation, and for their success (Cable et

al., 2009; Gut & McLaughlin, 2012; Kronholz, 2012; Morrissette, 2011; Pharo, 2012; Tyler &

Lofstrom, 2009).

<div align="center">**Factors Related to the Dropout Rate**</div>

Even with the dropout rate declining over the past few years (Georgia Department of

Education, 2015a), it is important to understand the issues related to school dropouts. In

considering much of the current literature concerning dropout prevention, many factors have

been suggested to help explain why students decide to drop out of school. Within the

literature, the research has shown the strongest likelihood for explaining why a student decides to

drop out usually includes a combination of factors that can be grouped into three main

constructs: socioeconomic factors, personal factors, and school-related factors (Branson et al., 2013; Foley et al., 2014; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Rahbari et al., 2014; Smith & Thomson, 2014).

Socioeconomic Factors

One of the most leading determinants for dropping out of high school is family background and socio-economic status (Bradley & Ranzulli, 2011). As many studies have found, being a member of a family with low-socioeconomic status has been related to a range of influences that affect a student's decision to drop out, including but not limited to poor academic scores, lack of engagement in school and extracurricular activities, and problems socializing (Bradley & Ranzulli, 2011). Socioeconomic factors include unsteady parental employment, poverty, having a mother or father who dropped out of school, parents' lack of value of education, an absence of family support, and broken homes (McGregor & Mills, 2012; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Low socioeconomic status can influence a student to leave school due to poor academics, but it can also influence a student to leave school due to having to work and help provide an income.

In a review of previous research and interview data from alternative school students, parents, and teachers, McGregor and Mills (2012) identified a relationship between dropping out of school and low socioeconomic status. Their research found that opportunity inequalities such as family practices, support, and resources contribute to a student's view of school. Smith and Thomson's (2014) review of research on student risk factors also linked socioeconomic factors to dropping out. They concluded that parents with negative school experiences, those who place little value on education, and those who dropped out themselves do not, usually, promote education with their children. Branson et al. (2013) interviewed a group of dropouts in order to

acquire their perceptions of their life experiences. The participants were asked to explain

contributors to their dropping out. The responses were categorized, and socioeconomic factors

such as dysfunctional families, poverty, lack of parental support, and low value of education

from parents were identified. Rahbari et al. (2014) collected data from research literature, focus

group discussions, and interviews with students, parents, and teachers and identified

socioeconomic factors such as financial difficulties, living conditions, and peer groups outside of

school to be leading influences for students dropping out.

Personal Factors

Although the socioeconomic problem is highly significant, it is not all-encompassing.

Specific individual issues can make attending school challenging for some students and can

substantially impact a student's decision to drop out. Personal factors include peer influences,

health problems, drug abuse, mental issues, personality conflicts and/or disorders, emotional

instability, ethnicity, age, developmental disabilities, personal traumas, and outside

responsibilities such a teen parenthood, caring for family members, and a need to work (Branson,

et al., 2013; Rahbari et al., 2014; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Additional research by Branson et

al. (2013) included student dropouts describing some type of personal life event in which

contributed to their decision to drop out. Several participants related stories of association with

gang involvement, substance abuse, crime, and mental health problems. Smith and Thomson

(2014) determined through their research that factors such as students having to work too many

hours throughout the week, legal issues, teen pregnancy, and drug abuse make school a low

priority and attendance challenging for students. Further research presented data which

suggested that the most significant personal factors leading to quitting school include mental

issues, malnutrition, attention deficit disorder, and personal problems associated with adolescence (Rahbari et al., 2014).

School-Related Factors

Students who do not succeed in school often feel alienated and excluded, and commonly just stop attending. Factors associated with school experiences can affect a student's decision to drop out to a greater extent than socioeconomic and personal factors. School-related factors include poor grades, low test scores, grade-level retention, abnormal attendance patterns, lack of class participation, disengagement, problems in reading and math, lack of motivation, student/teacher relationships, an absence of school connections, behavioral issues, the school environment, learning programs, effective teachers, and the school rules and policies (McGregor & Mills, 2012; Smith & Thomson, 2014) McGregor and Mills (2012) indicated that school procedures can often add distress to students who are already disengaged from learning. They also noted that the teacher-student relationships and pedagogical procedures play a large part in student engagement and interest. Branson et al. (2013) determined through research and interviews that academic performance and academic behaviors were the most consistent indicators of leaving school early.

Other Factors

In their investigation using data from student, parent, and school administrator survey responses, Foley et al. (2014) used a factor-based paradigm and found that a student's cognitive abilities, noncognitive abilities, and parental value of education play significant roles in a student's decision to drop out of school. Their empirical study, using a dropout calculation formula combined with a calculated formula of unobserved influences, resulted in four main conclusions:

1. The competencies a student acquires by age 15 have a significant effect on whether or not he or she will drop out.

2. Being a child of a high school dropout, parental valuation plays a considerable role in a student's decision to drop out.

3. Abilities identified in the study's noncognitive measures have a substantial effect on a student's dropout decision, but not as sizeable as the first two factors.

4. Students who dropout are mainly low-ability students whose parents place little value on education.

In summary, while socioeconomic and personal factors may not be able to be corrected by schools and school officials, school-related factors such as the learning environment and programs, and the effectiveness of teachers – which have substantial influences on students – can be modified within the school systems (McGregor & Mills, 2012). Undoubtedly, whatever the impact on a student's decision to drop out may be, with the many risk factors and dropout predictors, schools must be aware, be able to identify the students early, and be prepared to offer alternative interventions in order to keep students in school.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Alternative Schools

Alternative education offers students who are not performing well in the traditional classroom different options for learning. The literature details risks, challenges, and benefits of alternative education that can be categorized under three main groups: learning environment, educational effectiveness, and student self-esteem/self-awareness.

Learning Environment

Alternative schools are most often distinguished by their small class size and community-like environment. This allows students to develop meaningful relationships with teachers and

other students. One advantage found in the literature was that the community-type environment presents a positive atmosphere for at-risk students who had often endured negative experiences in the regular classroom (Caroleo, 2014). The atmosphere and learning environment of alternative schools are non-threatening and supportive of the students, improves responsibility in academics and behavior, is able to be flexible and work around students' social issues, and creates a sense of safety that many at-risk students had not experienced before (Caroleo, 2014). McGregor and Mills (2012) determined through student interviews that the learning environment in alternative schools was much more comfortable than regular classroom settings. Students expressed that there was more flexibility in regards to attendance rules, assignment deadlines, and behavior. Students interviewed by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) from alternative schools also stated that teacher-student relationships and peer relationships were better for them in their alternative school setting than their mainstream setting, and that the atmosphere was more supportive. Students involved in the research noted that they liked the way teachers spoke to them. They admitted to feeling respected and cared for. Caroleo (2014) also noted that in large classrooms in the regular schools, teachers lack the time to form individual relationships that make students feel more cared for. It is the positive relationships that students gave as one of their main reasons for enjoying and attending alternative schools.

One disadvantage and challenge for alternative schools students is that because the schools are typically located off-campus from the mainstreamed schools, students feel segregated from their peers in the general population (Caroleo, 2014; McGregor & Mills, 2012). The disagreement in the research is that the separation of these students from their mainstreamed school peers hinders them from developing personal and caring relationships. Those who argue this point state that this will put at-risk students even further behind their mainstreamed peers

due to the absence of these relationships (Caroleo, 2014). However, when interviewed, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) and McGregor and Mills (2012) found that many students indicated that regardless of being separated from the home campus, they felt more involved and a part of their school environment in the alternative school setting.

Educational Effectiveness

Alternative schools offer optional programs to help at-risk students improve academically, socially, and emotionally. Smith and Thomson's (2014) study identified some characteristics in which promote student learning: adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of the students; individualized instruction and support; extracurricular opportunities; and enrichment activities. Some researchers argue that alternative schools better meet the needs of the students as a result of the flexibility, individualized instruction, and instructional strategies being used (McGregor & Mills, 2012). The uniqueness of alternative education is that the schools take different approaches to create an effective educational environment because they recognize that not all students learn the same way (Caroleo, 2014).

Other researchers who do not favor alternative schools argue that the quality of education in these schools is not comparable to the education being provided in the regular school setting (Caroleo, 2014). Some researchers maintain that the emphasis on academics is not as high as it should be, and that higher academic gaps exist in graduates from non-traditional schools (Bryson, 2010). Bryson noted that segregating students from mainstreamed schools can hinder them from the management, attention, and growth in which they are meant to experience by preventing them from receiving the resources and educational opportunities needed to help them develop.

Because some criticism has arisen about the quality of education in alternative schools (Caroleo, 2014), some education officials are pushing for an aligned curriculum between the alternative schools and home schools. However, others contend that because it is the at-risk student population that attends alternative schools, the learning styles, the curriculum, and the instructional methods must continue to be flexible in order to meet the students' needs (Caroleo, 2014). Since alternative schools cross over outside of the traditional classroom methods, students are allowed to find a learning environment in which they can be successful. This, in-turn, provides them the equity and excellence in which the American education system is supposed to be built upon (Sagor, 1999).

Student Self-Esteem and Self-Awareness

Some alternative schools seem to carry a negative label for housing students with behavioral, emotional, social, and/or academic problems. The stigma attached to them could deter students from wanting to attend, with the probability that they would begin to feel the same way and reduce their perceptions of the value of an education. According to Wilson et al. (2011), students enrolled in alternative schools are perceived as "second-class" students, whereas those in the regular schools are "first-class." Caroleo (2014) pointed out that this view could have such a strong impact on students that educators should become more attentive to the descriptions used when describing alternative school services.

As much as a negative influence seems to impact students' self-esteem and self-awareness, a positive influence does, as well. The literature showed a strong connection between alternative schools and improved self-esteem. It also displayed a positive effect on students' independence, self-sufficiency, academic performance, attitudes about education, attendance, self-control, and problem-coping skills (Caroleo, 2014; Smith & Thomson, 2014). A study

conducted by Morrissette (2011) of alternative school students revealed a strong relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement. The research found that as the teachers and staff created a community-like environment, that students took ownership and found a sense of identification that related them to the school. The students admitted that in the mainstream school, they felt like outsiders; but the community-like environment of the alternative school helped in their decision to stay in school.

There is little unanimity about alternative schools, with the literature debating on both the advantages and disadvantages. The research does, however, show that alternative education can be effective in improving academic success and the dropout rate for at-risk students (Caroleo, 2014; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Morrissette, 2011; Smith & Thomson, 2014). It is imperative for school leaders and officials to understand how students are able to succeed in alternative schools when they did not function well in traditional education classrooms. It is also important to look at the dissimilarities between the two and to identify the characteristics of effective alternative schools.

Qualities of Effective Alternative Schools

Evaluating the effectiveness of traditional mainstreamed schools involves factors relating to student achievement, graduation rates, attendance rates, and discipline issues. When measuring the effectiveness of alternative schools, however, different modes of evaluation should be used. In terms of alternative school effectiveness, Flower et al. (2011) define *effectiveness* as routines and procedures that are relevant, realistic, influential, and result in positive outcomes. These positive outcomes of student success include a decrease in disruptive behaviors, fewer high school dropouts, increased academic achievement, and improved self-respect and confidence (Hemmer et al., 2013; Zolkoski et al., 2015). So, how effective have

alternative schools been at providing these positive outcomes for at-risk students who do not

function well in mainstreamed schools? Raywid (1994) identified three groups of factors which

seem to contribute to alternative school effectiveness: 1) the schools create a community-like

environment; 2) they engage students in learning; and, 3) the structure of the school is developed

and managed in such a way to establish and support the first two factors. Since Raywid's study,

research has included these three groups of factors, but has identified many more *effective*

common characteristics of alternative education which can be grouped into the three areas of

personal/emotional, *school-related*, and *organizational* (Flower et al., 2011; Hemmer et al.,

2013; Riddle & Cleaver, 2012; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Zolkoski et al., 2015).

Personal/Emotional Characteristics

Personal characteristics include those features which make students feel as if they are a

part of the school. Extensive attention needs to be given to developing a culture of positive

connections among students, between students and teachers, and with the school itself.

According to Smith and Thomson (2014), effective alternative schools create a situation for

students that is relevant and important to them. The staff is dedicated and attentive to students'

needs, and provide support for students' personal and/or family concerns. Effective alternative

schools also incorporate approaches to resolving problems, managing conflicts, and setting

personal goals into their curriculum. Flower et al (2011) included personal traits associated with

successful alternative schools as those that provide instruction aimed at promoting social skills,

offer support services for serving the socio-emotional needs of students, and give incentives to

help increase students' personal accountability.

In order for alternative schools to be successful, students must want to be there. The

community-like environment of successful schools provides an atmosphere that students find

welcoming and safe. When at-risk students feel secure and accepted, when they feel as if they are a part of their school, they are more likely to succeed (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Morrissette (2011) found in his study with alternative school graduates that the personal development, improved self-esteem, and a sense of belonging that the participants felt in their alternative schools played a critical part in their decision to stay in school and graduate. McGregor and Mills' (2012) study also revealed that building a community-like environment was vital for the student participants' decisions to stay in school.

School-Related Characteristics

School-related characteristics include features relating to the curriculum, academics, rules, and procedures. Effective alternative schools provide differentiated classes, adjustments to courses, individualized instruction, and personal academic and behavioral support in order to meet the needs of students. Many successful schools provide work-based programs, service supports, and extracurricular opportunities. They also offer a flexible schedule that allows students to work at their own pace, choose which subject to work on at any particular time, and attend school around personal agendas (Smith & Thomson, 2014). High-quality instruction is also an educational characteristic of effective alternative schools. At-risk students often require individualized instructional interventions which allow them to be successful (Flower et al., 2011; McGregor & Mills, 2012), along with innovative, data-driven approaches that provide research-based instructional supports (Pharo, 2012).

Although school rules and processes are necessary to insure orderliness and safety, at-risk students may need more empathy from school staff and leaders. Lagana-Riordan et al., (2011) reported that students in their study described school rules and procedures in the mainstreamed school as being very stern and inflexible. They felt the rules in the alternative school were more

accommodating and flexible to each students' situation. The participants expressed that this flexibility contributed to their decision to stay in school and graduate.

