

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE SUCCESS OF STUDENTS IN AN ALTERNATIVE
LEARNING CENTER WITH AN ONLINE CURRICULUM: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

by

Heather Amanda Clay

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to discover the factors which contribute to the success of students in alternative learning centers with online curriculums in Central Virginia. The main theory guiding this study was Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory as it proposes that learning occurs in social environments through an interaction with people, the environment, and behavior. Self-regulation theory was also used as it posits that learners are active participants in the learning process. The central question guiding this study was: What factors contribute to the success of students in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia? Purposeful sampling coupled with criterion sampling was utilized to procure three cases, who were students of an alternative learning center for one semester or longer and made improvements in behavior and/or grades. These three students along with their parents, teachers, and administrators from the school sites were included in the study. Data in this qualitative multiple case study was collected through interviews, document analysis, and graphic representations from participants. A cross-case synthesis technique was used to analyze the three cases.

Keywords: Alternative education, alternative learning center, online learning, personalized learning, self-regulation, student success

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents. Dad, I wish you could have been here to encourage me through this process and see it through to completion. I miss your wisdom, strong faith, and guidance. Mom, thank you for your support through this chapter of my life.

Acknowledgments

This doctoral journey has been challenging in many ways. I am so thankful for my faith and know that God has provided the strength, wisdom, encouragement, and peace along the way. My prayer is that He will somehow use this degree for His glory and a Kingdom influence.

I am also thankful for my husband, Floyd, and son, Gabe. They allowed me to take time to work countless hours to bring this to completion. I appreciate their unwavering support through this process and their belief in me.

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List of Abbreviations

Alternative Educational Setting (AES)

Alternative Learning Center (ALC)

Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI)

Computer-Based Instruction (CBI)

Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (EBD)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Alternative educational settings (AES) were created to address unique needs of learners by providing educational services through a nontraditional approach (Fallon & Feinberg, 2017). Generally, students are placed in an AES due to their needs not being met in a traditional classroom setting (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009; Schwab, Johnson, Ansley, Houchins, & Varjas, 2016; Zolkoski, Bullock, & Gable, 2016). These students are often deemed “at-risk” of academic failure due to poor grades, disruptive behavior, truancy, suspension, previous grade retention, social problems, or emotional problems (Beken, Williams, Combs, & Slate, 2009; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; McGee & Lin, 2017; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006; Te Riele, 2007). The goal of the AES is to provide students deemed at-risk with an opportunity to achieve social, behavioral, and academic success (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996).

Thousands of alternative educational settings exist in the United States in many forms. The alternative learning center is just one model that school districts use to keep students in an instructional setting (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). Students are normally placed in these centers as a disciplinary consequence, or due to being behind one or more grade levels due to previous grade retention (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). A unique aspect of alternative learning centers is that students have the ability to earn their way back into a traditional classroom setting (Henderson, Washington, Hamit, Ford, & Jenkins, 2018). Many alternative learning centers (ALCs) are also beginning to offer instruction through an online format (Karahana & Roehrig, 2016). There is a lack of information on factors that contribute to the success of students in the alternative learning center setting (Garner, 2016; Henderson & Barnes, 2016). The purpose of

this study was to discover the factors which contribute to the success of students in alternative learning centers with an online curriculum in Central Virginia. This chapter will provide a background for the study, the researcher's philosophical assumptions related to the study, the purpose of the study, and the problem statement. The study's significance, research questions, and pertinent definitions are also included.

Background

Schools across the nation face an ongoing problem with meeting the needs of a progressively diverse student population. Students come to school with an assortment of social, emotional, academic, and behavioral problems that manifest themselves in many ways and may make it difficult for them to attain the skills and concepts needed for success (Lehr et al., 2009). Many times, these students need a different setting to meet their needs (Schwab et al., 2016). Alternative education has been in place for decades with a goal of meeting the educational, social, emotional, and behavioral needs to students who are sometimes pushed out of the traditional school setting (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). The AES seems to some to be just a dumping ground for unwanted students that only serves to further emphasize the failure of students and the school system (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). Despite this negative stigma, there are students who meet success in the AES. Research is lacking on the factors that contribute to the success of these students (Garner, 2016; Henderson & Barnes, 2016). This section will provide historical, social, and theoretical contexts for the research problem.

Historical Context

Alternative education programs and schools began to appear in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Caroleo, 2014). These alternative programs were created for students whose needs were

not being met in the traditional school setting (Schwab et al., 2016). In the 1960s, the alternative school was a private school setting for students who were not being served equitably in the public education setting (Lehr et al., 2009; Quinn et al., 2006). These schools were instituted to provide students with a different path to learning and often include smaller class sizes, a more flexible structure, and a more supportive learning environment (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lehr et al., 2009). By the 1970s, many public school systems began forming their own alternative schools to serve a variety of purposes (Ross & Mathison, 2008). Some of these schools were created to attract and engage already successful students, while others aimed to educate students where the traditional setting had failed (Ross & Mathison, 2008). Many of the alternative schools established in the 1970s closed their doors due to structural difficulties, financial problems, or public pressure for accountability (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Alternative education gained acclaim again in the 1990s to satisfy a desire for school choice and diversity (Kim & Taylor, 2008). There were many state and federal initiatives for alternative schools to prevent truancy, dropping out, and juvenile delinquency (Ross & Mathison, 2008). Many of these schools had a negative stigma attached to them as dumping grounds for unwanted students who were pushed out of the classroom (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Vadeboncoeur & Velloso, 2016). Still other schools allowed students a choice in engaging instruction that sometimes catered to certain skills (Raywid, 1999; Ross & Mathison, 2008).

Today, alternative settings serve many different purposes and a clear definition of this setting is inconsistent and often confusing (Lehr et al., 2009; Raywid, 1999; Schwab et al., 2016). The U.S. Department of Education (as cited in Lehr et al., 2009) defines an AES as a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students which typically cannot be met in a regular school and provides nontraditional education which is not

categorized solely as regular education, special education, vocational education, gifted and talented or magnet school programs. (p. 19)

There are generally three types of alternative education programs; Type I, Type II, and Type III. Students choose to attend Type I schools due to their focus on educational specialties (Carswell, Hanlon, Watts, & O'Grady, 2014). Type II or Last Chance Schools focus on students with discipline issues and are often seen as the last option before expulsion (Behan, 2017). Type III schools are therapeutic, catering to students with disabilities (Behan, 2017).

Students enrolled in alternative schools range from gifted and talented to those with severe problematic behavior (Caroleo, 2014). Over the years, alternative schools have become better known as a resource for students exhibiting major academic, behavioral, social, and emotional problems (Carswell et al., 2014). This shift in focus has come with a stigma for students who attend alternative schools (Carswell et al., 2014). Students in alternative settings are often minority, living in poverty, and older than peers in the same grade (Carswell et al., 2014). Research suggests that students in alternative settings are at a higher risk of school failure, school dropout, incarceration, and risky behaviors (Carswell et al., 2014).

Alternative educational settings come in all shapes and sizes. There is no one definition of an alternative school that describes this educational establishment. As the field of education has expanded and transformed, so have alternative educational settings. The look, feel, type of students serviced, curriculum, and purpose of alternative schools is continuously changing. A newer model of alternative schooling is the alternative learning center or ALC (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). This model emerged within the past 12 years with an original purpose of serving as an alternative to long-term suspension or expulsion (Henderson & Barnes, 2014). ALCs allowed students to remain in an instructional environment instead of being sent home with no

educational services. This model continues to be redesigned by school districts to better meet the needs of students with problematic behaviors and students who are older than the peers in their grade due to previous academic failure.

Social Context

Currently there are over 11,000 public alternative schools or programs in the United States of America that serve over one million students (Jordan, Jordan, & Hawley, 2017). Research indicates that students in alternative settings make little progress in resolving academic and behavioral problems (Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, Justin, & Lequia, 2016). There is much research on the academic failure, problematic behavior, and overall poor results of students in alternative settings (Free, 2017; Garner, 2016; Kennedy-Lewis, 2015; Kennedy-Lewis, Whitaker, & Soutullo, 2016). More research is needed on students who achieve positive results in alternative settings and successfully transition back to the traditional classroom setting to better understand what factors aid in success (Garner, 2016; Henderson & Barnes, 2016).

In response to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), educational leaders are trying to find ways to reduce the achievement gap and increase graduation rates (Henderson et al., 2018). One avenue being explored is the use of alternative learning centers (Henderson et al., 2018). These centers are located within school districts and often house students with problematic behaviors or those who historically struggle academically (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). These students also exhibit academic struggles, are often overage, and are at a high risk of dropping out of school (Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016). School districts are using ALCs as ways to implement innovative learning environments to help these students achieve success. The ALC is an understudied alternative school model (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). More research on this model could assist school leaders in redesigning programs that help at-risk youth. Further

research into this model and the factors that contribute to student success may also benefit students, parents, and staff members in this type of alternative setting. Understanding what leads to student success may help each stakeholder make adjustments that better support students. Ultimately, the more students who are behaviorally, academically, and socially successful; the more successful the overall school and surrounding community will be.

Theoretical Context

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory proposed that learning occurs in social settings through interactions with the environment, behaviors, and people (Bandura, 1969). Any change or adaptation a person makes is due to their social interactions (Bandura, 2012). The theory also argued that the responsiveness of people is partially controlled by external stimuli and that adult models can change the judgmental behaviors of students (Bandura, 1969). Though partially controlled by external stimuli and interactions, Bandura (2006) stated people "are contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them" (p. 164). Based on the assumptions by Bandura (2006), people influence the events in their lives as well.

This was the central theory guiding the study due to the belief that each participant is influenced by the people and factors in the environment they interact with each day. Based on Bandura's theory, the environment of the ALC shapes the academic, social, and behavioral learning of each student (Bandura, 1969). The observations students make of their parents, staff members in the ALC, and other students in the ALC may affect their behavior, attitude, and values (Bandura, 2006). If qualities of teachers, the environment, or the students themselves in ALCs contribute to the success of students, Bandura's social cognitive theory may explain why.

The second theory guiding the study was self-regulation theory. This theory is closely related to social cognitive theory as it proposed that people have influence over behaviors and

learning practices (Bandura, 1991; Zimmerman, 1986). Self-regulation Theory posits that students can “activate, alter, and sustain their learning practices in specific contexts” (Zimmerman, 1986, p. 307). Based on this theory, students are able to alter learning behaviors by setting goals, monitoring their own performance, utilizing time management skills, linking causation to results, and then changing their future processes (Zimmerman, 2002). This theory was used in this study because students using an online curriculum may need to use more self-regulatory strategies. If there is a relationship between self-regulated learning processes and academic achievement, then this theory may explain why. Further, this theory may explain a relationship between improved behavior and self-regulatory processes.

Situation to Self

I have served in the field of education for 18 years. At the time of the study, I served as an assistant principal of a middle school in rural Central Virginia. A large component of my job was working with students who exhibited academic and behavioral problems. The school district, in which I was employed, opened an ALC four years ago. Students could be placed at the center as an alternative to expulsion or due to being overage for their grade level. I was part of the team that recommended students for this center. Some students from our school that have been placed in the center made giant strides behaviorally, socially, and academically; while others seemed to digress in this setting. Deciding which students to send to the ALC was not a decision I took lightly. I would like to know more about what aspects of an ALC, students, staff members, and parents help students overcome their behavioral and academic struggles. I believe each student can be successful given the proper supports and environment. Even though I was an employee of the district with one of the ALC sites, I did not work directly with the site or supervise its staff members. I was in no way connected to the second ALC site. The second site

was of interest to me because it is run in a similar fashion to the first site. I was curious to see if the factors affecting student success are the same, regardless of the site.

As the researcher, I was responsible for collecting and analyzing all data for this study. I brought to this research my own beliefs and philosophical assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I identify with a social constructivist worldview, which caused me to construct meaning in this study from interactions with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a constructivist, I believe that the understanding of the factors that contribute to student success in ALCs came entirely from listening to the views of participants (Creswell, 2013). The participants in this study interact and engage with the ALC or students daily and are the ones who can indicate reasons for student success. Interacting with and listening to each participant provided meaning and an in-depth understanding of each factor that aids in student success.