Organizational Characteristics

Organizational characteristics include the structural make-up of the school. Successful alternative schools provide smaller class sizes and reduced teacher-to-student ratios. Flower et al. (2011) stated that lower student-teacher ratios and reduced class sizes correlate to increased student engagement, a feeling of being more connected to school, and higher levels of dedication to meeting academic goals. Highly structured classrooms, positive environments, opportunities to interact with school-based mentors, and a decreased focus on disciplinary rules and procedures are also qualities associated with effective organizational characteristics (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Morrissette's (2011) study discovered that the student participants felt that the structure of the alternative schools investigated provided a greater sense of independence, allowed them to willingly meet their objectives, and do what they needed to do to graduate.

Additional research by Wilson et al. (2011) identified some of the school/organization-related characteristics commonly associated with successful alternative schools as the following:

- options – voluntary participation by teachers, students, and parents;
- independence and management – horizontal hierarchy of power and decision-making, as opposed to vertical hierarchy;
- curriculum and learning – instruction relevant to students' lives and individual needs; and
- community-like environment – focus on school as a community.

Wilson et al. (2011) emphasized that this type of educational structure develops when there is honesty, compromise, investigation, and communication between the people who seek to meet the needs of the students served.

Alternative schools can be successful in producing positive outcomes for students and increasing the graduation rate of students at-risk of dropping out (Smith & Thomson, 2014). It is imperative to look at the practices and characteristics of effective alternative schools which are not found in the mainstreamed schools in order to determine the individual needs of students who do not succeed in the traditional education setting. Table 4 illustrates current common qualities of alternative schools which have been regarded as *effective,* according to the literature (Morrissette, 2011; Smith & Thomson, 2014).

Table 4

Qualities of Effective Current Alternative Schools

Personal/Emotional Qualities	School-Related Qualities	Organizational Qualities
Sense of belonging	Individualized and differentiated instruction	Reduced class size
Positive student-teacher relationships	High-quality instruction	Smaller teacher-to-student ratios
Community-like Environment	Working at one's own pace	Decreased focus on discipline rules
Support for personal and family issues	Choice of assignments	Decreased focus on Procedures
Problem-solving support and instruction	Flexible schedules	Positive Environments

Source: Morrissette, 2011; Smith & Thompson, 2014

Chapter Summary

Alternative education has evolved over the decades into schools that promise to provide at-risk students with a chance to improve academically and experience achievement. Those who support alternative schools recognize their potential to provide an attentive, supportive, optimistic environment for the success of at-risk students. Since their beginning, however, there is limited consensus about the schools, with very little research documenting their effectiveness. As time has progressed, with no specific description of alternative schools, explanation of their practices, or account of particular students who attend, it is difficult to create a research study that offers a conclusive answer (Caroleo, 2014; Flower et al., 2011).

The purpose of this review was to analyze the literature about alternative schools, their characteristics, and the advantages and disadvantages of them, to gain a better understanding of

student populations attending alternative schools, and to evaluate the common effective characteristics researchers have found in alternative schools. The references used for this review of literature included research of practice, outlines of schools, and expert opinions. In order for alternative schools to survive in the educational system, educators, policymakers, and researchers must address the issues of school attractiveness, student characteristics, and academic outcomes. More research is also needed to understand the characteristics of effective alternative schools.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia as perceived by ten leaders of such schools. Using a basic interpretive approach (Merriam, 2014), the investigation explored characteristics perceived as contributing to the success of alternative schools in Georgia which serve students who are at risk of dropping out of school, as well as their perceptions about the challenges associated with the schools.

Research Questions

This research study focused on the following overarching question: What do leaders of alternative schools in Georgia perceive to be characteristics of effective alternative schools? The following five sub-questions were used to answer the overarching question:

1. How do alternative school leaders define student success?

2. What are leaders' perceptions of the characteristics of alternative schools that contribute to their students' success?

3. What are leaders' perceptions of the challenges they experienced in leading alternative schools?

4. What are leaders' perceptions of the challenges students experience in alternative schools?

5. What are the leaders' perceptions of the benefits of alternative education for at-risk students?

Semi-structured interviews with leaders from ten different alternative schools in Georgia were conducted. Throughout the interviews the researcher developed a rapport with the participants in order to establish trust with them and encourage openness. The researcher explained the purpose of the study, explored the participants' ideas of student success, investigated perceived effective characteristics of the individual alternative schools, encouraged reflection about the challenges within the schools for them as leaders and as they see them for the students, and examined their perceptions of the benefits for students attending their alternative schools. Relevant school documents (e.g., student handbooks, mission and vision statements, school improvement plans, and school websites) were also reviewed to gain an understanding and knowledge of the composition and background of each school.

This chapter is comprised of the following information: (1) the introduction; (2) research questions; (3) research design and rationale; (4) the role of the researcher; (5) data sources; (6) data collection procedures; (7) data analysis methods; and, (8) a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

Since the research questions were intended to cause participants to reflect upon their experiences as leaders of alternative schools, a qualitative approach utilizing the basic interpretive method (Merriam, 2014) was chosen for the research design. The basic interpretive method was ideally suited to encouraging participants to discuss and reflect upon their experiences relative to the purpose of the investigation.

Qualitative Research

Merriam (2002) described qualitative research as an endeavor to comprehend and make sense of experiences and events from a participant's perspective. The approach involves understanding how meaning is created by the individual in relation to how he or she sees the

world. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) defined qualitative research as a method in which people make sense of behaviors and perceptions related to particular life experiences. Although there are various and diverse approaches for carrying out qualitative research, it often includes interviews, group discussions, and observations to gain a comprehensive understanding of specific behaviors. Berkwits and Inui (1998) described qualitative research as a form of investigation that evaluates information presented through verbal communication and behavior in the natural setting. It includes participation, observation, and detailed interviewing. It also provides a method for collecting information in a realistic, trustworthy, and structured way.

Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, and Ormston, (2013) identified some general qualities that characterize qualitative research. Qualitative research

- intends to interpret the participants' perceptions about their worlds, their experiences, and their histories;

- purposively selects participants based on relevant conditions;

- involves data collection approaches which are interactive between the researcher and the participants;

- provides comprehensive data and information;

- allows for analysis to produce detailed descriptions, identify patterns, and develop clarifications; and

- produces outcomes with detailed descriptions and interpretations of the participants' perceptions of the social setting or experience being studied.

In general, Ritchie et al. (2013) noted that qualitative research is used to answer research questions that entail descriptions and interpretations of participants' social phenomena and their settings. In order to fully understand the substance of the participants' perceptions of their

experiences as leaders of alternative schools, the researcher conducted individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews in each of the alternative school leaders' offices of the schools in which they work.

A basic interpretive qualitative study assesses how participants make meaning of specific situations. It uses the researcher as the instrument and employs inductive strategy—gathering data from interviews, observations, or document examination, and then finds patterns or common themes in the data to establish a theory that could support those patterns. The outcome results in a rich descriptive discussion or presentation that makes reference to the literature that helped structure the study (Merriam, 2002). Merriam explained that interpretive qualitative research is interested in identifying individuals' understandings of a particular situation at a particular point in time. Studying how these individuals experience and relate with their world and the significance it has for them is regarded as an interpretive qualitative method of research. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) supported this description by explaining interpretive research as inquiry that uses normal language and representation of how participants feel, what they know, and how they perceive a particular phenomenon. Given that the purpose of this study was to examine the interview responses from alternative school leaders about perceived characteristics of effective alternative schools and the challenges associated with alternative schools, and to find common patterns within those perceptions, a basic interpretive method was used. The objective of the study was to correctly depict the perceptions of the alternative school leaders and describe those perceptions in a comprehensive portrayal of their experiences.

Merriam (2002) stated that interviews, observations, and documents are the three most common resources for data in a qualitative research study. This research study involved semi-structured interviews of the alternative school leaders and a review of relevant school documents

(i.e., student handbooks, mission and vision statements, school improvement plans, and school websites) in order to better understand the composition of each school.

The researcher acquired information from each of the participants' experiences, reflections, and viewpoints through individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants a level of autonomy to give more detail to their thoughts as well as allowed the interviewer to ask questions in greater depth and resolve any apparent inconsistencies (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The data obtained from the interviews provided information for explaining meanings gathered from the participants' responses in a descriptive manner. The school documents allowed the researcher to gain background knowledge in order to better understand and describe the demographic and organizational make-up of the schools.

The Role of the Researcher

In this research investigation, the researcher sought to select and interview ten leaders of alternative schools in Georgia. The researcher is currently the curriculum director for the school system in which she is employed. The school district houses one alternative school for students in grades six through twelve who have had consistent behavioral problems. As the curriculum director, this researcher has working knowledge of the curriculum being used in the school. Although this is a disciplinary alternative school in which students do not have enrollment choice, this researcher has had students ask to remain in the school after they have served their disciplinary time. Some students have indicated their preference for the alternative school learning environment. Therefore, based on this knowledge, there was potential for preconceived notions and prejudices. Researcher bias is a conceivable threat to the validity and credibility of qualitative research. Research bias results from the researcher's selective observations and data

recording, and from allowing personal opinions to determine how the information is collected

and interpreted (Collier & Mahoney, 1996). Because of this researcher's connection to an

alternative school and knowledge of some students' desires to remain in the school, this

researcher gave her best attempt to not allow professional or personal viewpoints to interfere in

the study and attempted to decrease any bias and preconceptions.

Controlling Bias

Mays and Pope (1995) reported that basic practices for ensuring validity and reliability in

research includes employing organized and cognizant research strategies, data collection and

analysis, interpretation, and reporting. In trying to control and lessen any influences of bias in

this study, the researcher was mindful to thoroughly account for the method of data collection

and analysis, as well as to produce a credible and logical explanation of the interpretations of the

participants' perceptions and responses obtained during the interviews. Interview questions were

carefully formulated, appropriate for answering the research questions, and communicated to the

participants in a clear, specific, and unbiased manner. The researcher attempted to fully avoid

allowing any predetermined notions, personal opinions, and personal experiences to affect the

interview process or the interpretations of the participants' perceptions.

Trustworthiness

In a qualitative investigation the researcher is the "instrument" for data collection.

Simply claiming that the researcher is reliable is not enough for establishing trustworthiness of

the study. Instead, behaviors must be distinguished that show personal credibility and confirm

that the interpretations of the data are trustworthy (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Lincoln and

Guba (1985) identified four concepts, or standards, deemed important for establishing

trustworthiness in qualitative research:

1. *Credibility:* exhibiting sureness in the accuracy of the study's results;

2. *Dependability:* displaying consistency in the results;

3. *Confirmability:* showing that the results were formed from the participants' responses, not the researcher's preconceptions or personal interests;

4. *Transferability:* indicating that the results may also be relevant to other circumstances.

Savin-Baden and Major (2013) supported these four concepts and stated that to ensure and demonstrate trustworthiness, credibility, and authenticity in qualitative research, researchers must present reliable outcomes and descriptions of the study's framework, the participants' experiences, and methods for data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) communicated a set of practices that can be used to meet the standards in which they defined for establishing trustworthiness and to produce reliable outcomes:

- Researchers should spend adequate time in the field in order to develop rapport, understanding, and a true interpretation of the participant's perceptions (*prolonged engagement*);

- Researchers should share collected information and their interpretations of the data with the participants in order to check for accuracy (*member checks*);

- Researchers should use multiple data sources in order to understand a phenomena (*triangulation*). This includes using different points of view;

- Researchers should discuss their results with someone who has no investment in the study. This allows for a critical analysis to ensure the findings are grounded (*peer debriefing*).

Ritchie et al. (2013) supported Lincoln and Guba's guidance by stating that these concepts and practices are essential for establishing a sustainable, well-grounded, and trustworthy study. This researcher followed these guidelines to the best of her ability throughout the investigation by devoting sufficient time to interviewing participants in order to generate an understanding of their perceptions, comparing the participants' responses, and critically examining the final results.

Data Sources

Qualitative research involves understanding how people perceive experiences and what meaning they attach to those experiences. Basic interpretive research presumes that reality is socially created and there is no solitary, discernible reality. Rather, there are multiple truths, or perceptions, of a single event (Merriam, 2014). In order to acquire data and produce a vivid description of perceived characteristics of effective alternative schools and challenges faced by the leaders and the students of these schools, it was necessary to conduct a number of different interviews to gain multiple perspectives, or interpreted truths.

When identifying participants to interview for this study, it was important to choose those who would best answer the research questions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). However, because the population of those associated with alternative schools in Georgia was too large to include in the study, it was necessary to work with a smaller sample group of participants. Morse (1994) recommended at least six participants for phenomenological studies and at least 35 for grounded theory studies. Creswell (1998) recommended between five and twenty-five for phenomenological studies and at least twenty for grounded theory. To allow for the development of important themes and valuable interpretations, this researcher selected ten leaders from alternative education schools in Georgia as the sample size for this research study.

Sampling

Savin-Baden and Major (2013) reported that using good sampling methods help to ensure the production of a sound research study. Determining the type of sampling to be done depends upon the research questions and the best approach for answering the questions. Curtis, Gesler, Smith, and Washington (2000) described two types of sampling in qualitative research: theoretical sampling and purposeful sampling. Theoretical sampling is intended for producing a theory and is usually related to grounded theory research. Purposeful sampling is used to answer the research questions and involves intentionally choosing specific settings, participants, or activities for the study in order to obtain information. Merriam (2002) explained that "because qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which the most can be learned. This is called 'purposeful sampling'" (p. 12). For the purpose of this research study, purposeful sampling was employed, as the researcher sought to understand the meaning of alternative school leaders' perceptions of characteristics of effective alternative schools, as well as perceived challenges associated with the schools. Ten alternative school leaders in Georgia were selected to participate in this research study.

Participants and Sites

Savin-Baden and Major (2013) explained that selecting participants entails identifying those from whom data can be collected and who can best answer the research questions. Given that the inquiry was to determine alternative school leaders' perceptions of characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia, along with challenges associated with the schools, it was evident that the participants would be selected from various Georgia alternative schools. According to the Public School Review (2016), there are 79 public alternative/non-traditional

education programs (AEPs) in Georgia. Of the 79 schools, 33 are alternative high schools,

serving approximately 3,000 students. The program operations may vary from single-system

schools to multi-system schools, and may be located at the local regular school site or at a

separate location (Georgia Department of Education, 2015b).

The schools and programs in Georgia include the following:

- disciplinary programs;

- attendance recovery programs;

- choice alternative programs;

- community-based alternative programs; and

- credit recovery programs.

For the purpose of this study, leaders from alternative schools were first selected based

on recommendations from executive officers of the Georgia Association for Alternative

Education (GAAE). Three executive officers were asked to identify 20 alternative schools in

Georgia regarded as "successful" based on the list of effective qualities displayed in Table 4 of

Chapter 2. The lists of schools identified by the executive officers were cross-checked, and

alternative schools named by at least two of the officers were considered for the study. The

researcher then selected alternative schools and invited the leaders to participate in the study.

Six alternative school leaders agreed to participate. The researcher used the snowball technique

(Emerson, 2015) to locate additional contacts by asking the original school leaders to

recommend other alternative school leaders in which they felt met the criteria for selection. This

provided the researcher the remaining participants needed for this study.

The ten alternative school leaders who agreed to participate in this study included eight

male and two female leaders, with years of serving as leader in their current alternative schools

ranging from one to eight years. After interviewing the participants and reviewing various school documents (e.g., student handbooks, mission and vision statements, school improvement plans, and school websites), the researcher created participant and school profiles which included the following information: each participant's number of years serving as an administrator prior to serving in an alternative school, number of years as an alternative school leader, average number of students enrolled in their current alternative schools, grade levels served in their schools, and number of staff members employed in their schools. The researcher reported this information in a table format as well as a more descriptive account in a narrative format. Pseudonyms were used for the school leaders' names and for the schools in which they serve.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to pursuing participants for this study and collecting data, the researcher sought approval from the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the research. A letter of informed consent (see Appendix A) was developed and signed by each participant prior to the interviews taking place.

According to Merriam (2002), interviews can vary from being very structured—with explicit questions and the order in which they will be asked being predetermined, to completely unstructured—with a topic to discuss, but no questions or order determined ahead of time. Semi-structured interviews fall in between, with a combination of structured and less-structured questions. This study employed individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with ten alternative school leaders. The goal of this process was to understand how the participants made meaning of their experiences and to collect data in which reflected their interpretations. An interview protocol (see Appendix C) was created in order to guide the interview. Interview protocols are written directions of the process in which interviews will be followed. With semi-

structured interviews, the interviewer relies on the protocol for questions and topics; however, the interviewer may stray away from the guide as the opportunity becomes appropriate (Saven-Baden & Major, 2013). Although the researcher used an interview protocol during each of the ten interviews, the questions did not always follow the order on the guide and they became conversational and open-ended. The participants were also prompted to expand on their responses if the researcher felt additional information was needed. Merriam (2014) advised to use interview protocols as guides for discussions rather than instruments that dictate the conversations. The researcher audio-recorded the interviews and wrote field notes during the interviews. According to Savin-Baden and Major (2013), field notes help provide documentation of participant behaviors (if applicable), the date, time, and location of the interviews, and a description of the setting. The researcher used the field notes to supplement the interview transcripts and to write reflective notes after each interview. Member checking (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) was also used on a selective basis to ensure the accuracy of quotations for a few instances when the interview transcript was not clear. As information might have been disclosed during the interviews that could have compromised privacy, the researcher was mindful of the need to protect confidentiality at all times.

In addition to the leader interviews, a review of applicable school documents was conducted for school background information. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) explained that documents can provide information about the environment or composition of the school that help the interviewer understand the background of the setting in which the study takes place. Student handbooks, mission and vision statements, school improvement plans, and school websites aided the researcher in understanding the background and organization of the participating schools.

To ensure participant confidentiality and document security, none of the participants nor their schools were identified. Pseudonyms have been used for both the participants and their schools. Interviews were audio recorded, then transcribed by a professional transcription service that provided assurance of confidentiality. The transcripts are being stored at the researcher's residence in a locked storage cabinet. Only the researcher and the researcher's chair have access to the raw data (i.e., transcripts). Three years after the final dissertation is approved, the researcher will destroy the transcripts.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis involves a combination of any of the following stages: organizing information in order to describe it; editing information that is extraneous or irrelevant; coding with words or phrases that symbolize a part of the data; converting codes into themes; and developing visuals to help represent the information (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Strauss and Corbin (1990) explained that data analysis is a combination of both science and creativity. It is considered science because it involves sustaining accuracy and obstinacy. It is considered creative because it requires the researcher to be resourceful in assigning categories, in comparing information and finding patterns, and in extracting overarching themes from the data. Merriam (2002) reported that data analysis should coincide with data collection simultaneously, beginning with the initial interview, observation, and review of documents. Concurrent collection and analysis permits the researcher to make any necessary modifications and look for common comparable patterns along the way.

Following each interview, the field notes were organized and relevant information regarding the participants, the setting, and the overall tone was recorded. Subsequently, once the interview recordings were transcribed, raw data from the interview transcriptions were read

multiple times as the researcher began to gain an overall sense of the ideas and perceptions of the participants. The researcher then began the process of organizing and coding the data. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) explained that as the researcher begins to review the data, actions, approaches, behaviors, tones, relationships, and patterns will begin to be seen.

Two cycles of coding took place: initial coding and axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), with initial coding the researcher takes more time to conceptualize the data, possibly line by line, and generates numerous codes related to the information. Axial coding, or second-phase coding, then takes place as the researcher makes connections and creates categories from the initial codes. The categories should coincide and be responsive to the research questions. Following coding and categorizing, as described, this researcher then converted the categories into themes. A theme is a uniting or central idea in the data and is the core of data analysis (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). A visual representation of the themes are displayed in Table 4 in Chapter 4. The table provides a brief description of the data and a recap of the findings. The development of the themes and a summary of the findings helped move the research process toward data interpretation.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia as perceived by the school leaders, as well as challenges associated with the schools. In consideration of the research questions, the study employed a qualitative approach utilizing the basic interpretive method. Individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted at the site of each participant's school. Additional information was obtained from relevant school documents (e.g., student handbooks, mission and vision statements, school improvement plans, and school websites) in order to better understand

the makeup and background of each alternative school. An analysis of data involving the participants' perceptions was conducted.

Prior to all interviews and data collection, permission was sought from the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. Further, the study was explained to the participants, written consent was requested from each participant, and interviews were conducted at a time convenient to the participants. Each individual interview session was digitally recorded, the recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts were read multiple times prior to coding and identifying themes. The researcher attempted to answer the research questions through the patterns, descriptions, and themes interpreted from the coded data in order to gain an understanding of characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia, as well as the challenges associated with them.

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this basic interpretive study was to examine characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia as perceived by leaders of such alternative schools. Ten semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight male alternative school leaders and two female alternative school leaders. These focused yet casual interviews were guided by an interview protocol that prompted open-ended responses by participants. All ten interviews were conducted in the alternative school leaders' offices and were digitally recorded. Field notes were taken during the interviews, and additional reflective comments were added to the notes after each interview. Pre-interview surveys (see Appendix B) were sent to the participants prior to the interviews in order to gather information about the leaders' professional educational backgrounds and demographics about their alternative schools. Four of the ten participants completed the pre-interview surveys prior to meeting face-to-face. The other six surveys were completed as part of the interview. Once the audio recordings were transcribed into print by a professional transcription service, the researcher analyzed data by performing initial coding in order to conceptualize the information, and then axial coding in order to categorize noted patterns into hierarchical lists of major themes. The resulting common themes formed the framework for this chapter in describing characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia, as perceived by ten alternative school leaders.

The research study focused on the following overarching question: What do leaders of alternative schools in Georgia perceive to be characteristics of effective alternative schools? The following sub-questions were used to answer the overarching question and to guide the study:

1. How do alternative school leaders define student success?

2. What are leaders' perceptions of the characteristics of alternative schools that contribute to their students' success?

3. What are leaders' perceptions of the challenges they experience in leading alternative schools?

4. What are leaders' perceptions of the challenges students experience in alternative schools?

5. What are the leaders' perceptions of the benefits of alternative education for at-risk students?

This chapter contains the following information: (1) an introduction, (2) participant and school backgrounds, (3) data collection, (4) data analysis, (5) findings, and (6) chapter summary.

Participant and School Backgrounds

This study investigated what ten alternative school leaders in Georgia perceive to be characteristics of effective alternative schools. Participants in this study were current leaders of alternative schools. Eight of the participants were male leaders and two were female leaders.

The researcher first selected six participants based on recommendations from at least two out of three executive officers of the Georgia Association for Alternative Education (GAAE). The remaining four participants were selected using the snowball sampling technique (Emerson, 2015), asking the previous six to recommend other alternative school leaders in which they had personal or professional knowledge of said leaders and of their school's characteristics. This approach allowed the researcher to find an additional four participants for the study through recommendations of several different sources.

Participant and School Characteristics

Basic interpretive studies permit researchers to understand how participants make meaning of their experiences through their perspectives, with data being collected through interviews (Merriam, 2002). Ten alternative school leaders were interviewed for this study, with years of leadership experience in alternative schools ranging from one to eight years. Eight of the participants in the study had been in administrative positions as either a principal or an assistant principal prior to serving as leaders in their current alternative schools. None of the participants had served as leaders in any other alternative school setting. The number of years of leadership experience in other settings prior to the current alternative school setting, as either a principal or assistant principal, ranged from one to nine years. All ten participants had been classroom teachers prior to serving as school administrators. Of then ten participants, two were white males, six were black males, one was a white female, and one was a black female. One of the black males held a doctoral degree. Nine of the ten participants were principals of the alternative schools selected for the study; one participant was an assistant principal. Schools themselves varied somewhat, as seven schools served grades six through 12, one served grades seven through 12, one served high school only, and one served grades kindergarten through grade 12. Student enrollment ranged from 40 to 300 students.

Table 5 provides an outline of the professional characteristics of the ten alternative school leaders and basic demographic information about the alternative schools. The participants were selected using a purposeful selection process (Patton, 1999; Suri, 2011).

Table 5

Participant Characteristics and School Demographics

Alternative School Pseudonym	Alternative School Leader Pseudonym	Years as Administrator Prior to Alternative School	Years as Alternative School Leader	Average Alternative School Student Enrollment	Alternative School Grades Served	Number of Alternative School Staff	School District Size (0-1000; 1001-3000; 3000+)
AltSchool 1	Principal One	3	6	65	6-12	7	3000+
AltSchool 2	Principal Two	0	3	50	6-12	7	3000+
AltSchool 3	Principal Three	5	2	75	7-12	7	3000+
AltSchool 4	Principal Four	9	1	106	9-12	25	3000+
AltSchool 5	Principal Five	8	1	55	6-12	9	3000+
AltSchool 6	Principal Six	0	5	40	K-12	3	1001-3000
AltSchool 7	Principal Seven	7	8	300	6-12	25	3000+
AltSchool 8	Principal Eight	0	1	60	6-12	5	1001-3000
AltSchool 9	Principal Nine	4	1	118	6-12	13	3000+
AltSchool 10	Principal Ten	7	8	132	6-12	8	3000+

Note: For confidentiality purposes, all school and participant names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

In order to present the reader with a better perception of the participants, a brief description of the alternative school leaders and their schools was produced through the use of field notes, reflective notes, digital recordings, and various school documents (e.g., student handbooks, mission and vision statements, school improvement plans, and school websites). Pseudonyms are being used for each leader and each school in order to protect the privacy of each participant.

Principal One. Principal One has been the AltSchool 1 principal since 2010. He has more than 17 years of experience in education, and was previously the assistant principal at an elementary school in the same district for three years. Before moving into administration, Principal One was a classroom teacher in the fields of special education, mathematics, and language arts. He also coached football, basketball, golf, and track. He took the position of AltSchool 1 principal when the superintendent asked him to start a new alternative school in the district. He has led the school now for six years.

AltSchool 1 advertises itself on its website as being designed to provide a smaller non-traditional learning environment where students can concentrate on academics. In addition, the school claims to provide a more supportive social environment than possible at a larger, traditional school. There are five ways in which students are enrolled in the school: (1) through a hearing or tribunal, due to punitive actions; (2) placement through the juvenile justice system; (3) through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students with disabilities, or referrals for students who are not functioning well in the classroom at the traditional school; (4) by transferring from another alternative school in a different system; or, (5) by already being enrolled in the school through one of the prior routes, being a "role model" student, and asking to remain in the school. AltSchool 1 currently serves up to 80 students per semester in grades six

through 12. Class sizes range from 18 to 20 students, with students receiving individualized instruction through a computerized program facilitated by certified teachers. Students attend from 9:00 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. Monday through Friday. The school employs four regular education teachers, one special education teacher, one counselor, and one secretary. The school building itself is connected to the district board of education offices and district special education offices.

Principal Two. Principal Two has been the principal of AltSchool 2 since 2013. Prior to moving into this position, he entered teaching through an alternative route and taught middle school science and social studies. Although he had not served as a school administrator in education before pursuing the principal position at AltSchool 2, he feels that his military background presented him with the experience necessary for leadership.

AltSchool 2 serves approximately 50 students in grades six through 12, from 8:10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. The school has two different programs: (1) an alternative learning center designed for students who have demonstrated undesirable social behavior in the traditional school setting; and (2) a performance learning center designed for students who are not succeeding in or who have disengaged from the traditional school setting, or for those who desire a smaller, blended learning environment. In both programs, students receive individualized instruction through a computerized program facilitated by certified teachers and paraprofessionals. The school employs two certified teachers, two paraprofessionals, two support personnel, and one secretary. The school building is housed at its own site, an older building, which was formerly a middle school building.

Principal Three. Principal Three has served as the leader of AltSchool 3 since 2014. Beginning his educational career over 14 years ago, he taught physical education and health, and he held head coach positions in both football and basketball prior to moving into an

administrative role. He was an assistant principal in a high school for five years before being promoted to the role of AltSchool 3 principal.

AltSchool 3 serves approximately 75 students in grades seven through 12, from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. This achievement center prides itself on providing a non-traditional learning environment that encompasses academic instruction, social development, and community partnerships. There are three classifications for student enrollment in AltSchool 3: (1) for students who just want to be in a smaller, more structured environment; (2) for students who need credit recovery; and (3) for students placed for disciplinary reasons. Students receive individualized instruction through a structured computerized program facilitated by core-content teachers. The school is housed in its own building and employs six certified teachers and one secretary.

Principal Four. Principal Four has been the principal of AltSchool 4 for one year. However, he served as the assistant principal in a high school in the same school district for nine years before applying for this principal position. Before moving into administration, Principal Four held many various classroom teaching positions. He has over 14 years of educational experience.