I applied ontological assumptions to this study by recognizing that multiple realities exist within the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant entered this study with their own beliefs, values, and perspectives. I used interviews, document analysis, and graphic representations from participants to report the various perspectives accurately and used the information from participants to develop themes within the data (Creswell, 2013). I applied epistemological assumptions to the study by conducting face-to-face interviews to obtain the subjective views of each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These face-to-face interactions helped me get to know and understand each participant, while developing a more comfortable atmosphere so the participant will be more likely to open up. Axiological assumptions were applied to this study by recognizing that this research is value-laden and biases will exist in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My personal values and those of participants were addressed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the researcher, I ensured that I openly discussed any values or

biases as they related to the study. The rhetorical assumption was addressed by ensuring all data was accurately transcribed and presented in narrative form to provide the unique perspectives of all participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed by an outside source to ensure accuracy.

Problem Statement

Recent studies indicate that there are over 11,000 public alternative schools or programs in the United States that serve around one million students (Jordan et al., 2017). Definitions of alternative educational settings vary widely due to the many types of alternative placements that exist (Jordan et al., 2017). The alternative learning center is an underexplored alternative education model that caters to students who have been placed there as a disciplinary consequence for continued problematic behavior, or who are not with their correct peer group due to continued academic failure and grade retention (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). Many of these centers utilize blended or online learning curriculums which differ from the curriculum of most traditional classroom settings. Students placed in ALCs have the opportunity to transition back into the traditional classroom setting, when academics and behavior improve (Henderson et al., 2018).

Youth who attend alternative education programs are at high risk for school failure, school dropout, problematic behaviors, and incarceration (Carswell et al., 2014). Many times, students placed in alternative settings have high social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs; yet the alternative setting often has limited resources to meet these needs (Slaten, Irby, Tate, & Rivera, 2015). Research suggests that students in alternative education settings make little progress in resolving academic and behavioral issues (Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016). More research is needed to better understand the experiences and outcomes of students in

the AES (Plows, Bottrell, & Te Riele, 2017). Research is lacking on students who achieve positive results in alternative settings (Garner, 2016). The problem is there is a lack of in-depth understanding of factors that contribute to the success of students in ALCs with an online curriculum.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to discover which factors contribute to the success of students in ALCs with online curriculums in Central Virginia. At this stage in the research, success of students was defined as an improvement in academic achievement and/or a decrease in problematic behavior, which qualifies the student to transition back to the traditional education setting (Henderson & Barnes, 2016; Perzigian, Afacan, Justin, & Wilkerson, 2017). The theories guiding this study were Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory as it proposed that learning occurs in social environments through an interaction with people, the environment, and behavior (Bandura, 1969) and self-regulation theory as it posits that students have some control over their learning through the use of various subprocesses to obtain goals (Zimmerman, 1989).

Significance of the Study

Across the United States, 64% of school districts house some type of AES (Schwab et al., 2016). These students typically enter these AES facilities with poor academic, social, and behavior skills making them at-risk for educational failure (Beken et al., 2009; Schwab et al., 2016). Research on negative outcomes of students placed in AES is easily accessible, but more needs to be known about students who meet success in these environments (Beken et al., 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Garner, 2016; Scwab et al., 2016). This study may add to the research on factors that help AES students meet success. Understanding what

elements breed success may help educators in the alternative setting and the traditional setting. This section will expound upon the empirical, theoretical, and practical significance of this study.

Empirical Significance

It is anticipated that this study may add to the literature related to ALCs with an online curriculum, which have a goal of transitioning students back to the traditional classroom setting. Studies are needed to examine student perspectives on all alternative education programs (Free, 2017). Research is also lacking on the perspective of parents with students in AESs (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). In particular, ALCs are an underexplored model of alternative education programs (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). Numerous studies exist to examine negative outcomes of students placed in alternative education programs, but more research is needed on students who experience positive outcomes (Beken et al., 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Garner, 2016; Scwab et al., 2016). Information from this study may benefit alternative school leaders, district level administrators, and traditional school leaders as they work to revitalize AESs and improve traditional school settings. Empirically based evidence on what helps students meet success can be used by educators in AESs and educational leaders to transform programs and practices in school districts. This study will address a gap in the literature on student success in an AES, parent perspectives on an AES, and particularly the ALC model.

Theoretical Significance

It is anticipated that this study may expand upon Bandura's (1969) social cognitive theory by demonstrating how students' interactions with people, the environment, and behavior in an ALC with an online curriculum shape their behaviors and learning. Social cognitive theory may bring a better understanding to the adaptations and changes that take place within students

in this particular alternative setting (Bandura, 2002). This theory takes on an agentic perspective to changes and adaptations in people, meaning different agents or instruments influence the development of humans (Bandura 2001, 2006, 2012). Learning in an AES does not occur in isolation, but is a product of students' interactions with staff, administrators, peers, parents, and themselves. Bandura's social cognitive theory is a proper framework for this study because it is based on the value of social interaction in learning and may aid in the understanding of how social interactions play a role in the ALC (Bandura, 2002). The study may advance the current learning theories utilized by local school districts, leaders, and educators. Viewing the learning process through social cognitive theory may help school districts restructure learning environments in traditional and alternative classrooms.

This study may also expand upon self-regulation theory by linking students' use of various self-regulatory subprocesses to the achievement of academic or behavioral goals (Zimmerman, 1986). Self-regulation theory may help explain how students in an ALC with an online curriculum can control, change, and maintain their learning and/or behavior practices (Zimmerman, 1986). Through the use of a variety of self-regulation strategies, students play an active role in their learning process and possibly even control of their behavior (Zimmerman, 1986, 2002; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2014). This theory may demonstrate that environment alone is not the governing factor in student success in an ALC with an online curriculum. This theory is an appropriate secondary theory for this study due to students using an online curriculum and most likely needing to use some self-regulatory strategies. This study may help leaders of alternative learning sites, educators, as well as state and local educational leaders realize the value and role of self-regulatory skills in classrooms. Further, the study may help educational leaders add the instruction of self-regulatory strategies into curriculums.

Practical Significance

There are many stakeholders in alternative settings in school districts across the nation. Teachers, administrators, school support staff, parents, students, and community members all have a vested interest in student success. It is anticipated this study may inform educators and administrators of AESs as they design and revitalize programs for at-risk youth. The study may assist alternative school administrators and central office leaders as they create policies and procedures to improve the effectiveness of alternative settings (Wilkerson et al., 2016). As the number of alternative schools run by local school districts grows, leaders must more closely examine these programs to find ways to better serve the marginalized youth who attend (Caroleo, 2014). This study may assist leaders of alternative school settings as they find ways to meet the needs of all students (Caroleo, 2014).

Parents, students, and community members may also benefit from the results of this study. Based on Bandura's social cognitive theory students are not simply products of their environment, but play an active role (Bandura, 2006). If students can better understand what it takes to be successful, they may be able to change behaviors and attitudes. Parents may benefit from knowing how to best support their children (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). Information on factors that aid students in success may also help parents better advocate for the needs of their children. Similarly, results of this study may aid community members in knowing how to advocate for student and school district needs. The community is directly affected by student success or lack thereof. Community members will benefit from knowing how to best support schools and students in the journey to success, and they may have a deeper knowledge of necessary funding for alternative programs.

Research Questions

Given that the purpose of this study is to discover the factors which contribute to the success of students in alternative learning centers with online curriculums in Central Virginia, the following questions will be used to guide the research.

Central Question

What factors contribute to the success of students in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia?

The central question for a research study should be derived from the purpose statement and should be as broad as possible while still addressing the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This central question restates the purpose of the study. Students are placed in these alternative settings due to problematic behavior, academic failure, or being overage (Caroleo, 2014). Alternative programs operate from a deficit-model and students who attend these programs often do not make the academic or behavioral progress that is expected (Caroleo, 2014). Despite the deficit-model, there are students who make academic and behavioral gains making it possible to transition back to the traditional setting. The purpose of this question is to discover the factors that aid the students in being successful.

Sub-Question 1

What environmental factors contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia?

Bandura's social cognitive theory proposed that learning occurs through an interaction with the environment (Bandura, 1969). Learning environments in alternative educational settings are different than learning environments in traditional school settings (Caroleo, 2014). Each student also comes from a different home environment that may influence his or her

success. This question seeks to discover if environmental factors influence success, as Bandura proposed in his social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1969).

Sub-Question 2

What social support factors contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia?

Research suggests that the quality of relationships has great influence on the academic and behavioral progress of students (Free, 2014). Studies have also shown that students in alternative educational settings may gain from teachers who care (Jordan et al., 2017).

Interactions with parents and peers may also affect student progress. This question seeks to discover what particular types of social support foster an environment of success for students and is closely tied to Bandura's social cognitive theory, which posits that learning occurs through interaction with people (Bandura, 1969). Specifically, Bandura's theory discussed how adult models can be effective in modifying behaviors of children (Bandura, 1969).

Sub-Question 3

What emotional support factors contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia?

Many students placed in an AES are considered "at-risk" (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; McGee & Lin, 2017; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Students in AESs have a greater risk of substance abuse, incarceration, violent behavior, and school dropout (Herndon & Bembenutty, 2014).

Students are normally placed in alternative educational settings due to continued problematic behavior, academic failure, or emotional issues (Carswell et al., 2014; Zolkoski et al., 2016).

This question seeks to discover what type of emotional support these at-risk students receive that aids in success in the ALC setting with an online curriculum.

Sub-Question 4

What academic support factors contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia?

The majority of students placed in an AES are experiencing academic failure (Wilkerson et al., 2016). These students have not met success in the traditional school setting and often come to the AES one or more grade levels behind (Beken et al., 2009; Lehr et al., 2009). This question seeks to discover what type of academic supports contribute to the success of students in an ALC with an online curriculum.

Sub-Question 5

What self-regulatory skills contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia?

Students placed in an AES are experiencing academic and/or behavioral difficulties in the traditional school setting (Caroleo, 2014; Wilkerson et al., 2016). When entering a school environment with an online curriculum, learners often need to be more self-motivated and possess stronger organizational skills to assist with learning (Lim, Morris, & Kupritz, 2007). This question seeks to discover what, if any, self-regulatory skills contribute to the success of students in an ALC with an online curriculum.

Definitions

1. *Alternative Education* – Alternative education refers to a public elementary or secondary school that addresses needs of students that cannot be met in a regular school setting (Caroleo, 2014).
2. *Alternative Learning Center* – An alternative learning center is an alternative education program created by a school district for students who commit a variety of rule infractions

in the traditional school setting or those who are overage due to grade retention (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). These centers are designed to keep students in school by providing academic and behavior support with the chance to earn their way back to the traditional school setting (Henderson et al., 2018).

3. *Problematic Behavior* – Problematic behaviors repeatedly disrupt a student’s learning and can include disrespect, insubordination, skipping class, fighting, and classroom disruptions (Henderson & Barnes, 2016; Henderson et al., 2018).
4. *Academic Failure* – Academic failure occurs when students do not meet a school’s numerical or letter grade in core subjects due to lack of academic skills or motivation (Herndon & Bembenuddy, 2014)
5. *Overage* – A student is considered overage when they are older than the peers in their grade either because of a previous grade retention or late entry into school (Roderick, 1994). Students who are overage are at a higher risk of dropping out of school (Roderick, 1994).
6. *Online Learning* – Online learning occurs when content and instruction are delivered primarily over the Internet (Staker & Horn, 2012).
7. *Blended Learning* – Blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace (Staker & Horn, 2012).
8. *Traditional School Setting* – Traditional school settings are the mainstream middle and high school classrooms located in public schools (Henderson et al., 2018).
9. *GradPoint* – GradPoint is a digital learning program for grades 6 through 12 (Pearson, 2018).

10. *Apex Learning* – Apex Learning is a digital curriculum designed to engage students in learning and meet their individual needs. (Apex Learning, 2019).
11. *Personalized Learning* – Personalized learning incorporates a flexible approach which tailors learning for each student’s interests, strengths, and needs (Basham, Hall, Carter, & Stahl, 2016).
12. *Self-regulation Strategies* – Self-regulation strategies are personal methods aimed at acquiring knowledge and skill (Nota, Soresi, & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 199). These strategies may include self-evaluation, organizing and transforming, goal-setting and planning, seeking information, keeping records and monitoring, environmental structuring, self-consequences, rehearsing and memorizing, seeking peer assistance, seeking teacher assistance, seeking adult assistance, reviewing tests, reviewing notes, and reviewing texts (Nota et al., 2004; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007; Zimmerman, 1986, 2002).