AltSchool 4 is designed to serve students who have not been successful at their home school despite numerous and varied interventions. The school provides small group and individualized academic, social, and emotional interventions. The school also provides social skills instruction focusing on correct decision making, conflict resolution, and college and career readiness. Students who enroll include those who have been expelled from their traditional home school in the district; however, once enrolled, students have the choice to stay until graduation. The school serves over 100 students in grades nine through 12 per year, with a limit

of 150 students being allowed for enrollment. School hours are 7:30 a.m. to 2:40 p.m. Monday

through Friday. The school employs nine core-content teachers, one business teacher, one

foreign language teacher, 13 other support staff, and one secretary. It is housed in a wing

connected to the district's central office.

Principal Five. Principal Five has over 18 years of educational experience, becoming

principal of AltSchool 5 in 2015. For nine years he taught physical education, coached football,

and served in other various teaching positions before accepting an assistant principal position.

He served as an assistant principal in both a high school and a middle school for eight years

before taking his present position at AltSchool 5. This past school year was his first year as

principal of this alternative school.

AltSchool 5 is a non-traditional alternative school which serves approximately 50

students in grades six through 12. Students originally enroll in the school for punitive reasons,

but have the choice to stay once they have completed the term designated for their enrollment.

The students receive individualized instruction from 7:45 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Monday through

Friday, through an online program facilitated by certified teachers, as well as direct instruction.

The school is housed at its own site and employs three full-time teachers, as well as two part-

time teachers, three paraprofessionals, and one secretary. A counselor from one of the district's

high schools comes to work with high school students every Tuesday, and a counselor from one

of the district's middle schools comes to work with middle students every Thursday.

Principal Six. Principal Six began his educational career as an art teacher. He served in

this capacity for 20 years in both elementary and middle schools before taking the role of

principal in AltSchool 6. He has served as the leader of this school for the past five years, with

no prior leadership experience.

AltSchool 6 assists at-risk students in meeting the necessary requirements for graduation and provides them every opportunity to become productive citizens. An average of 40 students in grades kindergarten through 12 are enrolled in the school at one time, with elementary and middle school students attending 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and high school students attending 8:00 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Self-paced, individualized, on-line instruction is provided in the basic core courses, as well as several electives. The school is housed within the board of education offices, with two certified teachers employed in the school to facilitate the online curriculum. One secretary is also employed.

Principal Seven. Principal Seven has over 30 years of educational experience. He began teaching in 1984 and taught high school mathematics for 15 years. He also coached basketball and football during this time. He began in administration as an assistant principal in a high school and held this position for seven years prior to taking the principal position at AltSchool 7. He just completed his eighth year as the principal of this alternative school.

AltSchool 7 serves approximately 300 students in grades six through 12 who were unsuccessful in a traditional school setting. Class sizes run between 12 and 15 students. The school is designed to provide learning experiences for students to acquire academic, social, occupational, and life skills. It is housed in its own building and employs 24 teachers who deliver direct instruction to the students. Two assistant principals and a secretary are also employed with the school. School hours are from 7:55 a.m. to 2:40 p.m.

Principal Eight. Principal Eight is a part-time assistant principal at AltSchool 8. She taught first grade for 12 years prior to taking a teaching position at AltSchool 8. She has been employed with this school for three years, and presently serves as teacher and part-time assistant principal. Next year, she is expected to become the full-time assistant principal.

AltSchool 8 is located at its own site and serves approximately 60 students in grades six through 12 who did not succeed in the traditional school setting. Students receive computer-based individualized instruction through an online program facilitated by certified teachers. The school employs three full-time teachers, one paraprofessional, and one secretary. The high school runs two sessions daily, while the middle school students attend all day.

Principal Nine. Principal Nine taught kindergarten before moving into the field of special education. Between the two areas, she taught in the classroom for 17 years prior to becoming an assistant principal in an elementary school. She worked in this position for four years before taking another assistant principal position in a different elementary school. She was only in this school for a few months before being asked to revamp the district's alternative school. She moved to the central office and spent the remaining part of the year working on refining the program. She then became the chief executive officer of AltSchool 9 this past year.

AltSchool 9 is housed at its own site and serves an average of 120 students in grades six through 12 through an individualized computerized program. There are three different programs for students that encompass the school. One program is set up for punitive purposes in which students are sent by their home school. The second program is voluntary in which students apply and enroll for credit recovery, or for students who may not function well in the traditional school. The third program is designed for students who have been assigned out-of-school suspension for up to 10 days, and are allowed to attend to make up work and not receive zeros. The school employs six certified teachers, four paraprofessionals, two counselors, and one secretary. Students attend from 8:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Principal Ten. Principal Ten began his teaching career later in life. At age 40, Principal Ten started teaching in an alternative school and taught various subjects in the school for seven

or eight years. He then moved to an assistant principal position at a junior high school and worked there for seven years before becoming the principal of AltSchool 10. He has been in this position for the past eight years.

AltSchool 10 serves approximately 130 students in grades six through 12. Middle school students receive direct instruction through certified teachers, and the high school students receive individualized instruction through a computerized program facilitated by certified teachers. The school is housed at its own site, and employs seven teachers and one secretary.

Data Collection

The researcher conducted ten individual face-to-face interviews with each of the alternative school leaders selected to participate in this study. The participants were selected through a purposeful sampling approach and were initially contacted through emails. Follow-up emails and phone calls were used to confirm the dates and times for the interviews to take place. The ten interviews with eight male administrators and two female administrators were semi-structured in nature and were guided by an interview protocol that allowed open-ended discussions. The interviews were held in the administrators' offices of their alternative schools and were digitally recorded. The interviews were conducted over a five-week period beginning on May 2, 2016 and ending on June 1, 2016. Table 6 displays the data collection process as it was performed.

Table 6

Data Collection Information

Participant Pseudonym	Means of Participant Selection	Form of Initial Contact	Form of Interview Confirmation Contact	Date of Interview	Site of Interview	Place of Interview	Length of Recorded Interview
Principal One	Referred by GAAE	Email	Email	May 2, 2016	AltSchool 1	Principal's Office	58:06
Principal Two	Referred by GAAE	Email	Email	May 4, 2016	AltSchool 2	Principal's Office	1:00:07
Principal Three	Referred by GAAE	Email	Email	May 4, 2016	AltSchool 3	Principal's Office	31:36
Principal Four	Referred by GAAE	Email	Email	May 9, 2016	AltSchool 4	Principal's Office	15:47
Principal Five	Referred by GAAE	Email	Phone Call	May 11, 2016	AltSchool 5	Principal's Office	12:51
Principal Six	Referred by Principal Two	Email	Email	May 18, 2016	AltSchool 6	Principal's Office	25:40
Principal Seven	Referred by Principal Two	Email	Email	May 18, 2016	AltSchool 7	Principal's Office	17:11
Principal Eight	Referred by Principal Three	Email	Email	May 18, 2016	AltSchool 8	Principal's Office	25:13
Principal Nine	Referred by Principal Four	Email	Phone Call	May 25, 2016	AltSchool 9	Principal's Office	23:58
Principal Ten	Referred by GAAE	Email	Phone Call	June 1, 2016	AltSchool 10	Principal's Office	49:08

Six participants in this study were found by utilizing the assistance of three members of the Georgia Association of Alternative Education (GAAE) board of directors. Each of the three board members provided a list of 20 recommended alternative schools in Georgia. The three lists were cross referenced, and the researcher chose participants by selecting those schools that were provided on at least two of the lists. Fourteen schools were listed on at least two of the lists provided. The researcher then contacted the leaders of these schools through emails. Six of the fourteen leaders responded and agreed to participate. This included Principal One, Principal Two, Principal Three, Principal Four, Principal Five, and Principal Ten. The other four participants were located by using the snowball technique—taking recommendations from three of the previously selected participants. At the end of the previously selected interviews, the researcher asked the participants informally for other recommended Georgia alternative school leaders. This approach allowed the researcher to secure the remaining participants for this study, as well as commission the personal and professional knowledge the previous six had about other alternative school associates who they had met through Georgia alternative school conferences and workshops. The remaining four were identified as potential participants as follows: Principal Two referred Principal Six and Principal Seven; Principal Three referred Principal Eight; and Principal Four referred Principal Nine. These four were then contacted via emails and each one agreed to participate in this study.

Initially, emails were sent to each participant's alternative school email throughout the months of April and May of 2016 to ask for their participation in the study. Within these emails, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, requested participation in the form of an interview from each principal, and explained how the interview could be scheduled on a date and a time that worked best for the participant. Once the participants confirmed their agreement to

participate in the study and provided a date and time that worked best for them, additional emails were sent to each one verifying the interview details along with a pre-interview survey and a copy of the Georgia Southern University Informed Consent Form. The ten face-to-face interviews were conducted in each principal's office in the alternative school in which they worked. Four of the ten participants had completed the pre-interview surveys prior to the face-to-face meeting. The other six surveys were completed as either part of the recorded interview or just prior to the interview.

The researcher's objective for each interview was to establish each alternative school leader's perception of effective elements of his or her particular alternative school. The overarching research question and the five sub-questions were used to develop the interview protocol which guided the semi-structured interviews. The researcher began the interviews by introducing herself and by reiterating the purpose of the research study. She also explained that the information gathered would be held in confidence and that pseudonyms would be used to ensure privacy for both the participants and their schools. She explained that the participants could stop the interviews at any time and could refuse to answer any of the questions. The participants were then asked to sign the informed consent form and were asked for permission to digitally record the interviews.

During the interviews, the interview protocol was used to guide the semi-structured interviews, however, the researcher did not use the protocol as a prescribed script. Although the guide ensured the researcher collected the same information from each participant, it also allowed the researcher to form a more comfortable interview situation for the school leaders. The interviews became more informal and most of the participants expanded on their personal experiences as alternative school leaders. This method worked well for seven of the participants,

as their interviews went well into the expected interview times of 15 to 30 minutes. Three of the

participants were not as free flowing with their conversations and did not expand on their

responses as did the other seven. Although these three interviews only lasted between 12 and 17

minutes, the basic questions from the interview protocol were answered and the relevant

information was gathered. Also, four of the five administrators with the shortest interviews had

been an administrator in the alternative school setting for only one year. Along with digitally

recording the interviews, the researcher also took field notes to record information and

perceptions during the interviews. Various documents such as student handbooks, personnel

handbooks, school improvement plans, vision and mission statements, and school website

informational printouts were also collected in the schools to help give the researcher a better

understanding of the purpose and the function of each school. Following the interviews, the

researcher referred to field notes to write reflections, adding her own perceptions and

interpretations of what had been observed during the interviews and some basic details about the

alternative school buildings themselves.

The ten interviews were digitally recorded by the researcher and transcribed by a

professional transcription service. Once the researcher received the transcripts, she reviewed

them for accuracy and completeness by comparing them to the field notes and reflections, by

self-checking the recordings herself for some of the questionable data that had apparently not

been completely understood by the transcriptionist, and by using member checking for a few

instances when the interview transcript was not clear. . The researcher then reviewed all of the

data numerous times to discern developing patterns and themes found in the data.

Data Analysis

All of the data utilized in this research was provided by the ten Georgia alternative school leaders who participated in this study. The field notes written during the interviews, the reflections composed after the interviews, the digitally-recorded transcripts, and the various documents collected (e.g., student and personnel handbooks, school improvement plans, mission and vision statements, website information) formed a collective set of data for the researcher to review. The documents provided background knowledge of the alternative schools. The study's interview protocol provided the data needed to answer the sub-questions and, ultimately, the overarching research question. Table 7 shows how the research questions and the interview questions align.

Table 7

Correlation of Interview Protocol Questions to Research Sub-Questions

Research Sub-Question	Interview Question
1. How do alternative school leaders define student success?	Q1, 3-5a-b, 7, 8, 11
2. What are leaders' perceptions of the characteristics of alternative schools that contribute to their students' success?	Q1, 2a-b, 5a-b, 7, 8, 11
3. What are leaders' perceptions of the challenges they experience in leading alternative schools?	Q1, 2c, 7, 9-11
4. What are leaders' perceptions of the challenges students experience in alternative schools?	Q1, 2c, 6, 7, 11
5. What are the leaders' perceptions of the benefits of alternative education for at-risk students?	Q1, 2a-b, 3-5c, 7, 8, 11

After reviewing the recordings, the transcriptions, and the participant information several times, the researcher began highlighting key phrases found in the transcripts, and then cutting the vast amount of data into smaller chunks for closer examination (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). A list of the cut text from each interview transcript was then put into a Microsoft Word document and organized with headings labeling each different interview data set. The researcher then highlighted key words and phrases from the field notes, and then coded the field notes by assigning labels that represented the highlighted text. This information was then added to the interview data sets in each of the Microsoft Word documents. After creating these data sets, the researcher coded the information a second time using axial coding—putting all of the data back together by correlating all of the information to form major categories (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The researcher then connected all of the information and organized it into themes tied directly to the research question and sub-questions. Table 8 illustrates the process for analyzing the data, beginning with the first iteration (initial coding), continuing through the second iteration (axial coding), and ending with the final iteration where themes were identified and aligned with research questions.

The information from the reflective notes and the various school documents was used to help produce a description of the alternative school leaders and their schools.