Summary

Alternative educational settings were created to provide students with a new approach to education with the hope of helping them progress academically, behaviorally, and socially (Raywid, 1999). Unfortunately, there is much research that suggests that many alternative placements actually produce the opposite effect. There is limited research on students who do make positive progress in alternative settings (Garner, 2016). The ALC setting is also a model that requires more research (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). This qualitative multiple case study aimed to discover the factors that contribute to the success of students in an ALC with an online curriculum. This chapter provided the background for the study, philosophical assumptions, purpose of the study, problem statement, significance of the study, research questions, and

pertinent definitions. The study gathered information from the students, parents of the students, and staff of the ALCs to better understand what makes students successful.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to discover the factors that contribute to the success of students in alternative learning centers with online curriculums. Based on Bandura's social cognitive theory and self-regulation theory, the research sought to gain a richer understanding of the students' interactions with various elements of their environment in the ALC and how these interactions shape their behavioral, academic, and social learning (Bandura, 1969; Huh & Reigeluth, 2018). Further, the study sought to better understand the personal role students play in their behavioral and academic learning by examining how they are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active in the process (Zimmerman, 1986). The literature review examined the existing literature on alternative schools, students in alternative settings, alternative learning centers, online curriculum, factors for student success, and personalized learning. Chapter Two provides the theoretical framework for the study, various related literature on the topic of the research, and a summary of this section.

Theoretical Framework

The journey people take on the pathway of learning and development is intriguing. There are many theories on how people develop and learn behaviorally, academically, and socially. Learning theorists, such as Albert Bandura, believed that development and learning comes from experience (Miller, 2011). Children will develop, change, and grow through their interactions and experiences. This thought was the basis of Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory, which will be the main theory guiding this study. Students who are placed in an ALC are not experiencing success in the traditional public school classroom setting. Their experiences, interactions, and socialization in that context were not propelling them on to success. This study

will examine the factors that aid ALC students in success. Something in the environment of these students and their interactions in that environment are propelling them to success. This theory is fitting as a guide for this study as it proposes learning occurs in social contexts through experiences and interactions (Bandura, 1969).

A second theory which formed the theoretical framework for this study is self-regulation theory. Self-regulation theory branches off from social cognitive theory, as it involves how students are “metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process” (Zimmerman, 1989, p. 329). Bandura (1991) believed that people want to apply control over their lives and further noted that this can occur through reciprocal interactions between behaviors, environmental factors, and personal influences (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007; Zimmerman, 1989) (see Figure 1).

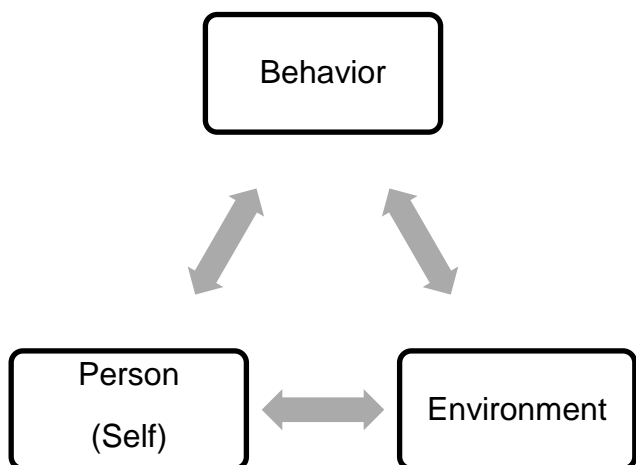


Figure 1. Bandura’s model of reciprocal interactions. Adapted from “Influencing Children’s Self-Efficacy and Self-Regulation of Reading and Writing Through Modeling,” by D. H. Schunk and B. J. Zimmerman, 2007, *Reading and Writing Quarterly*, 23, p. 9.

Based on this belief, the social environment may affect personal factors or behaviors and vice versa (Bandura, 1991; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007; Zimmerman, 1989). Social cognitive theory and self-regulation theory naturally coexist with one another to explain academic, behavioral, and social growth in students (Zimmerman, 1986; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2014). Just as in social cognitive theory, self-regulation theory posits that learners are active participants in the learning process, not just products of a process (Labuhn, Zimmerman, & Hasselhorn, 2010; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007; Zimmerman, 1986, 2002, 2008). Self-regulation theorists also believe that students' ability to self-regulate is affected by social-contextual variables, such as their environment (Zimmerman, 1995). When examining student success in an ALC with an online curriculum, the theory of self-regulation most certainly plays a role. Students learning through an online curriculum often need to have more control over their learning activities than those in a traditional setting and may need more self-regulatory strategies (Huh & Reigeluth, 2018).

Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's (2012) social cognitive theory posits that learning takes place in social contexts through the observation of others. People's interactions with their environment shape their motivation, learning, values, and behaviors (Bandura, 2012). The theory proposed that social modeling in a person's environment has an effect on behavioral competencies, cognitive competencies, motivation, emotional proclivities, language, mores, customs, educational practices, and may even work to shape images of reality (Bandura, 2012). Much of what is learned occurs through the power of social modeling, which simply takes place through observation of people and the environment (Bandura, 2012). Whereas many theorists believed

behavior can only be shaped through reinforcers, Bandura (2012) believed that no type of reinforcement was necessary for behavior to be modified.

Bandura (2001) further suggested that “people are producers as well as products of social systems” (p. 1). The agentic perspective of social cognitive theory proposed that direct personal agency, proxy agency, and collective agency all work together in the shaping of behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs (Bandura, 2001). Thus, people learn to be self-reflective and self-reactive based on interactions within their social context (Bandura, 2001). This facet of Bandura’s (2001) theory suggested that people act purposefully to make certain events or actions happen and actually evaluate the results of their actions. When considering students who were previously unsuccessful in a traditional classroom setting who are now successful; this may help explain factors that caused a change in students’ thinking.

Bandura (1997) believed, “The school functions as the primary setting for the cultivation and social validation of cognitive capabilities” (p. 174). In this study, the ALC will be an agency that helps cultivate certain behaviors, beliefs, and skills in students (Bandura, 2001). The foundation of this multiple case study will be based on social cognitive theory, which is appropriate considering the behavioral and cognitive competencies of successful students in the ALC setting have been transformed in this environment due to factors in the environment (Bandura, 2012). This qualitative study may add value to current research, assist educators in their continued efforts to improve alternative settings that foster success in students, and advance Bandura’s (2012) social cognitive theory by demonstrating how environmental and other factors in a student’s social context shape their behaviors and cognitive abilities.

Self-Regulation Theory

Various theories involving self-regulation have been developed over the past few decades; each including similar characteristics (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). Zimmerman (1989) defined self-regulation as “self-generated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are planned and cyclically adapted based on performance feedback to attain self-set goals” (p. 329). Research links self-regulated learning processes to student academic achievement (Labuhn et al., 2010; Nota et al., 2004; Shanker, 2013; Zimmerman 1986). The cyclical self-regulation model that is most often applied to education was developed from social cognitive theory (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Labuhn et al., 2010; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007). This cyclical model includes a cycle of three sequential phases that foster students’ learning in academic settings (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Labuhn et al., 2010) (see Figure 2).

The phases of forethought, performance, and self-reflection enable learners to regulate their academic behaviors (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Labuhn et al., 2010). Forethought includes processes that precede action, performance involves processes that occur during action or learning, and self-reflection includes processes that occur after learning (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Labuhn et al., 2010). The basis of self-regulation theory is that learners must have metacognitive awareness; simply stated they must be aware of what they do and do not know (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Labuhn et al., 2010; Zimmerman, 1986, 2008).

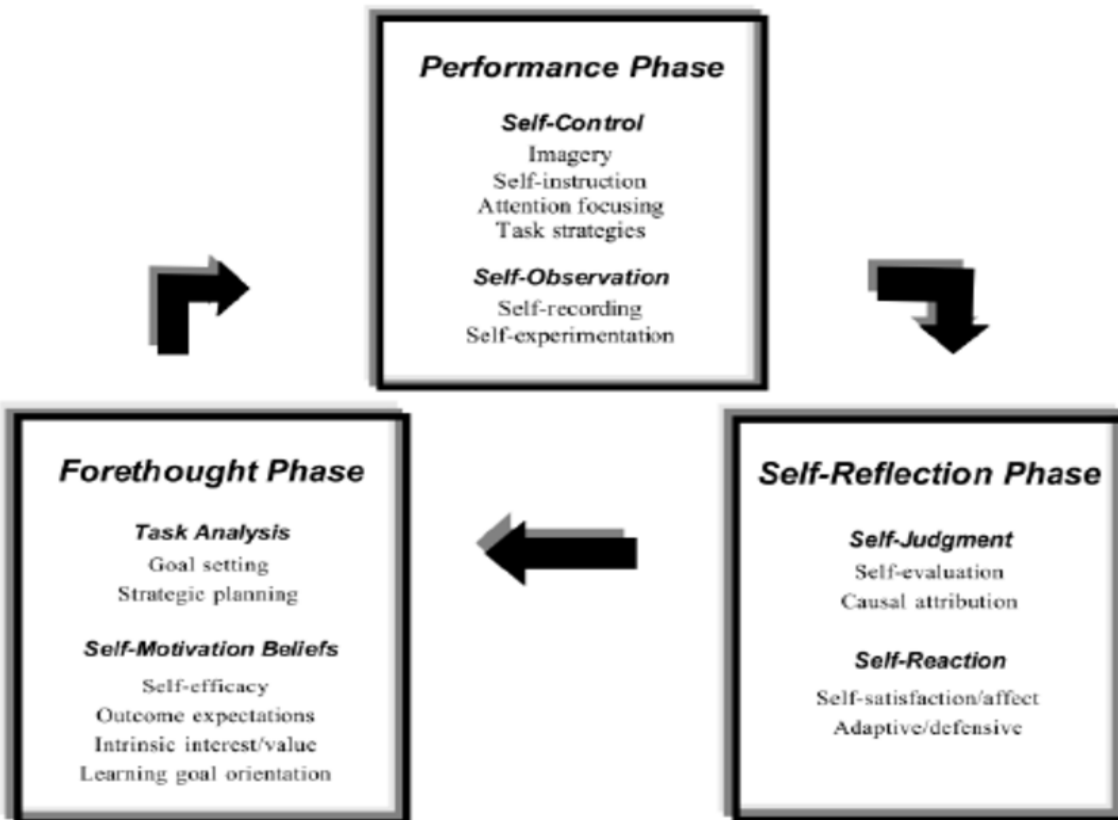


Figure 2. Phases and subprocesses of self-regulation. Reproduced and adapted with permission (See Appendix N) from “Investigating Self-Regulation and Motivation: Historical Background, Methodological Developments, and Future Prospects” by B. J. Zimmerman, 2008, *American Educational Research Journal*, 45, p. 178. Copyright 2003 by Cambridge University Press.

Though self-regulation theory still involves some external influence and social factors, the focus of this theory is on how people self-monitor their behavior, its determinants, and its effects (Bandura, 1991). This theory further proposes that people judge their behavior by their personal standards and their environmental circumstances (Bandura, 1991; Zimmerman, 1986). Social cognitive theory and self-regulation theory almost balance each other out. Together, they propose that human behavior is a combination of external factors and internal factors. “If human behavior were regulated solely by external outcomes, people would behave like weathervanes, constantly shifting direction to conform to whatever momentary social influence happened to impinge upon them” (Bandura, 1991, p. 249). In reality, people have the capacity to be self-

reflective and self-reactive; thus possessing some type of control over their thoughts and actions (Bandura, 1991; Vohs & Baumeister, 2011). Therefore, the behaviors and actions of people are influenced by external factors and self-generated factors (Bandura, 1991; Shanker, 2013; Vohs & Baumeister, 2011).

Many theorists and educators view self-regulation as a necessary element for children in school (Shanker, 2013). Educators should be focused on helping students become self-regulated learners (Nota et al., 2004). Self-regulation strategies will not only benefit students during their schooling years, but also afterwards as they either continue their education or join the workforce (Nota et al., 2004). Self-regulation gives students the ability to

- attain, maintain, and change one's level of energy to match the demands of a task or situation;
- monitor, evaluate, and modify one's emotions;
- sustain and shift one's attention when necessary and ignore distractions;
- understand both the meaning of a variety of social interactions and how to engage in them in a sustained way; and
- connect with and care about what others are thinking and feeling-to empathize and act accordingly (Shanker, 2013, p. x).

Self-regulated learners are proactively involved in the learning process through setting goals, self-observation, and self-evaluation (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Nota et al., 2004; Vohs & Baumeister, 2011; Zimmerman, 1986, 2008; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2014). Self-regulated learners are not afraid to seek assistance from peers, teachers, or other adults (Nota et al., 2004). This qualitative study may add to the current research on self-regulation theory and help educators better understand how to assist students in acquiring self-regulatory strategies.

Related Literature

Alternative education remains an area in need of further study (Carswell et al., 2014; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Free, 2017; Jordan et al., 2017). Of specific interest are student outcomes and the reasons for these outcomes (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Lehr et al., 2009). This section will present a conceptual synthesis of existing literature on the topic of alternative education. The history, definition, purpose, models of alternative education, stigma of alternative education, and types of students served will be reviewed. Literature concerning online curriculum, factors for student success, and personalized learning will also be examined. The study of alternative education continues to develop due to the ever-changing field.

Definition and Purpose of Alternative Education

The term alternative education takes on a variety of meanings and is used differently by educators and scholars (Caroleo, 2014; Jordan et al., 2017). Even the term used to describe these settings varies by researcher and school locality. This form of education may be referred to as alternative education, alternative programming, alternative setting, or alternative school. The definition and purpose of AES varies as widely as the students and localities which may be served. No clear or universal definition for alternative education exists (Caroleo, 2014; Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Free, 2017; Lehr et al., 2009; Raywid, 1999; Ross & Mathison, 2008; Schwab et al., 2016). The U.S. Department of Education (as cited in Lehr et al., 2009) defines an AES as

a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students which typically cannot be met in a regular school and provides nontraditional education which is not categorized solely as regular education, special education, vocational education, gifted and talented or magnet school programs. (p. 19)

Many educators and researchers apply this definition when speaking of AES, yet it fails to address AES that exist within schools (Porowski, O’Conner, & Luo, 2014). The issue of defining alternative education becomes further complicated due to at least 34 states having their own formal definition due to varying rationales for the existence of these institutions (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Porowski et al., 2014; Quinn et al., 2006). Some even argue that to be considered an AES, students must choose to attend and not be placed (Raywid, 1981). That specific definition would include charter schools and specialty schools (Raywid, 1981). For the purpose of this study, an AES will be defined as a school or program which aims to “address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools who are most often at risk of educational failure and negative life outcomes” (Free, 2017, p. 501).

With the varying definitions of an AES comes varying purposes for their existence. Some see an AES as just another pathway for students to take that brings more innovation and offers more choices to students and parents (Raywid, 1999; Ross & Mathison, 2008). Normally, schools that serve this purpose are charter or magnet schools where students choose to attend. These schools certainly extend a wealth of options to students, but are not what most people today would consider when they hear the term alternative education. Some AES are seen as places that exist to fill the opportunity gap in the United States (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). Schools that serve this purpose focus on providing a personalized educational experience for students whose needs are not being met in the traditional public school setting (Lehr et al., 2009; Quinn et al., 2006). Probably the most notable and frequently seen purpose of an AES is to meet the needs of students labeled at-risk (Carswell et al., 2014; Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Jordan et al., 2017; Lehr et al., 2009). These AES strive to help students who normally enter with behavioral, academic, and social problems (Carswell et al., 2014; Jordan et

al., 2017). The needs of these students are normally not met in a traditional setting and many enter the AES in a state of academic failure, sometimes serious problematic behavior, and severe disengagement from the school process (Aron, 2006; Carswell et al., 2017; Jordan et al., 2017; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Porowski et al., 2014). The goal of educators in these settings is to utilize different instructional methods than those found in traditional settings to re-engage students in school and help them graduate from high school (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

The purpose of the latter AES grew out of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (Aron, 2006; Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lehr et al., 2009). The legislation was originally passed by Congress in 2001 and called for stronger accountability for results, more choices for parents, and the use of proven education methods (Aron, 2006; Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lehr et al., 2009). The legislation was the perfect foundation for educators to create more alternative options for students who were not succeeding in the traditional school setting. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 continued the push for alternative settings such as these in an effort to provide more educational opportunities to all students and improve student outcomes (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017). The ESSA called for a reduction in the achievement gap and increased graduation rates (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Henderson et al., 2018). Further the ESSA required that “states provides all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education” (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017, p. 6). This legislation expanded upon the foundation formed by NCLB and cleared the way for more alternative opportunities for at-risk students.

Since their genesis, alternative schools have been created to fulfill diverse purposes. Raywid (1999) stated “They’ve functioned almost as an empty glass to be filled with any sort of liquid-or even used for something other than a glass” (p. 47). It would seem that the only

consistency in alternative education is the constant changing nature of the programs and the belief that one size does not fit all when it comes to education (Porowski et al., 2014; Raywid, 1999). Alternative programs truly exist to close the opportunity gap that exists in public education facilities across the United States (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). Alternative schools and programs of today look very different from those which emerged in the 1960s. A major goal of many AES is to re-engage students and prevent high school dropout. Specifically, in Virginia, the current high school dropout rate is 9.9% (Virginia Department of Education, 2018). Alternative education has the power to lower this rate and help re-engage students in school to complete their education. Knowing more about these settings and what makes students successful could be a mighty force in re-engaging students in school and lowering the high school dropout rate. As the face of education continues to change, so will the AES.

History of Alternative Education

Alternative education has an intricate history. This facet of the educational system has taken on many forms over time and continues to evolve. Alternative education programs began to materialize in the United States in the late 1950s to the early 1960s (Caroleo, 2014; Carswell et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2017; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lehr et al., 2009; Quinn et al., 2006; Raywid, 1981; Ross & Mathison, 2008). The original AES grew out of a desire for a private alternative to public education and were mainly located in urban and suburban areas (Lehr et al., 2009; Quinn et al., 2006; Raywid, 1981). Many of the first AES focused on providing students who were failing with an alternative placement that would offer innovative pathways to learning not offered in traditional education settings (Lehr et al., 2009; Quinn et al., 2006; Raywid, 1981). The populations of these schools mainly consisted of students from impoverished and minority backgrounds (Carswell et al., 2014; Quinn et al., 2006; Ross & Mathison, 2008). Several

individual movements emerged from this original AES growth. These movements followed the cultural and political trends of the 1960s and focused on liberating children from so-called oppressive school environments (Quinn et al, 2006; Ross & Mathison, 2008). The free school movement was based on the work of A. S. Neill and presumed that traditional schools were restrictive and did not respect the personal needs of students (Jordan et al., 2017; Quinn et al, 2006; Ross & Mathison, 2008). Another AES movement during the 1960s was the freedom schools movement (Quinn et al., 2006; Raywid, 1981). This movement took place in Southern states and was based on the belief that traditional schools were not appropriate settings for African-American students (Quinn et al., 2006; Raywid, 1981). Freedom school advocates thought traditional public schools were focused on producing “subjects, not citizens” (Quinn et al., 2006, p. 12). Educators in these settings believed content should be taught through the context of black history and the power structure of the United States (Quinn et al., 2006; Raywid, 1981; Ross & Mathison, 2008).

The focus on education increased in 1965 with the passing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Raywid, 1981). This act was a response to the war against poverty in the United States and provided substantial government funding for alternative school settings (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Raywid, 1981). A partial goal of the ESEA of 1965 was to equalize opportunities for economically disadvantaged children by promoting innovative alternatives to the traditional school setting (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Raywid, 1981). Prevention of student dropout and academic failure was an emphasis of alternative education through the ESEA (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Evaluation of the programs instituted under this act showed that there was truly no significant difference in the academic outcomes of students in these alternative schools and the traditional public school setting (Raywid, 1981).

During the 1970s, many public school systems began to open alternative schools (Ross & Mathison, 2008). These schools differed widely based on their location; with some aiming to change the student, some the school experience, and some the educational system itself (Raywid, 1999; Ross & Mathison, 2008). The federal Experimental Schools Program in 1971 spurred the creation of model alternative schools (Raywid, 1981; Ross & Mathison, 2008). This initiative brought about differentiated alternative schools in Minneapolis, Berkeley, and Tacoma that were specifically available by choice (Raywid, 1981; Ross & Mathison, 2008). Unfortunately, many of the alternative schools that began in the 1970s were short-lived due to structural or financial obstacles coupled with a public cry for school accountability (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Again in the 1990s alternative education began to regain momentum (Caroleo, 2014; Kim & Taylor, 2008). The variation in types of alternative schools and purposes for these schools became even more varied. Voucher programs in the 1990s influenced the rise of alternative school options in the form of public, private, magnet, or charter schools (Caroleo, 2014; Kim & Taylor, 2008). These particular alternative schools were about choice for parents when students were not succeeding in the traditional school setting (Caroleo, 2014; Kim & Taylor, 2008). The 1990s also saw a growth in alternative settings in the form of residential treatment facilities, day facilities, and clinical schools (Caroleo, 2014). Students attending the wide range of alternative options ranged from gifted to those with academic and behavioral concerns (Caroleo, 2014; Quinn et al., 2006; Raywid, 1981).

Today alternative education continues to grow and transform. The types of alternative settings are extremely varied and exist for multiple purposes. The absence of a clear definition for alternative education makes it difficult to identify an accurate statistic on how many alternative settings exist or how many students are served (Caroleo, 2014; Lehr et al., 2009;

Quinn et al., 2006). Some research suggests that there are over 11,000 alternative schools in the United States that serve close to one million students with 64% of school districts reporting operating at least one alternative program or school (Carswell et al., 2014; Free, 2017; Jordan et al., 2017; Kim & Taylor, 2008). Currently, many alternative settings are seen as a way to offer struggling students more pathways to graduation and opportunities for success (Jordan et al., 2017; Rennie Center for Education and Policy, 2014). Alternative schools struggle with a negative stigma and are often not seen as viable options for young people (Free, 2017; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Ross & Mathison, 2008). Alternative schools continue to be an area in need of further research (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Free, 2017; Jordan et al., 2017).

Alternative Education Models

Typically, AES can be classified as one of three types. The typologies were developed by Raywid (1999) and are based on the goals of the particular program. Type I schools are those attended by parent and student choice (Aron, 2006; Caroleo, 2014; Carswell et al., 2014; Foley & Pang, 2006; Ross & Mathison, 2008). These schools are often attended by middle and upper middle class students, feature innovative and challenging curriculum and instruction, and focus on fixing the system of education (Aron, 2006; Caroleo, 2014; Carswell et al., 2014; Ross & Mathison, 2008). Type I schools may include charter schools, magnet schools, experiential schools, career-focused schools, or schools in atypical settings (Aron, 2006; Foley & Pang, 2006). Research suggests that this type of program is the most successful of the three (Aron, 2006).

The Type II alternative schools are very much the opposite of Type I schools. Type II schools are often called last chance programs where students are assigned as an alternative to out-of-school suspension or expulsion (Aron, 2006; Caroleo, 2014; Carswell et al., 2014; Foley

& Pang, 2006; Ross & Mathison, 2008). Educators in this setting focus on behavioral interventions and behavior modification in an effort to fix the student (Caroleo, 2014; Ross & Mathison, 2008). Students in this setting often come with a history of disruptive behavior and may also be behind academically (Aron, 2006; Caroleo, 2014; Carswell et al., 2014; Ross & Mathison, 2008). Curriculum and instruction are very basic and do not offer students a challenging, rigorous educational experience (Aron, 2006; Ross & Mathison, 2008).