Table 8

Code Map: Three Iterations of Data Analysis: Characteristics of Effective Alternative Schools in Georgia: Leaders' Perceptions

(Third Iteration: Application to Research Questions)

Research Sub-Questions	Common Themes among All Participants
SQ#1: Definition of Student Success	Improving the Student as a Whole Person
SQ#2: Alternative School Characteristics Contributing to Student Success	The Right People in the Right Place for the Student
SQ#3: Leaders' Challenges in Alternative School	A Different Kind of Leader for a Different Kind of Student
SQ#4: Students' Challenges in Alternative School	A Different Kind of Student in a Different Kind of School
SQ#5: Benefits of Alternative School	Doing Whatever It Takes

(Second Iteration: Pattern Variables)

SQ#1 Student Success	SQ#2 Characteristics Contributing to Student Success	SQ#3 Leaders' Challenges	SQ#4 Students' Challenges	SQ#5 Benefits of Alternative School
1A. Improved Academics	2A. Having the Right Staff in the Right Place	3A. Losing the Students (dropping out)	4A. Starting at the Bottom: Working Hard to Get Back on Top	5A. Doing Whatever It Takes
1B. Improved Personal Development	2B. Starting School Without Prejudice	3B. A Different Kind of Leader in a Different Kind of School	4B. A Different Kind of School	

(First Iteration: Initial Codes/Surface Content Analysis)

SQ#1 Student Success	SQ#2 Characteristics Contributing to Student Success	SQ#3 Leaders' Challenges	SQ#4 Students' Challenges	SQ#5 Benefits of Alternative School
(Responses Relating to Academics) 1A. Graduation 1A. Back on Track 1A. Earning Credits 1A. Meeting Goals 1A. Attendance 1A. Better Grades	(Responses Relating to Staff) 2A. The Right Staff 2A. Open-Door Policy 2A. Whatever it Takes 2A. Keeping Tabs on Students 2A. Putting Students First	(Responses Relating to Students) 3A. Losing Students 3A. Dropping Out 3A. Student Motivation 3A. Student Attendance	(Responses Relating to Students) 4A. Bad Home Life 4A. Already Behind 4A. Coming to School 4A. Motivation 4A. Lack of Confidence	(Responses Relating to Benefits) 5A. Doing Whatever It Takes 5A. Student is Front & Center 5A. Meet the Child Where He/She Is 5A. Student-Oriented 5A. Flexible Schedule 5A. Small Class Size 5A. Individualized Instruction 5A. Relationships 5A. Rewards, Awards, Celebrations 5A. Positive, Family-Like Environment 5A. Caring Staff
(Responses Relating to Personal Development) 1B. Handling Things Differently 1B. Growth: School, Community, Home 1B. Recognizing Their Own Problems 1B. Developing Good Characteristics 1B. Self-Skills	(Responses Relating to the School) 2B. New Place 2B. New Rules 2B. New Teachers 2B. Without Prejudice	(Responses Relating to Leaders) 3B. Making Hard Decisions 3B. Different Mindset 3B. Multiple Responsibilities 3B. Resources, Space, Funding	(Responses Relating to School) 4B. Different Rules 4B. Different Structure 4B. Curriculum on the Computer 4B. Limited Resources 4B. Accepting Responsibility	

Findings

Included in this section are the findings for the study's overarching research question and each of the five research sub-questions. General themes are discussed and supported by interview responses from the participants.

Improving the Student as a Whole Person

Two major sub-themes were generated by the ten alternative school leaders in response to this study's first research sub-question, "How do alternative school leaders define student success?" All ten of the participants conveyed that *improved academics* is a major focus in their schools; therefore, they define student success as meeting this goal. The second sub-theme communicated through the ten participants was *improved personal development* for students. The perceptions collected through the interviews were interpreted into the understanding that these alternative schools in Georgia function to improve the student as a whole person, thereby defining student success. Since a level of variance within these themes was distinguished to some extent by these leaders' responses, they are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Improved academics. When asked how to define *student success*, all ten leaders identified improved academics; however, their responses varied when terming its meaning. Many of the participants indicated that getting back on track, earning needed credits, and making better grades characterized student success. According to Principal One, "We just want them to be able to finish up the curriculum for that grade level by the end of the year. If they do that, that's success. To me that's huge." Principal Five said, "When kids don't get credit, they see it. They came here, especially a high school kid, they come here . . . and they start earning four to five credits. They go, 'Man, I can do this!'" Principal Seven added,

If they come here, we have credit recovery that they can receive more credits in. And when they get here, if they get on track to graduate, I call that success. Or, if they're caught up from wherever they were and gain progress, that's called success.

Principal Eight, who is a part-time assistant principal and part-time teacher, explained that for the students to be successful, her team of teachers print out weekly reports that show how many lessons the students have completed and how many more they must do to stay on track. She stated, "That's one of our things that we do that has been effective—to let them know, this is where you at; this is where you're going. If you want to do it, it's up to you."

Principal Six noted the importance of improved academics when defining student success. When asked to define it, he said, "That they're learning; that they have learned. They learn academically first." Principal Three's thoughts on improved academics were, "I tell my parents all the time that academics is important. I feel like it's very important that your child is assessed-for academically."

In reviewing participant commentary in regards to improved academics, several of the participants defined *student success* as improved school attendance, setting goals and achieving them, and graduating from high school. Principal Four explained that attendance in school influences student success. He stated,

Attendance is one thing. Usually with the alternative school, you have a large portion of kids that don't want to come to school. Last semester, and I don't think it's going to be that hard this semester, but last semester we had 99% attendance rate.

Principal Two explained, "I see success if the students achieve what they wanted to achieve." He added, "If that means that we have one graduate a year, I still think that was a success, especially if that person was a dropout." Principal One said, "I think it just comes back

to the individual kid and setting goals for that kid." Principal Nine noted, "Academically—when we move these kids through these classes. We have seniors that never thought that they would graduate and they're actually marching on Friday." And, Principal Seven added, "Our ultimate goal is graduation."

Lastly, Principal Ten's thoughts on student success were described as students doing what they need to do to get back into their home schools. He noted that many students want to stay in his school, but he lacks the resources to keep them. He stated, "The other piece of success is the number of students who do return back to their home school." He added, "When they're having success, parents want them to be here, and some of the kids want to stay. But I know I don't have the kind of resources that we need and the extra curriculum as the larger population."

Improved personal development. Improved personal development surfaced as a shared sub-theme in defining student success, as six of the ten alternative school leaders described success as students realizing their potential for improving their own characters and self-skills and applying what they have learned to make that improvement. Within this sub-theme, the six participants' responses varied between seeing students recognize their own problems and wanting to be successful, to seeing growth—in the school, the home, and the community, to how they handle situations, to how they develop good characteristics and self-skills.

Principal One discussed measuring student growth by not only academics, but also by seeing growth on a personal level. He commented,

> I'm not going to label our success off a test score. When we work with the kid the entire
>
> year and all of a sudden we're seeing growth, and a lot of growth from this kid at the
>
> school level, at the community level, at home, this kid is growing. He's doing better!

Principal Three and Principal Six discussed the importance of social skills when measuring student success. Principal Three talked about how important it is for students and their parents to understand the significance of developing good characteristics. He talked further about how it feels to see that kind of growth in students that are enrolled in his school. He stated, "I tell my parents all the time that academics are important. But just as important, it's very important that your child develops good characteristics, good self-skills, how to communicate with someone." Principal Six concurred by discussing how success means seeing the students apply social skills and accepting the things they have done wrong and moving forward. In defining *success,* he said it meant, "That they've learned to apply social skills. They will accept that they are here for a reason."

Principal Five, Principal Nine, and Principal Ten discussed student behaviors, seeing a change in those behaviors, and seeing the students handle situations differently than they did before coming into their schools as *student success.* Principal Five stated, "We try to rehab the behavior. We try to teach our kids how to handle things differently." Principal Nine said *student success* could be categorized as students realizing the changes they need to make in order to move on. She stated,

> It can mean that they have decided that, "Hey, it's really not worth me cursing a teacher out,' or "It's really not worth me fighting that student or whatever." "I'm learning different conflict resolution techniques to go through whatever I need to move through."

Principal Ten stated that *student success* is identified when students recognize the problems they may have had and doing something to fix them. He noted, "What I consider success is when a student is recognizing whatever the issue that may have brought him here and doing what they need to get back into the regular environment."

The Right People in the Right Place for the Student

The alternative school leaders were asked to reflect on interview questions aligned to the second research question, "What are leaders' perceptions of the characteristics of alternative schools that contribute to their students' success?" Participant responses from the interviews produced two overarching sub-themes: *having the right staff in the right place* and *starting school without prejudice.*

Having the right staff in the right place. In responding to questions from the interview protocol relating to characteristics of alternative schools that contribute to student success, many of the participants acknowledged the importance of having the right staff in place who puts the student first, and does whatever is necessary to help the student be successful. This sub-theme produced various responses that encompassed ideas relating to the teachers, as well as the leaders, and the responsibilities they take on in their schools.

Principal One, Principal Two, and Principal Three discussed the roles they and their staff have in contributing to student success. Principal One stated, "I want to make sure that they get what they need and that they're successful. To me, that's why I do what I do—is to make the kid successful." He added, "We're not in it for the recognition; we're in it for the kids' success." Principal Two expressed that it takes the right kind of person to ensure that success takes place. He noted, "When they come, if they're struggling, we have the time and an inclination, quite frankly, to do anything to help them be successful in whatever they have problems with." Principal Three added, "I think our teachers over here genuinely care to make sure these students get to where they need to be; which is graduation."

Principal Three also discussed how the right environment contributes to student success. This environment includes the teachers and staff in the school, and the attitudes in which they have. He stated,

Going back to our belief statements: we believe we know our students can be successful in the right environment. I just believe that the teachers and the people at our school, we take on the attitude, almost as if we can get students to where they need to be.

Principal Four, Principal Five, Principal Nine, also commented on how the school environment and the faculty's attitudes play a part in the success of the students. When asked what he felt contributed to student success, Principal Four stated, "Caring faculty. I'm surprised, but students come through—in and out of this door all the time because they know we have an open door policy." He added, "And knowing that they have someone to talk to, I think that makes a big impact." Principal Five said, "I would say room environment, caring staff, visible, supportive staff, and visible approach. Did I say caring staff?" Principal Nine noted, "We're like a family." She added, "We really try to make it a special place for them, even though it is alternative school."

Principal Ten concurred by explaining how the teachers have to *want* to be in the alternative school setting in order for students to see success. He said,

Probably number one is the staff and what has to happen here. You have to work with teachers who want to be at this setting. Having the right staff to be here, with the right attitude that complements each other.

Starting school without prejudice. Another sub-theme that was generated through the participants' interviews in relation to characteristics that contribute to student success was associated with allowing students to start school without any prejudice when they walk in the

door. Several of the participants made reference to this as a contributing factor for students'

success, and their responses involved giving the students a second chance.

Principal One and Principal Nine discussed how ensuring that the students understand

that they are being given an opportunity to start without prejudice helps contribute to their

success in his school. Principal One discussed that he tells the students, "You're going to a new

place. You're under new rules. You got new teachers. If you want to change, this is the place to

make that change. If you want to do it, we're here for you." Principal Nine added to the idea of

allowing students to enroll in her school without prejudice. She stated, "I think being able to

allow students to have a clean slate when they come in. You know I talk to the teachers. We

talk about baggage and not allowing the student's baggage to come with them." She added, "I let

them know, 'Hey, this is a fresh start for you.' Clean slate. And I let them know once they come

through the doors, that's it. I don't judge."

Principal Three, Principal Six, and Principal Ten also referenced how giving students a

start without prejudice contributes to success. Principal Three discussed how everyone deserves

a second chance. He stated, "I think everybody deserves a second chance first of all. I think

sometimes, our students—I don't want to make excuses for anybody—but a lot of times people

don't calculate how important the home life is." He added, "The importance of our school is to

give the student a second chance." Principal Six described how students should be viewed with

decency in order to promote success. He noted, "A common understanding of decency toward a

child. Just because they've been placed over here, it doesn't mean that they're all terrible

children." And last, Principal Ten referenced the importance of just letting the kids know that

the school doesn't give up on them. He discussed his graduation service, and how the students

responded by just knowing no one there had given up on them. He stated, "It's an emotional

service too, because these are kids that the system was just about to give up on them. The only

people who haven't given up on them, sometimes is the parent and us."

A Different Kind of Leader for a Different Kind of Student

Two major sub-themes emerged when participants were asked to reflect on interview

questions aligned to the third research sub-question, "What are leaders' perceptions of the

challenges they experience in leading alternative schools?" The first sub-theme generated

through the interviews, *losing students (dropping out),* produced responses relating to the

challenges the leaders face with the students themselves. The second sub-theme, *a different kind*

of leader in a different kind of school, produced responses relating to the leader and the school.

Losing students (dropping out). The challenge of keeping students in school and

getting them where they need to be academically can become difficult for leaders when dealing

with some of their student population. Some of the leaders communicated that their greatest

challenges are losing students due to drop out, attendance issues, and lack of motivation.

Principal One discussed how it bothered him to *lose a student.* He also discussed how a

student's home life can at times lead to him or her to drop out of school, and even though he

cannot change that, it still "kills" him. He said, "Another thing that kills me is losing a kid, I

can't take it. With losing a kid, I mean a kid dropping out of school." He added, "Absolutely

kills me because I feel like there was something else I could have done to save that kid."

Principal Two and Principal Eight talked about student attendance being a challenge for

them as leaders. When asked about the challenges he faces as a leader, Principal Two stated,

"The low point here is if we take the student that does have attendance issues, it's hard to get

them out of that issue . . . It's hard to break them out of that cycle." He added, "The number one

problem is attendance." Principal Eight also discussed how attendance is a problem in her

schools, but she also talked about how she handles this problem with the students. She noted, "We still have issues sometimes with attendance and with tardies, but that's what they're sent here for, so if they're tardy, you open that door and say, 'I'm glad you made it. Come on in.'"

Principal Two and Principal Five also conveyed the challenge they have with students' lack of motivation. Principal Two stated, "The negative we have got going on down here is, that I haven't yet figured it out how to motivate the student who just simply does not care." Principal Five commented, "Low points? Some motivation factors."

A different kind of leader in a different kind of school. This second sub-theme emerged when talking with leaders about the challenges they face in leading alternative schools. Many of the participants referenced various thoughts about the changes they have encountered and had to adapt to in leading an alternative school versus working in a traditional educational setting, both personally and organizationally.

When asked about the challenges they face as leaders of alternative schools, Principal Five, Principal Seven, Principal Nine, Principal Three, and Principal Ten all discussed organizational challenges such as space, funding, and resources. Principal Five noted, "The challenge I have is space." Principal Seven talked about how it is hard to get money when he needs it. He relayed that in this statement: "We have 600 students and 20 something staff members. Just like this situation, we don't have the money. We have to go higher to get the money." Principal Nine noted about funding, as well. She said,

> The funds are not there, so that's one of the challenges. My teachers may say, "I need such and such," and I have to go and call up and say, "Can I get this whatever." Whereas, a regular school could probably just write a check or put in a purchase order and be done with it.

Principal Three discussed the challenge of not having the resources or as many support staff as he needs and having to fill those roles himself. He stated, "I am missing key pieces. Like I don't have a full time counselor. I play the role of principal. I play the role of counselor. I play the role of registrar sometimes." And, Principal Ten added, "Our resources, we are in desperate need . . . We don't get all the resources that we truly need to do the job that we do over here."