Type III alternative schools target students with social and emotional problems which impede their academic success (Aron, 2006; Caroleo, 2014; Carswell et al., 2014; Foley & Pang, 2006; Ross & Mathison, 2008). Some students attend by choice, while others are mandated to attend (Carswell et al., 2014). Type III schools offer therapeutic, rehabilitative, or remedial assistance to students while focusing on non-punitive, compassionate methods of helping (Aron, 2006; Caroleo, 2014). Many of these settings offer counseling with a goal of the social and emotional development of the student (Ross & Mathison, 2008).

Most alternative schools are one of the three types; however, some may be a mix (Aron, 2006; Ross & Mathison, 2008). Today, more and more programs are mixing strategies and have multiple objectives for students (Aron, 2006). The alternative model continues to evolve as school districts seek models that will best meet the needs of students being served. Many current alternative options are focused on re-engaging young people in the educational process (McGregor & Mills, 2012). While the specific typologies defined by Raywid (1999) each serve a different type of student, AES of today may serve a mix of students.

The alternative model that will be used as the setting for this study is an alternative learning center (ALC). This particular model is not labeled as a Type I, Type II, or Type III AES. The ALC was created around 12 to 15 years ago to hold students who were in transition

from long-term suspension to alternative school (Henderson & Barnes, 2016; Henderson et al., 2018). Some school districts continue to use the ALC in this manner, while some have restructured this model to meet more than just disciplinary needs (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). The ALC can provide academic support that students need to graduate or to earn their way back to the traditional classroom setting (Henderson et al., 2018). Normally, the ALC functions as a part of a local school district and caters to middle and high school students (Henderson & Barnes, 2016; Henderson et al., 2018). The center may be held within a school or in a separate building. Due to the changing dynamic of AES, very little literature exists on the ALC. The ALC is an underexplored alternative model (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). This study may add to the literature on the ALC and help educational leaders understand aspects that aid in students' success in the ALC.

Students Who Attend Alternative Educational Settings

The extreme variation in purposes, definitions, and types of AES extends to the students served in these settings. Normally the type of AES will determine the criteria for students who attend. In general, AES are currently designed for students whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting (American Youth Policy & Civic Enterprise, 2017; Free, 2017; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; McGee & Lin, 2017; Raywid, 2001; Rennie Center, 2014). These young people often have traumatic experiences within traditional school settings and school staff (McGregor & Mills, 2012). Many times, these are marginalized students who are at risk of school failure or even dropping out of school (Aron, 2006). For the purposes of this study, the focus will be on students labeled at-risk, students who are overage, students placed in AES due to disciplinary reasons, and students receiving special education services.

At-risk students. At-risk is a broad term that is associated with students exhibiting a variety of educational and behavioral difficulties (Beken et al., 2009; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996). The term at-risk is often used to describe students experiencing academic failure, behavioral problems, and social or emotional problems (Beken et al., 2009). At-risk students are those “who could potentially drop out of school or engage in self-destructive behaviors that interfere with academic success” (Johnson & Perkins, 2009, p. 123). Normally students labeled at-risk meet one or more of the following criteria; poor academic performance, overage or under-credited, chronic absenteeism, history of disciplinary infractions, negative attitude towards school, low socioeconomic status, pregnant or parenting, wards of the state, mental health issues, previously incarcerated, or primary caregivers (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Rennie Center for Education and Policy, 2014). Approximately 25% of youth ages 16 to 24 may be identified as at-risk based on the previous criteria (Rennie Center for Education and Policy, 2014). Of this number, 10% to 20% are enrolled in some type of AES (Rennie Center for Education and Policy, 2014).

A major concern when considering at-risk students is that they are more likely to drop out of school (Beken et al., 2009; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Johnson & Perkins, 2009; McGee & Lin, 2017; Rennie Center for Education and Policy, 2014). A major factor leading to school dropout is an absence of school engagement (Johnson & Perkins, 2009; Jordan et al., 2017). School engagement involves behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Behavioral engagement is comprised of participation in academic activities (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). When students are emotionally engaged, they can identify with the school, value the success of the school, and have an overall enjoyment in school (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Students who are cognitively engaged can self-regulate their learning (Wang &

Fredricks, 2014). A lack of engagement in the school process can lead to disruptive behavior, low academic performance, and many negative psycho-social outcomes (Randle, 2016; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). It is like a vicious cycle that can ultimately lead to students not completing their school experience. Many students placed in AES are considered to be at-risk (Beken et al., 2009; Jordan et al., 2017; McGee & Lin, 2017). An important goal of the AES is to find ways to re-engage these students in the process of school, a task which many traditional school structures seem ill-equipped for (McGee & Lin, 2017).

Over-age students. None of the typical AES models specifically cater to over-age students, but as the AES continues to transform to ensure the needs of all students are met, the over-age student is more likely to enter this setting. Over-age students are those who lack the appropriate number of credits for their age and intended grade-level (Rath, Rock, & Laferriere, 2012). These students have typically struggled throughout their school career and are disengaged from the process of school (Rath et al., 2012). Students have become over-age due to being retained in a grade level one or more times during their school career (Roderick, 1994). Being overage places these students at a higher risk of dropping out of school (Hughes et al., 2017; Rath et al., 2012; Roderick, 1994). Often these students feel out of place and are easily discouraged due to their continued academic struggles (Rath et al., 2012; Roderick, 1994).

The majority of students considered overage for their grade level have been retained at least twice (Huang, 2014; Rath et al., 2012). Though grade retention is still a highly used strategy to assist students who are struggling academically, research suggests that it is ineffective (Griffith, Lloyd, Lane, & Tankersley, 2010; Huang, 2014; Robles-Pina, 2011; Roderick, 1994). The practice of retaining students may actually be detrimental to their academic, emotional, and social well-being (Griffith et al., 2010; Huang, 2014; Hughes et al., 2017; Robles-Pina, 2011;

Roderick, 1994). Research suggests that students who have been retained actually exhibit lower cognitive growth, lower self-esteem, lower levels of social maturity, lower levels of behavioral maturity, have trouble with personal adjustment, have poor school attendance, and are at a much higher risk of dropping out of school (Griffith et al., 2010; Huang, 2014; Robles-Pina, 2011). Specifically, reading achievement of retained students seems to be significantly lower than that of students who have not been retained (Griffith et al., 2010). Students who are retained once are even likely to be retained again (Robles-Pina, 2011). Grade retention has numerous negative impacts on the emotional well-being of students (Griffith et al., 2010; Robles-Pina, 2011). Students often feel they are being punished by being retained in a grade and react with anger, fear, and even feelings of depression (Huang, 2014; Robles-Pina, 2011). The compilation of these many negative effects often leads to students dropping out of high school (Griffith et al., 2010; Huang, 2014; Hughes et al., 2017; Rath et al., 2012; Robles-Pina, 2011; Roderick, 1994). Educational leaders are compelled to find strategies to re-engage these students in the school process and assist them in the path to graduation. Placement in an AES may be one strategy to help over-age students.

Students with behavior problems. Students with behavioral problems are often placed in AES. Many times, these students have a history of disruptive behavior and have been placed in an AES as an alternative to out-of-school suspension or expulsion (Kennedy-Lewis et al., 2016; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan et al., 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016). These students may also exhibit academic difficulties and are likely to experience failure in school and beyond (Zolkoski et al., 2016). They often feel disengaged from school due to negative relationships with teachers and other school staff who could not tolerate their behavior and blamed the student for all behavior problems (Kennedy-Lewis et al., 2016; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan et al., 2016; Zolkoski

et al., 2016). In some cases, a placement in an AES further exasperates the feelings of failure and disengagement (Caroleo, 2014).

Some students who continually exhibit disruptive behaviors actually have an emotional or behavioral disorder (EBD). Students with EBD bring with them a distinctive challenge (Ennis, Harris, Lane, & Mason, 2014; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan et al., 2016). These students often display very low levels of academic engagement coupled with sometimes severe problem behaviors (Ennis et al., 2014). Many times, behavior intervention plans are put in place to help these students limit disruptive behaviors during instructional time (Ennis et al., 2014; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan et al., 2016). Often, AES are disproportionately comprised of students with EBD due to their lack of compliance and success in traditional school settings (Lehr et al., 2009; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan et al., 2016). The rate at which students with EBD are placed in AES is steadily on the rise (Ennis et al., 2014). Across the United States, six percent of school-aged children are classified as having an EBD (Wilkerson, Yan et al., 2016). This rate in AES is remarkably different. A national study in 2011 reported that nearly 70% of students in an AES were classified as EBD (Wilkerson, Yan et al., 2016c). This high percentage may be an indication of how the traditional school setting often conducts education with a one-size fits all approach. When students do not comply with or fit into this model, they are sent to AES. Some studies suggest that placement in an AES actually leads to a decline in behavior and academic progress of students with EBD (Lehr et al., 2009; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan et al., 2016).

Students receiving special education services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 defines disabilities as autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language

impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment (Behan, 2017). Based on IDEA, any student with a disability who is not making sufficient progress in school due to their disability qualifies to receive special education services (Behan, 2017). A student who qualifies for special education services require some type of specially designed instruction and sometimes other related services (Behan, 2017). Each student who qualifies for services requires an individualized education plan (IEP) (Behan, 2017; Marx et al., 2014). Parents, teachers, and other necessary members comprise the IEP team. This team meets annually to discuss the student's progress, goals, and necessary accommodations (Behan, 2017; Marx et al., 2014).

A major component of the IEP team's decision-making is the least restrictive environment (LRE) for the student (Behan, 2017; Marx et al., 2014). The LRE is a principle from IDEA which

refers to each school's responsibility to ensure that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities...are educated with children who are nondisabled; and that...removal from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (Behan, 2017, p. 6)

When students are not successful in the regular education classroom, schools must have an available series of other placements (Marx et al., 2014). These placements could be a special education classroom or a different school setting.

Students with disabilities who receive special education services are overrepresented in AES populations (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Jordan et al., 2017; Wilkerson, Yan et al., 2016). Students in AES may be diagnosed with a learning disability or may be emotionally disturbed (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996). Nationwide, around 13% of children ages 3 to 21 are diagnosed with

a disability (Wilkerson, Yan et al., 2016). In AES, 20% or more of the student population receives special education services (Wilkerson, Yan et al., 2016).

The Stigma of Alternative Education and Outcomes

Often, when people hear the term alternative school or alternative education, they immediately deflect to a negative, deficit mindset. Regardless of the countless alternative purposes or models, there is a negative stigma associated with alternative education (Aron, 2006; Caroleo, 2014; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Foley & Pang, 2006; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Plows et al., 2017; Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). These settings are often labeled as dumping grounds for unsuccessful and problem young people (Caroleo, 2014; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Kim & Taylor, 2008). These schools are often seen as an easier way to move students to graduation due to students being deficient in some way (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). The view of these settings as providing an easy way to graduate can actually hinder student success in post-secondary education and the workforce (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Plows et al., 2017). It is also thought that AES staff ineffective teachers, which leads to a poor quality of education (Aron, 2006; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016).

Due to the deficit mindset and negative stigmas attached to AES, the students who attend are automatically labeled and viewed in an unfavorable manner (Caroleo, 2014). The negative views of AES and their students can potentially cause students to devalue their education, develop low self-esteem, and further disengage them from school (Caroleo, 2014). Giving credence to the stigma of AES is research that suggests students in these settings experience negative outcomes (Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Some research has shown that students in AES earn less credits per semester, have poorer school attendance, enter the juvenile justice system, do not receive an equitable education, and actually

have access to fewer resources than necessary to meet their needs (Kennedy-Lewis, 2016; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016). Some research even suggests that academic learning in many AES is slight and students feel less valued due to being alienated from peers in spaces operated for containment (Jordan et al., 2017; Plows et al., 2017).

Despite the research on negative student outcomes in AES, there are students who experience positive outcomes (Garner, 2016; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016). Little is known about exactly how AES meet the needs of students (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). More research is needed on AES to determine what factors lead to student success (Aron, 2006; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Garner, 2016). There is a need in the United States for alternative settings due to the number of students who are not successful in the traditional school setting (Raywid, 2001). “What a youngster who doesn’t thrive in one school environment needs is another environment” (Raywid, 2001, p. 582). A better understanding of factors that lead to student success in the AES could benefit educators, students, and communities. Further, if research could shine a light on the positive aspects of AES and how some students are led to success through these settings, perhaps this negative stigma could be forever changed.