Both Principal Four and Principal Six considered the changes they had to make in themselves personally as being challenging when leading their schools. Principal Four discussed how he had to change the way he approached particular situations. He noted that he has to have a different mindset to lead the alternative school. He stated, "One of the challenges, I mean I face as a leader is, this is a different mindset." He added, "So teachers have to understand that too, and it's an adjustment of different mindset you got to have." Principal Six also found the changes he had to make in himself as being a challenge. He noted that one challenge involves the hard decisions he has to make with the students. He stated,

> First, because I don't open myself up to get too close to them, because if I get too close, I
> can find myself being bias in a way where I may let one kid to get away with something
> and keep coming to school because I've heard this, or I'm seeing this, or seeing that.

He added, "Because sometimes, I have to make some hard decisions when it comes to these children."

A Different Kind of Student in a Different Kind of School

When asked to consider interview questions aligned to the fourth research sub-question, "What are leaders' perceptions of the challenges students experience in alternative schools?" two major sub-themes surfaced: *starting at the bottom: working hard to get back on top* and *a*

different kind of school. Leaders' responses were categorized by the issues students already had before coming into the alternative school and the challenges they faced once they were enrolled.

Starting at the bottom: Working hard to get back on top. Five of the ten leader participants revealed various issues the students were already dealing with and how these challenges followed them when they entered their alternative schools. Their responses varied between personal problems and academic problems, but they all reflected issues the students had prior to enrolling into their schools. Most of these issues had to be overcome before the students could begin seeing success.

Principal One, Principal Three, and Principal Four discussed some of the personal problems students have at home and how hard it is when these students enter their schools with tough home lives. Principal One stated, "You look at every individual kid, and for me that's something very tough, whenever I know, every single one of my kids. I know their parents, and that kind of stuff." He added how hard it is for kids with bad home lives to care about school or their futures. He said, "He's got a bad home life. He's running the streets, and he sees the here and now. He doesn't see the future." Principal Three also made mention of some of the students' home lives and how oftentimes it is hard to realize the challenge that creates for them. Principal Four made mention of students' personal *street* lives. He stated, "Dealing with gangs. I mean, there's a lot of, you know, east and west side stuff." "When we have two wings, there's not too much separating we can do. I mean, so that's a challenge, and we deal with it."

Principal Eight also reflected on personal issues, the feelings students often have about themselves, and how these feelings can create challenges for them in the alternative school setting. When asked to describe some of these challenges, she stated, "A lot of them have no

confidence in themselves. None. They think they got sent out here because they're bad or they're stupid, and that's not the case."

Principal Two discussed academic issues many of the students already have and how challenging it is for them to try to get the credits they need when they are already behind. He discussed how some students come to his school thinking they have more credits than they actually do and then realize they have more work to do than they thought. He stated, "Some of the challenges they experience are that they think they have a lot of credits. They think they've earned these credits."

A different kind of school. The second sub-theme that emerged within the leaders' interview responses was how the alternative school is a different kind of school to the students. This often creates challenges for the students as they try to adjust to the changes. Several of the participants described some of the challenges many students face when they first enter their alternative schools.

Principal Three and Principal Nine reflected on how the instructional model can be a challenge for many students. Since computerized programs are used for individualized instruction in their schools, the issue of not having direct, teacher-led instruction is something many of the students found to be challenging, at first. Principal Three stated,

> I think some of the challenges, per se, is that the majority of our curriculum is done on the computer, because sometimes, if that's not your learning mode, it could sometimes be—I wouldn't call it negative—but, that's a hurdle that they have to come and get adjusted to.

Principal Nine concurred by stating, "Being able to do their work without a teacher right there. Because in the regular school, they have a teacher for every subject. We don't have that here. The computerized program—that's your teacher."

Principal Five, Principal Six, and Principal Three discussed the challenge many of the students have in adjusting to the different rules and structures in the alternative schools. Principal Five expressed that his students' biggest challenge is wearing uniforms. He noted, "The challenges are that they have to be in uniform." Principal Six noted that accepting responsibility when students are in trouble is also a challenge to many them, but it is a part of the structure of the school. He stated, "Well what I do often is I talk to them first, I make them aware . . . This is about correcting yourself." And Principal Three added, "Another hurdle will probably be just coming over here and getting used to the different rules."

Principal Seven and Principal Ten discussed how having limited resources not only hinders what the schools can provide for the students, but how it also creates challenges for the students. Principal Seven talked about not being able to provide transportation for his students in an after-school tutoring program. He stated, "They can't have school tutoring because they have to get on a bus and go, and the parents can't pick them up. They work, and that limits us from serving all the students for the distance they have to travel." Principal Ten discussed the challenge of not having the needed resources in his school to be able to allow students to stay over a certain period of time. He stated, "When they're having success, parents want them to be here, and some of the kids want to stay, but I know they don't have the kind of resources that we need and the extra curriculum as the larger population."

Doing Whatever It Takes

Finally, the ten alternative school leaders were asked to consider interview questions aligned to the fifth research sub-question, "What are the leaders' perceptions of the benefits of alternative education for at-risk students?" The ten leaders had multiple comments, and although responses varied to some extent, one major theme surfaced: *doing whatever it takes.* All ten participants communicated that their schools' major focus is on promoting the success of each and every child and that they do whatever it takes to ensure that the students are successful.

The ten alternative school leaders emphasized that their schools are functioning to support the student—no matter what the reason may be that the student is enrolled. When asked to discuss how their alternative school benefits the students, the participants provided descriptions that they considered to be positive characteristics.

Principal One stated, "I will say the structure has to be there. The school has to be setup in a way that lends to success." He added, "To me, you've got to have great teachers. They're in there working every single day with those kids, getting them what they need. So it's huge having teachers that can build relationships with the kid." He also stated, "Another thing would be the relationship piece. From the relationship with school, to the community; from us to the parents, the students, parents and us altogether. The relationship has to be there, or it doesn't work."

Principal Two responded, "This really is a family business. It's a real caring environment. That is the a deal; like a family business." He also added that the school and the staff must show the following: "Caring, empathy, consistency, simplicity, determination, thinking outside the box, fairness, flexibility, and patience."

Principal Three described the benefits of his school as, "I think we are very student-oriented when it comes to developing the total student." He added, "I think, kind of going back

to our belief statements, we believe we know our students can be successful in the right environment."

Principal Four explained that one benefit of attending his alternative school is that students can catch up and finish the curriculum earlier than they may have in the traditional school. He said, "Definitely being able to graduate early." He added the following characteristics as being positive benefits, as well: "Caring faculty," and, "We have open door policy."

When asked to describe the benefits of his school, Principal Six named the following characteristics: "Well the small environment." He added,

> Support would be the first thing. The second thing I would say, accountability, student accountability. The third thing of course would be parent accountability. The fourth then will be consistency. The fifth thing will be a common understanding of decency toward a child.

Principal Five also noted, as a benefit of his school, "We are a smaller environment."

Principal Seven listed the following as benefits of his school: "The teachers, caring teachers. We have high expectations. Our first goal is a safe school, so we don't tolerate. Our climate is positive, we take pride in that." He added, "Just the environment itself is smaller, like I said. The class size is smaller."

Principal Eight described some of the benefits of her school as, "We are a family. We work as a team. They know they could come to any of us. It doesn't matter which one it is." She also named some characteristics that describe her school, "Loving. Firmness, meaning you will meet your expectations." She added, "We're a team. It takes a village. You are a part of it just as we are a part of it."

Principal Nine provided these remarks about the benefits of her school: "We're able to communicate with each and every child every day." She added, "We're like a family." "We really try to make it a special place for them, even though it is alternative school."

Lastly, Principal Ten provided the following remarks about the benefits of his school: "Class size is one. The other one is our safe, our caring, and a flexible learning environment." When asked to name characteristics that describe his school, Principal Ten said, "Caring, clean, safe, nurturing, accountable. Accountability is very important."

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia as perceived by the leaders of such schools. The following overarching research question was the focus of this investigation: What do leaders of alternative schools in Georgia perceive to be the characteristics of effective alternative schools? Since the intention of this study was to understand how the participants make meaning of their experiences through their perspectives (Merriam, 2002), the researcher developed an interview protocol based around five research sub-questions and an existing body of literature.

The researcher used purposeful sampling to select the ten alternative school leaders for this study. Ten individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol that led to open-ended discussions. Information collected from the interviews and the field notes taken during the interviews established the data set used for this research. The reflective notes devised after the interviews and various school documents (e.g., student handbooks, mission and vision statements, school improvement plans, and school websites) were used to help produce a description of the alternative school leaders and their schools. Three

iterations of data analysis were performed to produce the five most common themes conveyed by the alternative school leader participants.

The theme generated by interview questions aligned to the first research sub-question relating to the definition of *student success* was improving the student as a whole person. Two common sub-themes surfaced from the data as the meaning of student success: *improved academics* and *improved personal development*.

In response to interview questions aligned to the second research sub-question involving characteristics that contribute to student success, the main theme communicated was the right people in the right place for the student. The two common sub-themes from the data set were the following: *having the right staff in the right place* and *starting school without prejudice.*

Interview questions aligned to the third research sub-question asked the participants to describe challenges in which they encounter as leaders in their alternative schools. Two common sub-themes were produced from the data: *losing the students (dropping out)* and *a different kind of leader in a different kind of school.*

The theme generated by interview questions aligned to the fourth research sub-question relating to the leaders' perceptions of the challenges students face in alternative schools was a different kind of student in a different kind of school. Two common sub-themes surfaced from the data: *starting at the bottom: working hard to get back on top* and *a different kind of school*.

Interview questions aligned to the fifth research question asked the participants to reflect on the benefits of their alternative schools. The major theme communicated by the participants was doing whatever it takes.

The objective of this study was to investigate what ten alternative school leaders in Georgia perceive as being characteristics of effective alternative schools. The study also

explored challenges encountered by both leaders and students in the alternative school setting. The researcher will provide additional information about these findings and present recommendations in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this basic interpretive study was to investigate what ten alternative school leaders in Georgia perceived to be characteristics of effective alternative schools. This qualitative research sought to answer the following overarching question: What do leaders of alternative schools in Georgia perceive to be characteristics of effective alternative schools? The following sub-questions were used to answer the overarching question and to provide a framework for the study:

1. How do alternative school leaders define student success?

2. What are leaders' perceptions of the characteristics of alternative schools that contribute to their students' success?

3. What are leaders' perceptions of the challenges they experience in leading alternative schools?

4. What are leaders' perceptions of the challenges students experience in alternative schools?

5. What are the leaders' perceptions of the benefits of alternative education for at-risk students?

This chapter is comprised of the following five sections. The first section includes a discussion of the major findings of this study and an alignment between this study's findings and an existing body of literature on alternative schools. The second section presents the implications and recommendations for educational leadership practice. The third section discusses the limitations involved in this study. The fourth section provides recommendations

for future research studies. The fifth and final section includes personal reflections and

concluding thoughts of this researcher.

Discussion of Major Findings and Alignment with Existing Research

The purpose of this basic interpretive study was to examine the experiences of ten

alternative school leaders in Georgia and their perceptions of effective characteristics of their

alternative schools. The researcher sought to identify common themes within the participants'

experiences in relation to leading alternative schools. The researcher anticipates that the

information produced will provide a clear understanding of effective characteristics that support

student success in various alternative schools in Georgia for school officials and leaders who

may be considering starting such schools. Additionally, the researcher offers recommendations

and ideas of effective practices for existing alternative school leaders who feel that their schools

may not be as effective as they could be.

The following sections answer the over-arching research question as they summarize a

collective set of the characteristics of effective alternative schools as perceived by the

participants in this study. The qualities that contribute to student success, the challenges incurred

by the leaders and the students in alternative schools and how these challenges are handled, and

the benefits of attending alternative schools provide an explanation of what produces positive

outcomes for students and what constitutes characteristics of effective alternative schools.

Improving the Student as a Whole Person

This study's findings revealed that the ten participants characterized student success in

alternative schools as an improvement in the student as a whole person. The two sub-themes

identified as student success included *improved academics* and *improved personal development.*

The alternative school leaders interviewed in this study articulated descriptions of success which

included students getting back on track, earning needed credits, meeting academic goals, making better grades, improving attendance, graduating, recognizing their own problematic behaviors and their possible potentials, handling situations differently, and developing good characteristics and self-skills.

As explained in Chapter 2, a review of the existing literature written on alternative schools acknowledged that alternative schools can offer opportunities to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students that are not being met in traditional schools in order for students to see success (Bryson, 2010; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Marsh, 2010). The alternative school leaders interviewed in this study revealed descriptions of student success that aligned with definitions in other studies as improved self-confidence, a feeling of fitting in, optimism about school itself, good attendance and behavior, academic achievement, and graduation (Caroleo, 2014; Pharo, 2012; Roberson, 2015; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Sullivan & Downey, 2015). The results from this study also support explanations of student success in alternative schools as communicated by Flower et al. (2011) that student success includes a decrease in disorderly behaviors, improved academic achievement, and increased self-respect and self-assurance, and by Hemmer et al. (2013) that success is measured by improved academics, attendance, graduations rates, and personal development, as well as reduced disruptive behaviors and poor choices.

Findings from the work of Zolkoski et al. (2015) revealed definitions that aligned to this research study. Student participants in their study defined student success as the following: being what you want to be, need to be, and enjoy being; doing what is expected of you and what is required; and, getting done what you want to get done. These descriptions supported those in this research study as the participants discussed student success, in terms of personal

development, as students recognizing their problems, handling situations differently, and doing what they need to do to improve.

The Right People in the Right Place for the Student

When considering characteristics of alternative schools that contribute to student success, this study found two major sub-themes identified by the ten participants. These sub-themes involved having the right staff in the right place and allowing students to start school without prejudice. The alternative school leaders described the first sub-theme of *having the right staff in the right place* with characteristics such as having the appropriate staff employed, practicing with an open-door policy, doing whatever it takes for the students to be successful, keeping tabs on the students at all times, and putting the students first. The second sub-theme, *starting school without prejudice*, was characterized by ideas such as the students beginning in a new place, with new rules and new teachers, and starting without prejudice and prejudgments.

The characteristics described in the findings of this study support the work of other researchers such as Morrissette (2011) and Hemmer et al. (2013). In a phenomenological study, Morrissette (2011) found that former alternative school students described characteristics in which contributed to their success as the teachers' capabilities to perform different roles in order to meet their individual needs, the level of commitment and concern displayed by the teachers, and the opportunities given to them to start over with a second chance. Hemmer et al. (2013) concurred by stating that success for the alternative school student is a result from the personalized attention given to each student's academic, social, emotional, and physical needs.