Online Curriculum

The world accesses and interacts with information in an extremely different manner than they did even a decade ago. The vastness of information and the plethora of ways to access it have transformed the educational arena into one that is permeated with technology (Couros, 2015; LaFrance & Beck, 2014). The everyday lives or society are also immersed in technology. Today’s young people do not know a world without technology. Technology use is so engrained in students that many of them do not know what to do without it (Wang, Hsu, Campbell, & Longhurst, 2014). Due to the overabundance of technology and use of devices, participating in

online learning comes naturally for many students. Technology and online education have the ability to accelerate learning to unimaginable places (Couros, 2015). Online learning truly has the power to transform education, schools, and students (Corry & Carlson-Bancroft, 2014).

Online learning is not a new phenomenon. For almost two decades, this form of learning has been used in colleges and universities (Huh & Reigeluth, 2018; Karahan & Roehig, 2016; Kim, Park, & Cozart, 2014; Kimmons, 2015; Lamport & Metz, 2009). Through online education in the college arena, busy working adults have the flexibility to pursue a variety of degrees in multiple fields. Opportunities for online learning are not limited to the post-secondary education sector. Each of the 50 states of the United States and the District of Columbia offer some form of virtual learning for K-12 students and these offerings continue to grow (Bakia, Shear, Toyama, & Lassater, 2012; Greene & Hale, 2017; Kim et al., 2014; Kimmons, 2015; LaFrance & Beck, 2014; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). Initiatives by the federal government even suggest that online learning can transform education and serve all students (LaFrance & Beck, 2014). The National Technology Plan and creation of a Center for Online Learning and Students with Disabilities are two initiatives by the federal government that point to their commitment to expanding online education practices (LaFrance & Beck, 2014). The upsurge in the availability of online education has the ability to transform the future of learning (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2011). Online education allows learners to be self-paced and move beyond the time-based rules and constraints of the traditional form of education (Christensen et al., 2011; LaFrance & Beck, 2014; Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014). The evolution of online education also allows various educational institutions to pause and rethink the barriers that traditional educational norms cause in student learning (LaFrance & Beck, 2014). This form of learning also allows for quick diagnosis of student needs, interactive

content, immediate feedback, effective re-teaching of skills, efficient assessment of student learning, and easy access to stored samples of student work (Means et al., 2014; Watson & Watson, 2011). The advantages of an online forum of education seem endless.

Some AES are even beginning to integrate online learning and curriculum into their programs (Karahana & Roehrig, 2016). Research suggests that the use of technology in instruction can have benefits for at-risk students and better meet their needs (Karahana & Roehrig, 2016). Various types of online technology can promote student learning and lead to higher levels of school engagement and achievement (Corry & Carlson-Bancroft, 2014; Karahana & Roehrig, 2016). This technology has the potential to provide boundless opportunities for students and provide individualized environments to meet each student where they are (Corry & Carlson-Bancroft, 2014; Greene & Hale, 2017). Online learning may help students become more self-regulated learners due to the need for goal-setting and monitoring of progress (Huh & Reigeluth, 2018; Karahana & Roehrig, 2016; Kim et al., 2014). Questions still remain about the effectiveness, accountability, and teacher preparedness for online learning (Lampton & Metz, 2009). Further research is needed in these areas (LaFrance & Beck, 2014). Research is lacking on the outcomes of students in an AES with an online curriculum. Further exploration into this area is also needed.

Factors for Student Success

Success means different things to different people. If 10 people were asked about the meaning of success, 10 different answers may be given. The same is true in the field of education. Some students only feel successful when their grades are As and Bs. Other students may feel successful with a C or D because their goal is just to pass. Still other students may feel a sense of success just by being present at school and having the necessary supplies. Success is

truly as individualized and unique as each student (Plows et al., 2017). A significant outcome for one student may not be meaningful to another student (Plows et al., 2017). No matter how success is defined, there are certainly certain factors that either hinder or expedite student success.

When school success is thought of, many times academic outcomes in the core subjects of math, science, reading, and writing are used as indicators (Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2012; Plows et al., 2017). Some also consider graduation and gaining employment indicators of school success (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Plows et al., 2017). Success for other students may simply mean re-engaging them in the learning process (Plows et al., 2017). Regardless of what success looks like, there are certain factors that may play a role. Cognitive factors such as locus of control and achievement motivation may play a part in the success of students (Roblyer, Davis, Mills, Marshall, & Pape, 2008). The learning environment itself may also have an effect on student success (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Huh & Reigeluth, 2018; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011, 2012; Roblyer et al., 2008). Learning environment factors may include class size, how the day is structured, expectations, and the types of relationships school staff members have with students (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Plows et al., 2017).

These previous factors play a role in student success in any school setting. When focusing on students in an AES or an environment with an online curriculum, other factors may be important. In the AES or in an educational setting with an online curriculum many studies found that characteristics of learners were important factors in their success (Huh & Reigeluth, 2018; Lim et al., 2007; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011, 2012; Roblyer et al., 2008). Learner characteristics that may boost success include their achievement beliefs, level of responsibility, risk-taking behaviors, organizational skills, learning ability, and ability to self-regulate (Huh &

Reigeluth, 2018; Lim et al., 2007; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011, 2012; Roblyer et al., 2008). Some environmental factors were also shown to have an effect on student success (D'Angleo & Zemanick, 2009; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011, 2012; Roblyer et al., 2008). Instructional design of courses, feedback from teachers, school culture, available resources, availability of counseling services, and student-teacher interactions were all possible factors for student success (D'Angleo & Zemanick, 2009; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011, 2012; Roblyer et al., 2008). For students participating in an online curriculum; the technology skills of students, specific computer software, and time spent logged in to the online program were factors that may affect success (D'Angleo & Zemanick, 2009; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011, 2012). Research is specifically lacking in the area of student success in an AES with an online curriculum. The previously mentioned factors may or may not play a role in student success in an ALC with an online curriculum. There may be additional factors that this research can bring to light.

Personalized Learning

Students learn in different ways and all have special learning needs, yet instruction and assessment in most schools across the nation are standardized (Christensen et al., 2011). The current system of education often requires students to learn the same curriculum in the same way (Christensen et al., 2011; Watson & Watson, 2011). This model is focused on rigid time constraints and standardized content, not the needs of individual learners (Christensen et al., 2011; Watson & Watson, 2011). The traditional model of education holds time as the constant and learning as the variable, with the teacher leading all instruction (Antonetti & Garver, 2015; Childress & Benson, 2014). Students can become bored with this process or disengaged because they do not learn in this manner (Christensen et al., 2011). This boredom and disengagement in the learning process stem from instruction that is not relevant, timed pacing guides, and teachers

teaching in non-student-centric manner. Students truly need a customized educational experience. This customized experience is available through personalized learning.

Personalized learning “shifts the onus onto the learners and empowers them to take control of their own learning” (Couros, 2015, p. 140). This type of learning will accommodate different paces of learning and meet the individual learning needs of students (Christensen et al., 2011; Lim et al., 2007).

Personalized learning is not a new concept in the education arena. Even in 1958, Skinner discussed the concept of teaching machines being “used to support increased learner independence, allowing students to complete tasks independently and at their own pace” (Basham, Hall et al., 2016, p. 127). Personalized learning is focused on tailoring the learning experience to meet the needs of each student (Arbor, 2017; Basham, Hall et al., 2016; Bingham, 2017; Childress & Benson, 2014). This student-centered approach is built on flexibility and allows learners to influence how, what, when, and where they learn (Arbor, 2017; Basham, Hall et al., 2016; Bingham, 2017; Childress & Benson, 2014; Lim et al., 2007). Students are co-creators in the learning process and are responsible for their learning; which leads to a self-directed, reflective learning process (Couros, 2017; Watson & Watson, 2011). This approach to learning generates student ownership of their learning (Childress & Benson, 2014). In a traditional educational experience, learners are often in a stance of competition against their peers. A personalized approach to learning removes this competition (Christensen et al., 2011). Learners involved in personalized education make their goals and only compete against themselves. This type of competition has the potential to empower and motivate learners.

One method of personalizing the learning process is through instructional software and technology (Basham, Hall et al., 2016; Bingham, 2017; Childress & Benson, 2014; Watson &

Watson, 2011). Some researchers and educators even suggest that the use of technology may be essential in the shift to a more learner-centered personalized model of education (Watson & Watson, 2011). Computer-assisted instruction (CAI) or computer-based instruction (CBI) basically guides students through learning based on their performance (Basham, Hall et al., 2016; Watson & Watson, 2011). Students in this type of learning environment must be taught self-regulation skills (Basham, Smith, & Satter, 2016; Bingham, 2017; Watson & Watson, 2011). Most students do not possess these skills innately, thus they must be explicitly taught, modeled, and revisited for students to have positive outcomes (Basham, Smith, & Satter, 2016). Personalized learning, when carried out effectively, has the power to motivate students, meet the needs of students, enhance learning, and create lifelong learners (Bingham, 2017; Childress & Benson, 2014; Prain et al., 2013). Personalized learning experiences truly provide students with the tools and skills necessary to navigate not only their learning, but their future. Opposing views believe that too much student choice may undermine the learning goals and actual hinder the learning process (Bingham, 2017; Prain et al., 2013). Personalized instruction with the use of technology is still an area that requires more research to determine how student outcomes are affected (Basham, Hall et al., 2016; Bingham, 2017; Watson & Watson, 2011).

Summary

Alternative schools have been in existence since the 1960s (Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016). Alternative settings have often received labels as the dumping grounds for unwanted students and less than average staff (Caroleo, 2014). There are currently a large variety of AESs with a wide array of missions, but the original focus of these settings was to “address the unique needs of students who are flagged as being at risk of school failure” (Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016, p. 67). The antiquated one size fits all approach of

the traditional school setting does not meet the needs of all students (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Students sit in classrooms each day as “square pegs being forced into a round hole of education” that does not engage them, make them feel valued, or believe they can be successful (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009, p. 212). These students may need educators with a different approach to instruction or they may need an educational setting that is outside of the norm. Alternative education must be focused on adapting the education process so the needs of individual students are met (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

The look, feel, and purpose of alternative educational settings continues to morph as educational leaders try to design instructional settings that best meet the needs of students with academic, social, and behavioral problems. Educational settings that once only catered to students with disabilities or behavior problems are now welcoming students who are overage or who just do not fit in the traditional classroom setting. Many AESs are changing what instruction looks like by adopting blended learning or online learning environments. Much research exists on negative outcomes of students in these settings, but research is lacking on students who attain positive outcomes after alternative placements (Beken et al., 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Garner, 2016; Scwab et al., 2016). The ALC is an alternative placement where research is lacking (Henderson et al., 2018). Qualitative research is lacking overall for all types of alternative settings (Free, 2017). This study focused on students who are successful after being placed in an ALC with an online curriculum, which is a gap in the research.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This qualitative multiple case study sought to discover the factors that contribute to the success of students in alternative learning centers with online curriculums in Central Virginia. A deeper understanding of these factors may assist district leaders and leaders of alternative settings in designing and improving alternative settings. These factors may also assist administrators as they select which students to place in alternative settings. A qualitative multiple case study design best suited this study as the researcher sought an understanding of factors that contribute to the success of students in ALCs by using an inductive investigative strategy to form a deep and rich description of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This chapter includes the research design, research questions, description of the setting, information on the participants, procedures for the study, the researcher's role in the study, data collection methods, data analysis information, trustworthiness strategies, ethical considerations, and a summary of the section.

Design

The design of this research was a qualitative multiple case study. Qualitative research brings an in-depth understanding of a problem or phenomenon by providing rich data which provides insight from participants. The choice to conduct qualitative research comes from a desire to delve deeper into an issue and know the why behind the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative studies utilize an inquiry process of understanding to examine a problem in society (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An inductive method is used to study a phenomenon in a natural setting allowing people or participants to bring meaning; resulting in a rich description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Qualitative research was used for this study to address the meaning students, parents, and staff can bring to student success in an ALC with an online curriculum and to truly understand the nature of this phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Case study research is a challenging venture and incorporates several components that set it apart from other research designs (Yin, 2018). First, a case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in depth and within its real-world context” (Yin, 2018, p. 15). This case study included a bounded system or definitions of time, place, and any other clarifying items (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). For the research of focus, the cases were students who have recently been successful in an alternative learning center and their support systems. Bounds included the context, criteria for success, a set amount of time spent in the alternative learning center, and a time restraint of attending within the last three years. Next, a case study involves a unique situation where there may be more variables than data points (Yin, 2018). A case study also integrates specific methods of data collection and analysis, relies on multiple data sources, and must have data triangulate in the end (Yin, 2018).

The current study sought to understand the factors that contribute to the success of students in ALCs with an online curriculum in Central Virginia. A case study design was appropriate for this topic because the research seeks to explain a contemporary circumstance, the success of students in an ALC, within its real-world context, the environment of the ALC (Yin, 2018). Further, this research proposed an extensive and in-depth description of the phenomenon of the success of students in an ALC (Yin, 2018). Part of what makes this study extensive was the use of students, parents, teachers, and administrators as participants. Hearing the voices of these many types of participants further sets this apart from some other approaches, such as phenomenology. Case study research also provides the researcher with a choice of what is to be

studied based on the purpose and central question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I was able to choose the cases and determine the bounded system of the cases, which aligned well with this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). For this study, three students were chosen to represent the cases, making this a multiple case study. A multiple case study design is simply a variant of the case study design, with no broad distinction (Yin, 2018). Multiple case studies are often preferred over single case designs due to results being more powerful (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009). A multiple case design was chosen for this study in an effort to produce more robust results.

Research Questions

Central Question

What factors contribute to the success of students in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia?

Sub-questions

1. What environmental factors contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia?
2. What social support factors contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia?
3. What emotional support factors contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia?
4. What academic support factors contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia?
5. What self-regulatory skills contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia?

Setting

Cases for this study were chosen from two ALCs in Central Virginia. Both sites were part of local school systems and operate as centers in those systems. These sites serve sixth through twelfth grade students who have either been placed at the center as a disciplinary consequence, because they are overage and not with their correct peer group, or due to a continued pattern of academic failure in the traditional school setting. These sites mainly use online curriculum in the form of the GradPoint program by Pearson and Apex Learning. GradPoint is a digital learning program designed specifically for sixth through twelfth graders (Pearson, 2018). Apex Learning is also a digital curriculum designed to meet the individual needs of students (Apex Learning, 2019). These programs allow for the creation of personalized learning pathways and are self-paced (Pearson, 2018). Students make goals with their teachers and/or administrators and work through the curriculum and assessments through a digital format mixed with some direct instruction. Certified teachers are onsite to assist students in accessing the curriculum. Each site serves 20 to 60 students. Students can transition from the alternative center back into the traditional school setting based on improvements in behavior and/or academic performance.

For the purposes of this study, Central Learning Center and Eastern Learning Center were used as pseudonyms to identify the two ALCs. Central Learning Center was located in a suburban area of Central Virginia. Eastern Learning Center was located in a rural area of Central Virginia. Both centers were run by the local public school system and were located in sites separate from any other school in the local public school system. Students were sent to the sites by the school board due to disciplinary issues or by local school administrators due to academic failure or being one or more years behind. The student to teacher ratio in both settings ranges

from 5 students to 1 teacher, to 10 students to 1 teacher. Teachers were available to assist students with any questions or difficulties they may have while they work. The schedule of each ALC was very structured.

Though the sites were similar in nature, there were many differences. Central Learning Center housed around 60 students. Central Learning Center employed more teachers and could accommodate more students than Eastern Learning Center. Central Learning Center also had an on-site administrator who oversaw the teachers and handled any student discipline concerns. The site was located in several trailers behind a local school, but was separate from that school. Students were able to visit the cafeteria of this school to obtain lunches, but had to bring them back to their classrooms to eat. The various trailers allowed for a blended learning atmosphere with extremely small class sizes. This site offered more direct instruction from teachers than Central Learning Center. Chromebook stations allowed students a place to work on the Apex Learning System. This online learning format allowed high school students the opportunity to earn the various elective credits needed for graduation. This format also allowed some students to take extra courses during a semester to expedite their progress towards graduation.

One aspect of Central Learning Center that is evident upon entry into the office is the family-like atmosphere the staff has created. Each staff member encountered was friendly and visibly happy to be there. Also notable was that each student I crossed paths with greeted me with kind words and a smile. The culture of this center was built upon high academic and social standards. The administrator has worked hard to create a comfortable atmosphere where students are expected to excel behaviorally, academically, and socially. A feeling of pride exuded through the center and is evident in staff and students.

Eastern Learning Center housed around 20 students. The center was located in a building that housed several other county offices. The site was divided into two main classrooms, a lunch area, and two spaces that allow for elective class activities. The two extra spaces could be used for exercise classes, gardening, and woodworking. Each student was assigned a study area in a classroom. This area housed their workspace and computer. The majority of the student's day was spent on the computer using the GradPoint program to complete lessons and assessments. Structured breaks were given each day to allow students to attend an elective-type class, such as physical education. There was also an outside learning space with a greenhouse. Students had time to work outside in the greenhouse and garden area. Lunch was delivered to the site from a nearby school cafeteria. Students ate in a lunchroom adjacent to their work area. Eastern Learning Center did not employ an on-site administrator. This site employed two teachers who oversee the day to day running of the school and supervision of students. Any severe disciplinary infractions or major site decisions were handled by the assistant superintendent of the local school system.

These sites were selected based on being attached to the local school system, use of an online curriculum, having a blended population of sixth through twelfth graders, various criteria for entrance of students, the ability of students to transition back to the traditional school setting, and the proximity to the researcher. The majority of students attending each site were there based on the recommendation of an administrator from the traditional school setting or based on a school board disciplinary decision. Parents of recommended students meet with the school administrator to discuss possible placement at the center and must agree to this placement. This is a particular area of interest to the researcher and is also a major reason the sites were chosen.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used for this study along with criterion sampling. Purposeful sampling is the primary sampling method used in qualitative research to ensure that participants can “inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 326). Criterion sampling was used to find quality cases that meet specified criteria for inclusion in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The cases for this study, who were also be participants, are three students who are currently placed in one of the ALC sites. The three cases were chosen for the study based on the following criteria: (a) student is currently enrolled or was enrolled in one of the alternative learning centers for at least one semester and (b) student has shown improvement in core class grades, or student has shown improvement in behavior based on teacher input and discipline record. Some cases may have transitioned back to the traditional school setting or graduated from school, but this is not a criterion for selection. Based on the criteria for enrollment in the ALC sites students will have either earned an average of 60 or below in at least one core class when enrolled in the traditional school setting prior to placement in the ALC or have a history of problematic behavior, based on discipline referrals, when enrolled in the traditional school setting prior to placement in the alternative learning center. The first criterion for participants was a given due to purpose of the study. The second criterion was based on how successful students are defined in the literature. Particularly in an ALC setting, students are deemed successful when an improvement in course grades or behavior occurs (Henderson & Barnes, 2016; Henderson et al., 2018; Perzigian et al., 2017). When such improvements are observed in students over a period of time, the student is able to transition back to the traditional setting (Henderson & Barnes, 2016; Henderson et al., 2018; Perzigian et al., 2017). In general, any student who is able to meet the requirements to

graduate from high school is recognized as successful (Beken et al., 2009; Burdick, 2014; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016).

Teachers and administrators of both ALC sites recommended students that met the specified criteria. An initial questionnaire was given to all possible student participants of the study. The questionnaire was solely used to collect information to determine if students meet the criteria for the study. The researcher checked questionnaire information to ensure each student met the selection criteria. As the cases also include the support structure around the student, parents of the selected cases were included in the study along with staff members of the alternative learning centers. Staff participants included four to nine teachers, teacher-aides, or administrators of one of the ALC sites who have worked with one of the students selected as cases.

Procedures

First, approval of the proposal defense was granted by the dissertation committee. Next, approval to conduct research was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University (see Appendix A). The researcher then gained site approval from superintendents of the school districts and site administrators (see Appendix B). After all approvals occurred, administrators of the two ALC sites were asked to suggest students for the study who met the pre-determined criteria. With the help of the site administrators, the researcher identified 10 possible students based on the criteria to ensure a sample size of three was reached. A letter explaining the purpose and details of the study was given to each recommended student and their parents (see Appendix C). A screening survey accompanied the letter to ensure the criteria to be included in the study were met (see Appendix D). Staff members of the two ALCs who have worked with one of the students were also given the letter explaining the study. The letter also

notified each possible participant of compensation for the study in the form of a restaurant gift card in the amount of \$20. Each possible participant was notified that participation in the study was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Only students who met the selection criteria were included in the study. One or both parents of student participants were included in the study. Alternative learning center staff participants must have worked with one of the student participants. Each case ended up including the student, one or two parents, and at least one staff member who has worked with the student. Students, parents, and staff who agreed to participate in the study were given the appropriate consent form (see Appendices E and F). Once these forms were returned, each participant was given a questionnaire to obtain demographic and biographical information (see Appendices G, H, and I).

Interview protocols were created for interviews with students, parents, and school staff members (Creswell & Poth, 2018) (see Appendices J, K, and L). Interviews were scheduled with each participant. Interviews took place face-to-face in an environment that made the participants comfortable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interview protocol was utilized for each interview session, but each session resembled a guided conversation, rather than a structured inquiry (Yin, 2018). Each interview was recorded using an audio-recording device (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used a professional transcription service to transcribe each interview. The transcripts were sent to participants for review and verification of accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After verification, the transcripts were uploaded to the Atlas.ti software program. Atlas.ti is a computer software program that enables the researcher to organize data files for coding and comparison (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data was then analyzed using Yin's (2018) strategies for multiple case analysis.

The Researcher's Role

As the researcher, I was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I was responsible for conducting interviews, collecting documents, and analyzing all data for this case study. I have worked in public education settings for 18 years by teaching in elementary grades for 14 years and serving as an assistant principal for 4 years. At the time of this study, I worked as an assistant principal of a traditional middle school in rural Central Virginia.

As an assistant principal in a traditional public school setting, a large portion of my day-to-day routine involved dealing with student discipline and working on strategies for students who are unsuccessful academically. I always tried to make decisions based on what is best for students, but many times became frustrated when improvement in behavior or academics was not seen. I wanted to find ways to help these struggling students meet academic and behavioral success. The ALC in my previous school district was only a few years old. The dynamic of this learning center was unique in that it does not just focus on students with problematic behavior, but also on students who are overage due to previous grade retention and academic failure. The ALC in my district and one in a neighboring district were trying to personalize learning for students via an online curriculum. There are students who made improvements and qualified to transition back to the traditional setting, while other students did not make improvements. I was curious about what helped produce change and success in some students. As I recommended students for placement in the ALC, I wondered if I should look for specific characteristics in students that would make this the best placement for them.

I worked in the school district where one of the ALC sites was housed. I had no direct connection with this site, its staff members, the students, or parents. I also had no connection

with the second ALC from which possible participants were chosen. All researchers bring their philosophical assumptions and biases into their research (Creswell, 2013). As a social constructivist, I relied on the views of participants in this study to understand the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To avoid bias in the data analysis and collection, I reported all data honestly and accurately (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection

The goal of data collection is to gather sound information to answer the research questions of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). Researchers conducting a case study should use multiple sources of evidence, create a case study database, maintain a chain of evidence, and address all anticipated ethical issues that may arise during data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). This study used data from document and artifact analysis, graphic representations from participants, and interviews to answer the research questions. Data was collected in the order of the previous statement. Interviews occurred as the final method of data collection to provide the researcher time to review documents and graphic representations from participants. The analysis of these data provided the researcher with information that makes them more familiar with participants. The documents and graphic representations also provided information that the researcher would like to ask about during the interviews.