The work of Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) found through alternative school student interviews that having understanding, nonjudgmental teachers and support staff was highly associated to student motivation and success. The study's data revealed that the student

participants felt that having educators who did not label them, but did take an interest in their everyday lives helped them and their abilities to achieve. These findings also align to this study's findings as the alternative school leaders described the importance of "keeping tabs on students" and allowing students to begin in their schools without prejudice.

A Different Kind of Leader for a Different Kind of Student

Data from the participants' interviews in this study disclosed various challenges the leaders face as they lead alternative schools. Two main sub-themes were identified which involved challenges they face with the students and personal challenges they face as leaders. In relation to the students, the participants included responses associated with losing students, such as lack of motivation, attendance issues, and students dropping out of school. In relation to becoming a different kind of leader in a different kind of school, the participants revealed challenges such as having to make hard decisions, changing their mindsets, taking on multiple responsibilities in their schools, and working with limited resources, space, and funds. These responses replicate the findings of Hemmer et al. (2013) in their cross-case qualitative study about some of the accountability and compliance pressures alternative school leaders deal with as they lead their schools. Four major challenges for alternative school leaders were disclosed in their work: being expected to use inventive approaches to keeping students in school; changing the design, climate, and culture of what are perceived to be "throw-away" schools; placing more emphasis on attendance and graduation rates; and adapting the curriculum, structure, and organization of the school to meet the needs of the students.

A Different Kind of Student in a Different Kind of School

Participants in this study identified challenges that students face when they enter into their alternative schools. Many of the difficulties included problems the students were already

dealing with prior to enrolling, which formed the major sub-theme of students starting at the bottom and working hard to get back on top. These challenges included bad home lives, already being behind academically in school, getting into the routine of coming to school regularly, lack of motivation, and lack of confidence in themselves. The second major sub-theme which evolved from the participants' responses when discussing student problems involved the students having to adjust to a different kind of school. These challenges included adapting to different rules and a different school structure, learning their curriculum and getting their instruction from a computer, having limited resources, and accepting the responsibility of getting themselves where they need to be academically.

The findings from this study support existing literature concerning student challenges in alternative schools. Slaten et al. (2015) found factors such as socioeconomic status, family complications, social and emotional problems, academic difficulties, poor school behaviors, and negative attitudes about school as being associated with students who enroll in alternative schools. McGregor and Mills (2012) also identified challenges associated with students in alternative schools in their work. Some of the challenges which supported this study included bad home lives, personal hardships, attendance problems, and social and academic disengagement.

Doing Whatever It Takes

The findings in this study revealed that the ten participants believed that the benefits of attending their alternative schools involved doing whatever it takes to help the students succeed. A variety of benefits were identified, including offering flexible schedules, having smaller class sizes, creating positive family-like environments, offering individualized instruction, celebrating achievements with rewards and awards, putting the students front and center, meeting the child

wherever he or she is – both academically and socially, being student-oriented, and forming relationships between the students and a caring staff.

This study supported other research findings such as those revealed by McGregor and Mills (2012) in their interviews with alternative school students. These researchers found that the students felt that alternative schools attempted to accommodate their individual needs, the learning environment was more flexible and community-like, and the teachers were caring, respectful, non-judgemental, and supportive. This study also concurred with the work of Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), as interviews with alternative school students revealed positive teacher-student relationships, a supportive environment, feelings of self-responsibility and control, and a focus on student strengths. And, Smith and Thomson (2014) found that alternative schools share common beneficial traits such as making students feel a better sense of belonging, providing individualized instruction, and offering smaller learning environments.

Implications and Recommendations for Educational Leadership Practice

Sullivan and Downey (2015) pointed out that school districts are striving to provide an equitable and proper education for all students, particularly at-risk learners. As the state of Georgia, and our country as a whole, becomes increasingly divergent, many educational leaders and policy makers are becoming more responsive to the needs of all students. In an attempt to get at-risk students back on track and to graduate, many decision makers are focusing on alternative schools as an option for meeting the needs of these learners. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) suggested that alternative schools are in the position to provide a framework for learning to students who have struggled in traditional schools with the environment, instructional strategies, and the staff in which they offer. The findings of this study align with this framework and form a foundation for recommendations for educational leaders and policy makers who are

considering establishing new alternative schools in their districts or for those who want to improve educational practices in their existing alternative schools. These recommendations are described in the following sections and are presented in relation to each of the overarching themes found in this study.

Improving the Student as a Whole Person

When the ten alternative school leaders were asked to reflect on their definition of student success, the responses merged into the overarching theme of "improving the student as a whole person." The two common sub-themes identified in the interview data included those associated with improved academics for the student and those related to improved personal development for the student. Since these findings parallel much of the existing research, it is important for educational leaders and decision makers to consider the following when defining student success in alternative schools:

1. Look at *success* as an improvement in whatever difficulty brought the student to the alternative school.

2. Provide a curriculum and resources that address the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic development of the students and create opportunities for students to see improvement and successes in each of these areas.

3. Provide support services and mentoring programs where students receive assistance with social, emotional, and family issues.

4. Provide a curriculum that incorporates topics such as problem solving, conflict management, and goal setting.

The Right People in the Right Place for the Student

Results from this study indicated that the staff, the management, and the organizational structure contributed to student success in the alternative schools in this study, and constituted the predominant theme "the right people in the right place for the student." Two sub-themes emerged from the data to form this theme: having the right staff in the right place and starting school without prejudice. Since student success is the focus of alternative schools, it is important to understand characteristics in which contribute to success; therefore, based on the findings from this study, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Employ a staff that *wants* to work in an alternative school environment.

2. Employ a staff with a supportive and nonjudgmental attitude toward the students who enroll into the alternative schools.

3. Create a safe and positive school climate that students see as welcoming and non-threatening.

4. Provide an environment of respect for the students, ignoring their past, and offering a new start.

5. Provide a learning environment that is individualized, supportive, and flexible to meet the academic and personal needs of the students.

A Different Kind of Leader for a Different Kind of Student

When the researcher asked the participants to reflect and respond on challenges they face leading their alternative schools, the findings revealed how the leaders themselves had to change their own mindsets because of the diverse student population enrolled in their schools. These responses led to the overarching theme of "a different kind of leader for a different kind of student." Two sub-themes within this theme encompassed the various challenges in which the

participants named: losing the students (dropping out) and a different kind of leader in a different kind of school. Based on these findings, the research recommends the following:

1. Consider the physical structure of the school. Allow space for the diverse population and the curriculum needed to meet the needs of the students.

2. Employ the appropriate staff to meet the students' needs (qualified teachers, support staff, and counselors) and enlist the assistance of local agencies for additional emotional and social supports.

3. Recruit partnerships with local businesses to help with funding and resources.

4. Provide opportunities for community support. Community participation and relationships can support students' life-learning experiences.

A Different Kind of Student in a Different Kind of School

Results from this study indicated that the students face challenges when they enroll in alternative schools. Some of the challenges involved personal issues they were already dealing with prior to enrolling in the alternative school, and some of the challenges involved adapting to the new environment itself. These challenges centralized around the main theme "a different kind of student in a different kind of school." Two sub-themes involving student challenges made up this main theme: starting at the bottom and working hard to get back on top and a different kind of school. Based on the various challenges the participants felt the students face in their schools, the research recommends the following:

1. Make home-school associations a priority in order to see the whole student and the obstacles in which they may face at home.

2. Be able to provide each student with one-on-one personal attention on a regular basis to increase student motivation.

3. Implement realistic rules, expectations, and consequences. Give second chances when a student breaks a rule.

4. Help students find solutions to problems from home that affect academics.

5. Plan and implement strategies that create a safe, positive, and accepting school climate.

Doing Whatever It Takes

When the ten alternative school leaders were asked to reflect on the benefits of attending their schools, the responses combined into the overarching theme of *doing whatever it takes* for the student. Since the benefits of alternative schools is a main focus in this research, it is important for educational leaders and decision makers to consider the following recommendations:

1. Employ and maintain a committed and caring staff; form positive relationships between the staff and the students.

2. Modify the curriculum and individualize the instruction to meet the needs of the students.

3. Provide a flexible schedule that allows students to work at their own pace.

4. Build a community-like environment within the school, fostering a sense of belonging for the students.

5. Employ celebrations for students' accomplishments.

6. Provide a small-class-size environment, allowing for a small student-to-teacher ratio.

The researcher feels confident that the findings from this study will help educational leaders and decision makers who are considering starting alternative schools in their districts gain a better understanding of the characteristics of effective alternative schools as perceived by

alternative school leaders in Georgia. The information could also assist those who have ineffective alternative schools in their districts to improve the practices and structures in their schools.

Recommendations for Future Research

Existing research supports the idea that alternative schools can change negative educational experiences to positive outcomes for students who do not function well in traditional schools and are at risk of dropping out of school (Barr et al., 1977; Caroleo, 2014; Hemmer et al., 2013). In addition, current research indicates that there are many benefits for at-risk students who enroll in alternative schools (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Wilson et al., 2011). There is, however, very little research published that focuses on characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia. This researcher encourages other specialists, educational leaders, and decision makers in Georgia to use this information to initiate conversations between other educators and policy makers on ways to begin effective alternative schools or to improve the practices in existing alternative schools. Due to this study's constraints and methodology, the researcher suggests the following for research expansion:

1. Ten alternative school leaders in the state of Georgia were the focus of this research. Eight were male leaders and two were female leaders. The study could be replicated with a larger number of participants, a more balanced selection of males and females, and could be conducted in different locations within the United States.

2. This study investigated the perceptions of alternative school leaders through individual face-to-face interviews. Increasing the selection of participants to include school staff personnel, central office administrators, or students could provide additional perspectives for future studies.

3. Six of the ten participants had led their respective alternative schools for three or fewer years. Replicating this study with participants who have led alternative schools for more than three years would provide the element of having perspectives with more experience in the field.

4. All ten of the alternative schools in this study enrolled students who had had behavioral issues and were removed from their traditional schools. Most of the schools also served students with attendance problems, students who needed to recover credits, and students who chose the alternative schools because they did not function well in their traditional schools. Further research could be conducted on schools that served students on a voluntary enrollment basis only.

5. Some of the alternative schools in this study were located in rural districts with smaller student populations and some were located in larger districts with higher student populations. The number of support staff, teachers, and resources varied depending on the student numbers. A more in-depth study into the challenges alternative school leaders face due to limited staff and resources could be conducted.

Limitations

The findings in this study are limited by the sampling procedures used. Specially, the researcher assumed that the persons who identified potential participants (i.e., officers of the Georgia Association of Alternative Education and, when sampling by snowball technique, the participants themselves) were, in fact, knowledgeable of which alternative schools are effective.

All of the findings of this study were based on the researcher's field notes during the interviews, reflective notes after the interviews, and the interview transcriptions. Because interviews are the foundation of qualitative research, and the most predominantly used method

for data collection (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013), the findings are limited based on the

researcher's interview skills, which evidently influenced the research and the collection of data.

Due to these limitations, the findings of this study are not generalizable to other

populations. However, findings may be transferable to other school communities with similar

demographic profiles.

Personal Reflections and Concluding Thoughts

Throughout the entirety of this study, the researcher served as a system curriculum

director in a small school district in Georgia. Her desire to improve the practices used in the

alternative school in her district led to her interest in how other alternative schools in Georgia

operate. The researcher's primary objective was to gain knowledge of characteristics of effective

alternative schools in Georgia through each of the participants' perspectives and lived

experiences that could be applied to this study, expand the extent of existing literature on

characteristics of effective alternative schools, and be implemented in the researcher's own

school district's alternative school.

This researcher's current alternative school in her district is used for punitive purposes

only. Students have been assigned to the alternative school for behavioral problems or have been

ordered by the courts for legal reasons. There is only one certified teacher employed as the

director of the school and one paraprofessional is assigned to assist students. Both facilitate an

online curriculum program in which the students receive their "instruction." Since becoming

the curriculum director in this district, this researcher has felt that the district's alternative school

is ineffective and does not support the students in which it serves. Prior to and throughout this

investigation, however, the researcher has had many students serve their time at the alternative

school, be scheduled to transfer back to the home school, but ask to remain in the alternative

school. Many of these students expressed to the researcher that they liked the smaller

environment and being able to get caught up on their credits.   These students encouraged the

researcher to find out more about the operation of other alternative schools in Georgia and to

gain an understanding of their effective characteristics.

The findings of this study, which include a combination of the characteristics that

contribute to student success, the challenges incurred by both the leaders and the students, and

the benefits of attending alternative schools, provide a construction of characteristics of effective

alternative schools. When studying the relationship between these constructs and what

constitutes "effective characteristics," both the benefits and the challenges must be considered in

order to see the positive outcomes. How the challenges are dealt with will also determine the

effectiveness of the school. This researcher intends to use the findings and the information

learned through this study to present to her superintendent and Board of Education in a proposal

for change in the practices and procedures of the district alternative school.

REFERENCES

Barr, R. D. (1981). Alternatives for the eighties: A second decade of development. *The Phi Delta Kappan, 62*(8), 570-573.

Barr, R. D., Colston, B., & Parrett, W. (1977). The effectiveness of alternative public schools. *Viewpoints, 53*(4), 1-30.

Berkwits, M., & Inui, T. S. (1998). Making use of qualitative research techniques. *Journal of General Internal Medicine, 13*(3), 195-199.

Bowers, A. B., Sprott, R. R., & Taff, S. A. (2012). Do we know who will drop out? A review of the predictors of dropping out of high school: Precision, sensitivity, and specificity. *High School Journal, 96*(2), 77-100.

Bradley, C. L., & Renzulli, L. A. (2011). The complexity of non-completion: Being pushed or pulled to drop out of high school. *Social Forces, 90*(2), 521-545.

Branson, R. A., Marbory, S., Brown, A., Covington, E., McCauley, K., & Nash, A. (2013). A pilot study: An exploration of social, emotional, and academic factors influencing school dropout. *Researcher: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 26*(2), 1-17.

Bryson, P. (2010). Alternative education, equity and compromise: Dilemmas for practice development. *Child Care in Practice, 16*(4), 347-358.

Cable, K. E., Plucker, J. A., & Spradlin, T. E. (2009). Alternative schools: What's in a name? Education Policy Brief. *Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, 7*(4), 1-12.

Caroleo, M. (2014). An examination of the risks and benefits of alternative education. *Relational Child & Youth Care Practice, 27*(1), 35-46.

Carpenter-Aeby, T., & Aeby, V. G. (2012). Reflections of client satisfaction: Reframing family perceptions of mandatory alternative school assignment. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 39*(1), 3-11.

Chapman, C., Laird, J., & KewalRamani, A. (2010). *Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 1972–2008.* National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2011-012). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Collier, D., & Mahoney, J. (1996). Insights and pitfalls: Selection bias in qualitative research. *World Politics, 49*(01), 56-91.

Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Curtis, S., Gesler, W., Smith, G., & Washington, S. (2000). Approaches to sampling and case selection in qualitative research: Examples in the geography of health. *Social Science and Medicine, 50*, 1001-1014.

D'Angelo, A. F., & Zemanick, R. (2009). The Twilight Academy: An alternative education program that works. *Preventing School Failure, 53*(4), 211-218. doi:10.3200/PSFL.53.4.211-218.

Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. (1964). Available from: Gale Virtual Reference Library, Ipswich, MA. Accessed August 12, 2015.

Edwards, R. E. (2013). *Designing innovative alternatives to traditional high schools: What leaders need to know* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from PDXScholar Dissertation and Theses. (1036).

Ekstrom, R. B., Goertz, M. E., Pollack, J. M., & Rock, D. A. (1986). Who drops out of high

    school and why? Findings from a national study. *Teachers College Record, 87*(3),

    356-373.

Emerson, R. W. (2015). Convenience sampling, random sampling, and snowball sampling:

    How does sampling affect the validity of research? *Journal of Visual Impairment &*

    Blindness, 109(2), 164-168.

Fan, W., & Wolters, C. A. (2014). School motivation and high school dropout: The mediating

    role of educational expectation. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 84*(1), 22-39.

    doi:10.1111/bjep.12002

Flower, A., McDaniel, S. C., & Jolivette, K. (2011). A literature review of research quality and

    effective practices in alternative education settings. *Education & Treatment of Children,*

    34(4), 489-510.

Foley, K., Gallipoli, G., & Green, D. A. (2014). Ability, parental valuation of education, and the

    high school dropout decision. *Journal of Human Resources, 49*(4), 906-944.

Georgia Department of Education. (2015a). Georgia's graduation rate increases significantly.

    Retrieved from https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/

    Pages/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?PressView=default&pid=395

Georgia Department of Education. (2015b). Alternative education program and magnet schools.

    Retrieved from http://www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/School-Improvement-

    Services/Pages/Alternative-Education-Program-and-Magnet-Schools.aspx

Georgia Department of Education. (2015c). CCRPI-accountability. Retrieved from

    http://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Accountability/

    Pages/default.aspx

Georgia Department of Education. (2015d). Teacher and leader effectiveness. Retrieved from http://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Accountability/Pages/default.aspx

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* New York, NY: Aldine De Gruyter.

Gut, E., & McLaughlin, J. M. (2012). Alternative education's impact on office disciplinary referrals. *Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 85*(6), 231-236.

Hemmer, L. M., Madsen, J., & Torres, M. S. (2013). Critical analysis of accountability policy in alternative schools: Implications for school leaders. *Journal of Educational Administration, 51*(5), 655-679.

Khalkhali, V., Sharifi, R., & Nikyar, A. (2013). Students' intentions to persist in, versus dropout of high school: What self-determined motivation tells us about it? *International Online Journal of Educational Sciences, 5*(2), 282-290.

Kronholz, J. (2012). Getting at-risk teens to graduation. *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed For Quick Review, 77*(6), 14-19.

Lagana-Riordan, C., Aguilar, J., Franklin, C., Streeter, C., Kim, J., Tripodi, S., & Hopson, L. (2011). At-risk students' perceptions of traditional schools and a solution-focused public alternative school. *Preventing School Failure, 55*(3), 105-114.

Lemon, J. C., & Watson, J. C. (2011). Early identification of potential high school dropouts: An investigation of the relationship among at-risk status, wellness, perceived stress, and mattering. *Journal of At-Risk Issues, 16*(2), 17-23.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry (Vol. 75).* Chicago, IL: Sage.

Marsh, S. (2010). *Multiple pathways to graduation: New routes to high school completion.* CRPE Working Paper #2010_2. Center on Reinventing Public Education, University Of Washington.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2014). *Designing qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Sage.

Mays, N., & Pope, C. (1995). Qualitative research: Rigour and qualitative research. *BMJ: British Medical Journal, 311(*6997), 109-112.

McGregor, G., & Mills, M. (2012). Alternative education sites and marginalized young people: "I wish there were more schools like this one." *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 16*(8), 843-862. doi:10.1080/13603116.2010.529467

Merriam, S. (2002). Introduction to qualitative research. In *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis,* (pp. 3-17). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. B. (2014). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Morrissette, P. (2011). Exploring student experiences within the alternative high school context. *Canadian Journal of Education, 34*(2), 169-188.

Morse, J. (1994). Designing funded qualitative research. In N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook for qualitative research* (pp. 220–235). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

National Center for Educational Statistics. (2015). Public high school graduation rates. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coi.asp.

National Dropout Prevention Center. (2015). Alternative schooling. Retrieved from http://dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies/alternative-schooling.

Patton, M. Q. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Services Research, 34*(5), 1189-208.

Petrick Jr., D. L. (2014). School drop outs: Poverty and consequences for society. *Insights to a Changing World Journal, 2014*(4), 127-136.

Pharo, R. (2012). *Alternative Education and Pathways to Success*. Colorado Children's Campaign. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED538785.pdf

Porowski, A., O'Conner, R., & Luo, J. L. (2014). *How do states define alternative education?* (REL 2014-038). Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic.

Public School Review. (2016). Georgia alternative public high schools. Retrieved from http://www.publicschoolreview.com/georgia/alternative-public-schools/high

Rahbari, M., Hajnaghizadeh, F., Damari, B., & Adhami, B. (2014). Dropouts and social determinants of health: Policy for the prevention of school dropout, qualitative study of the causes and interventions. *International Journal of Preventive Medicine, 5(*11), 1396-1404.

Raywid, M. A. (1983). Alternative schools as a model for public education. *Theory into Practice, 22*(3), 190-197.

Raywid, M. A. (1993). *Alternatives and marginal students*. Unpublished manuscript.

Raywid, M.A. (1994). Alternative schools: The state of the art. *Educational Leadership, 52*(1), 26-31.

Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (2014). *Alternative education: Exploring innovations in learning.* Cambridge, MA: Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy.

Riddle, S., & Cleaver, D. (2012). One school principal's journey from the mainstream to the alternative. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 16*(3), 367-378.

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nicholls, C. M., & Ormston, R. (2013). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers.* London: Sage.

Roberson, L. (2015). *Perceptions of educators regarding the effectiveness of alternative programs in a southern state* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED556499.pdf

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2011). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Chicago, IL: Sage.

Rumberger, R. W. (1987). High school dropouts: A review of issues and evidence. *Review of Educational Research, 57*(2), 101–121.

Sagor, R. (1999). Equity and excellence in public schools: The role of the alternative school. *Clearing House, 73(*2), 72.

Savin-Baden, M., & Major, C. H. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Slaten, C. D., Irby, D. J., Tate, K., & Rivera, R. (2015). Towards a critically conscious approach to social and emotional learning in urban alternative education: School staff members' perspectives. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology, 7*(1), 41-62.

Smith, A., & Thomson, M. M. (2014). Alternative education programmes: Synthesis and psychological perspectives. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 30*(2), 111-119. doi:10.1080/02667363.2014.891101

Stetser, M., and Stillwell, R. (2014). *Public High School Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates: School Years 2010–11 and 2011–12. First Look* (NCES 2014-391). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch.

Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research (Vol. 15).* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Sullivan, S. C., & Downey, J. A. (2015). Shifting educational paradigms: From traditional to competency-based education for diverse learners. *American Secondary Education, 43*(3), 4-19.

Suri, H. (2011). Purposeful sampling in qualitative research synthesis. *Qualitative Research Journal (RMIT Training Pty Ltd Trading As RMIT Publishing), 11*(2), 63-75. doi:10.3316/QRJ1102063

Tyler, J. H., & Lofstrom, M. (2009). Finishing high school: Alternative pathways and dropout recovery. *Future of Children*, *19*(1), 77-103.

United States Department of Education by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. A report to the nation and the secretary of education.* Washington, DC.

U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2010). *Household data annual averages*. Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsa2009.pdf.

Wilkerson, K. L., Afacan, K., Yan, M. C. Justin, W., & Datar, S. D. (2016). Academic remediation-focused alternative schools: Impact on student outcomes. *Remedial and Special Education, 37*(2), 67-77.

Wilson, K., Stemp, K., & McGinty, S. (2011). Re-engaging young people with education and training: What are the alternatives? *Youth Studies Australia, 30*(4), 32-39.

Young, T. W. (1990). *Public alternative education: Options and choice for today's schools.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Zolkoski, S. M., Bullock, L. M., & Gable, R. A. (2015). Factors associated with student resilience: Perspectives of graduates of alternative education programs. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 60*(3), 231-243.

Appendix A

COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

INFORMED CONSENT

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Janet Poole, and I am currently pursuing my doctoral degree in educational leadership at Georgia Southern University. For my dissertation, I am conducting a study on alternative schools in Georgia. Alternative forms of schooling continue to receive the attention of researchers and education policy makers, in part due to the persistent problem of high school dropouts. Alternative education offers unique options for learning to students who do not function well in the traditional brick-and-mortar school. The purpose of this research is to identify what leaders of alternative schools perceive to be the characteristics of effective alternative schools.

Participation in this research will include a pre-interview survey to collect factual and background knowledge, and a semi-structured face-to-face interview ranging from 30 to 45 minutes. Relevant school documents (i.e., demographic information, mission and vision statements, and student and faculty handbooks), along with standardized test data and graduation rates, will also be reviewed to gain an understanding and knowledge of the composition and background of each school.

Since the focus of the study will be on alternative schools that have been designed for students who struggle in the traditional school setting, leaders from various alternative schools in Georgia can provide information that is of importance to educators who are seeking to offer alternatives to help keep students in school. Educational leaders may be better informed of the elements needed for the successful implementation of alternative schools. For educational leaders who already have existing alternative schools within their systems, the information may provide new innovative strategies and approaches for program improvement. Directors and leaders may use this research study to formerly assess their own alternative schools through the presentation of effective characteristics of other schools in order to improve their present practices.

To ensure participant confidentiality and document security, none of the participants nor their schools will be identified. Pseudonyms will be used for both the participants and the schools in

the final dissertation. Interviews will be audio recorded, then transcribed into verbatim transcripts by a professional transcription service that will provide assurance of confidentiality. After the verbatim transcripts are prepared I will destroy the audio recordings. The verbatim transcripts will be stored at my residence in a locked storage cabinet. Only my dissertation chair and I will have access to the raw data (i.e., the verbatim transcripts). Three years after the final dissertation is approved I will destroy the verbatim transcripts. Additionally, in an attempt to minimize any other potential risks, I will include the following strategies, as needed: conduct the interview at the time and place desired by the participant; inform each participant that he or she has the right to not answer any question that might seem injudicious or discomforting; and ensure each participant that he or she can withdraw from participating in the study at any time with no difficulty.

All information will be treated confidentially. There is one exception to confidentiality that I need to make you aware of. In certain research studies, it is our ethical responsibility to report situations of child or elder abuse, child or elder neglect, or any life-threatening situation to appropriate authorities. However, I am not seeking this type of information in my study nor will you be asked questions about these issues.

Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact me or my faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-5465.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. This project has been reviewed and approved by the GSU Institutional Review Board under tracking number H16395.

Title of Project: Characteristics of Effective Alternative Schools in Georgia: Leaders'
Perceptions

Principal Investigator: Janet Poole
                            165 Wilson Murray Rd.
                            Glennville, GA 30427
                            Phone: 912-532-9414
                            Email: jwoodsp02@gmail.com

Faculty Advisor: Dr. James Green
                            Box 8131
                            Statesboro, GA 30461
                            Department: LTHD
                            Phone: 912 478 5567
                            Email: jeg_home@yahoo.com

_____   _____
Participant Signature   Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

_____   _____
Investigator Signature   Date

Appendix B

Pre-Interview Survey

Topic: Professional Educational Background

Questions:

1. Tell me about your professional background as an educator, beginning with your first

    position through your current position?

    a. How many years have you been a school administrator in any school setting?

    b. How many years have you been a school administrator in an alternative school

        setting?

    c. How many years have you been a school administrator in this current school?

2. What brought you to your current position at School 1-10 (pseudonym)?

Topic: Current Alternative School Background

Questions:

3. What grade levels does your school serve?

4. How many students are enrolled in your school?

5. How many teachers do your currently have in your school?

6. Is your school located in its own building, at its own site, or as part of a local home

    school?

Appendix C

Interview Procedures and Protocol

Research Question: What do leaders of effective alternative schools in Georgia perceive to be the elements that contribute to student success and what are the challenges they encounter in leading alternative schools that are effective in contributing to student success?

Participants: I will be interviewing at least ten leaders of alternative education schools in Georgia who lead programs which have been deemed as "successful." (30-45 minutes)

Topic: Current Alternative School Background and Culture

1. What are some characteristics of your school that are different than traditional schools?

    a. Class size?

    b. Non-academic services or supports?

    c. Relationships (teacher-student, peer)?

    d. Meeting the needs of at-risk students?

2. Describe the culture of your school.

    e. What factors influence your school's culture?

    f. What are some of the highlights resulting from the culture of your school?

    g. What are some of the low points resulting from the culture of your school?

Topic: Student Success and Challenges in Alternative Schools

I would like to discuss student success in your alternative education program and your perception of the elements that contribute to student success. I would also like to discuss your views on some of the challenges students face in your alternative education program. Can you please elaborate on the following questions?

3. What does "student success" mean to you?

4. How do you measure student success?

5. How does your alternative education program promote student success?

    a. What elements contribute to student success?

    b. How do these elements compare or differ from traditional schools?

    c. What are the benefits for students attending your school?

6. What are some of the challenges students experience in your school?

    d. How do these challenges compare or differ from traditional schools?

    e. How are these challenges resolved?

7. Is there anything you would like to add concerning student success in alternative schools?

Topic: Leadership in Alternative Schools

8. How do you personally ensure your program promotes student success?

9. Please describe some of the challenges you experience as you lead your alternative school.

10. If you were an administrator in a different school setting, how did that experience differ from leading this school?

11. Is there anything else you would like to add concerning leading alternative schools?