Using multiple data sources strengthens the quality of the study, creates an in-depth understanding of the topic of study, and allowed for data triangulation where findings of the study are supported by more than one source of evidence (Yin, 2018). A case study database was created so information could be retrieved in an efficient manner later if necessary (Yin, 2018). The researcher organized all electronic data sources, notes, and documents to increase the reliability of the case study (Yin, 2018). To increase the construct validity of the study, a chain

of evidence was created (Yin, 2018). The researcher ensured that any reader of the case study is able to follow the steps of the study (Yin, 2018). The processes were relayed in a concise manner. Ethical issues were addressed by ensuring participants had a clear understanding of the purpose of the study, using pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants and sites, and storing data in a secure location (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Document and Artifact Analysis

Several documents, artifacts, and visual materials were examined to help build an in-depth picture of the cases (Creswell, 2013). Documents can play an important role in case study research due to providing details that corroborate evidence from other sources and enabling inferences to be made (Yin, 2018). Student goal-setting forms, mission and vision statements for the ALCs, student progress reports with teacher comments, student report cards with teacher comments, state testing scores, student discipline records, ALC curriculum materials, and photographs of each site setup were analyzed. All documents were requested from the ALC administrators. Photographs of the site setup were taken by me during visits to the sites.

Student-goal setting forms were used as a data source to gain an understanding of what students expected from the ALC. Mission and vision statements from the ALCs along with curriculum were analyzed to understand what the center is all about and what their philosophy on learning involves. Student progress reports with teacher comments, student report cards with teacher comments, state testing data, and student discipline records may give insight into progression and improvement of students throughout their enrollment in the ALC. Photographs of the ALC sites may provide unique factors of the learning environment that contributed to student success. The analysis of these documents may assist the researcher in answering the research questions about which environmental and academic factors aided students in success.

Graphic Representations

Student, parent, and staff participants were asked to create or provide a graphic representation of what it means to succeed. Graphic representations may include a cartoon, drawing, meme, painting, or photograph. Participants met with me in the ALC setting to provide a comfortable environment. Participants were given a directions sheet with unrelated examples to ensure they have an understanding of the task (see Appendix M). Participants wrote a short narrative to accompany the graphic representation. The narrative described the graphic representation. Each participant was given as much time as they needed and had a private space to complete the graphic representation and short narrative. Participants were given a folder to place their finished product in. The folder was given to me so data can be properly secured.

Graphics were reviewed and analyzed for patterns or themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The graphic representations may provide insight into how the students view success and/or what their motivating factors are. The graphic representations may also clarify how parents and staff members view success and how they view their role in the process of student success. The graphic representations may assist the researcher in answering the research questions about which environmental factors, social support factors, emotional support factors, or academic support factors aided students in success.

Interviews

Interviews are a vital source of case study evidence (Yin, 2018). Focused, in-depth interviews with a fluid stream of questions were used to collect data (Yin, 2018). Each participant type was interviewed using an interview protocol guide with pre-determined questions that were used to guide the conversation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). There were separate interview protocols for students, parents, and staff members. Interviews were

audio-recorded and then transcribed using an outside transcription service. Transcriptions were sent to interviewees for member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transcriptions were also reviewed by a colleague for peer review (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All interview transcriptions were then uploaded to Atlas.ti to assist in data analysis. Data from interviews may assist the researcher in answering research questions about which environmental factors, social support factors, emotional support factors, and academic factors aided students in success.

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions for Student Interviews

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How would you describe your strengths? How would you describe your weaknesses?
3. What led to your placement in the alternative learning center?
4. Tell me about the time you spent in the alternative learning center.
5. Tell me about your teachers in the alternative learning center. Describe your relationship with these teachers.
6. What characteristics or actions of the teachers do you feel helped your learning experience?
7. How was the curriculum and instruction at the alternative learning center different than what you had experienced before?
8. What elements of the curriculum and instruction do you feel helped your learning experience?
9. How was the learning environment in the alternative learning center different than what you had experienced before?
10. What elements of the learning environment in the alternative learning center do you feel helped your learning experience?

11. What was the goal-setting process like in the alternative learning center? How do you feel this helped you?
12. What strategies did you use while placed in the alternative learning center to self-evaluate and self-monitor your academic achievement and/or behavior?
13. How did you seek help with academic information you were unsure of? Who did you seek this help from?
14. How did you review or study information to prepare for quizzes or tests?
15. Describe your relationships and interactions with your peers in the alternative learning center.
16. Describe your parents' views toward education and tell me about their involvement in your education and with the alternative learning center.
17. How did your placement at the alternative learning center change your strengths and weaknesses?
18. How did the alternative learning center help you change your behaviors?
19. How did the alternative learning center help you change your academic achievement?
20. How would you define success for yourself?
21. What other information would you like to share about your time in the alternative learning center or what you feel helped you improve your grades and/or behavior?

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions for Parent Interviews

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Describe your view of education and what you believe your role is in the education of your child.

3. How would you describe the strengths of your child? How would you describe the weaknesses of your child?
4. What led to your child's placement in the alternative learning center?
5. Tell me about the time your child spent in the alternative learning center.
6. Tell me about the teachers in the alternative learning center.
7. Describe your relationship and interactions with the teachers of the alternative learning center.
8. What about the teachers do you feel helped your child's learning experience?
9. How do you feel the curriculum and instruction at the alternative learning center were different than that of the traditional school setting?
10. What elements of the curriculum and instruction do you feel helped your child's learning experience?
11. How was the learning environment in the alternative learning center different than that of the traditional school setting?
12. What elements of the learning environment in the alternative learning center do you feel helped your child's learning experience?
13. How did your child seek help with academic information they were unsure of? Who did they seek this help from?
14. How did your child review or study information to prepare for quizzes or tests?
15. Describe your child's organizational and goal setting skills. Do you feel these changed at all while they were placed in the alternative learning center?
16. Describe your child's interactions with their peers in the alternative learning center.

17. Describe your involvement in your child's education and with the alternative learning center.
18. In what ways did the staff of the alternative learning center reach out to parents, try to involve parents, or make parents feel welcomed?
19. How did your child's placement at the alternative learning center change their strengths and weaknesses?
20. How did the alternative learning center help your child change their behaviors?
21. How did the alternative learning center help your child change their academic achievement?
22. How would you define success for your child?
23. What other information would you like to share about your child's time in the alternative learning center or what you feel helped your child improve their grades and/or behavior?

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions for Alternative Learning Center Staff Interviews

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How would you describe your strengths as a teacher? How would you describe your weaknesses as a teacher?
3. What led to the student's placement in the alternative learning center?
4. Tell me about the time you spent working with this student in the alternative learning center.
5. How would you describe the strengths of this student? How would you describe the weaknesses of this student?
6. Describe the curriculum and instruction at the alternative learning center.

7. What elements of the curriculum and instruction do you feel helped improve this student's academics and behavior?
8. Describe the learning environment of the alternative learning center.
9. What elements of this environment do you feel help students improve their academics and behavior?
10. What was the goal-setting process like in the alternative learning center? How do you feel this helps students?
11. What strategies do students use while placed in the alternative learning center to self-evaluate and self-monitor their academic achievement and/or behavior?
12. How did the student seek help with academic information they were unsure of? Who did they seek this help from?
13. Describe the involvement of the student's parents with the alternative learning center.
14. Describe how the alternative learning center tries to engage parents in the learning process and in the school setting.
15. Describe the student's relationships and interactions with their peers.
16. How does the center decide the student is ready to transition back to the traditional classroom setting?
17. Are there certain traits the student has that you feel aided in their academic and behavioral improvement? If so, what are they?
18. Do you feel placement in the alternative learning center changed the strengths and weaknesses of the student? If so, how?
19. How would you define success for this student?

20. What other information would you like to share about the alternative learning center or what you feel helped the student improve their grades and/or behavior?

General knowledge or background questions were used to open each interview.

Questions 1 through 4 in the student interviews, 1 through 5 in the parent interviews, and 1 through 5 in the ALC staff interviews were used as general knowledge or background questions to begin each discussion. Other questions were developed to ensure that each research question was addressed. These interview questions were also developed with social cognitive theory in mind. This theory proposed that interactions with social environments influence learning (Bandura, 2012). Therefore, questions that specifically examined research questions are also tie to examining social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory also posits that people have an influence over their learning (Bandura, 2006). Therefore, students in the ALC setting are contributors to their success. Question 2 in the student interview, question 3 in the parent interview, and question 14 in the ALC staff interview examined traits of the student that may have aided in their success. Literature suggests that teachers play an integral role in socializing students (Free, 2017). Questions 5 and 6 in the student interviews, questions 6 through 8 in the parent interviews, and question 2 in the ALC staff interviews focused on teachers in an effort to discover teacher characteristics, actions, or roles that may have aided students in success. Self-regulation theory was used as a secondary theory in the study. This theory posits that students take an active role in their learning through various self-regulatory subprocesses (Zimmerman, 1986). Questions 11 through 14 in the student interviews, questions 13 through 15 in the parent interviews, and questions 10 through 12 in the staff interviews examined the use of these self-regulatory strategies.

Sub-question 1 was examined through student interview questions 9 and 10, parent interview questions 11 and 12, and ALC staff interview questions 8 and 9. Sub-question 2 was examined through student interview questions 15 and 16, parent interview questions 6 through 8 and 13 through 14, and ALC staff interview questions 13 through 15. Sub-question 3 was examined through student interview questions 15, 16, 5, and 6, parent interview questions 6 through 8 and 16 through 17, and ALC staff interview questions 13 through 15. Finally, sub-question 4 was examined through student interview questions 5 through 8, parent interview questions 6 through 8 and 9 through 10, and ALC staff interview questions 6 and 7. Questions 17 through 21 in the student interviews, questions 19 through 23 in the parent interviews, and questions 16 through 20 in the ALC staff interviews were broader in nature and examined the central research question. These questions were constructed in an effort to grasp the overall ALC setting and capture any other factors that may have aided students in success. The purpose of these interview questions was to allow each participant to give insight and deeper meaning to possible factors that aided students in success.

Data Analysis

When data analysis began, documents and artifacts were organized in a logical manner realizing that analyzing data from documents follows the same line of thinking as analyzing observation or interview data (Stake, 1995). I read over each document several times to gain a general sense of the information before making reflective notes (Creswell, 2009; Yin, 2018). A matrix or chart was constructed to notate reoccurring patterns or ideas from documents. Codes were assigned to the ideas that emerge. From the codes, themes were developed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This same process was used to analyze the graphic representations.

I utilized a holistic approach to data analysis whereby the whole case was analyzed, not just a particular aspect (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each interview session was audio recorded, then transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. All transcriptions were uploaded to Atlas.ti for organization, coding, and comparative purposes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the data collection process, a reflective journal was used to make notes after each interview session. This journal assisted with remembering subtle nuances, actions, facial expressions, or other noteworthy items that cannot be captured by audio recordings.

Multiple case study analysis aims to look at each case, then compare all cases to discover the theme or “functional relationship that strings the cases together” (Stake, 2006, p. 39). The first step in this process was to conduct a within-case analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). A within-case analysis is where the researcher looks at each individual case to discover themes or patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The data for each of the three cases was examined individually first. Data for each case included interviews of that student or case, interviews of the parents, interviews of the staff members who worked with that student, graphic representations from each participant, and progress reports for that student. An inductive strategy was used to analyze this data (Yin, 2018). I poured through the data from each case multiple times working it from the ground up to understand each individual case (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). I made notes and began to apply codes to the data using the Atlas.ti software (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In vivo codes, or exact words of participants, were used when possible (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Assertions were made about each case based on the themes that emerge (Yin, 2018). Studies such as this one that use a multiple case design are actually seen as offering more persuasive evidence and being more robust (Yin, 2018).

Once each case was analyzed, a cross-case analysis was conducted (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). In the cross-case analysis, I analyzed themes across cases to determine commonalities and outliers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). Throughout the analysis process the researcher must ensure the analysis is conducted in a manner to produce high quality (Yin, 2018). To accomplish a high quality analysis the researcher must attend to all the evidence, investigate all plausible rival interpretations, address the most significant aspect of the case or cases, and demonstrate a true understanding of the topic (Yin, 2018). The final report includes themes in the three individual cases and five to six themes that all three cases have in common (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of studies is essential to ensuring the quality of the research and its noteworthiness to readers (Schwandt, 2015). It is important for researchers to produce valid and reliable knowledge that professionals in applied fields can have confidence in as they seek new information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers must establish trustworthiness of the study by addressing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Schwandt, 2015).

Credibility

Credibility is similar to internal validity and addresses respondents' views being represented accurately (Schwandt, 2015). In this study, credibility was established using member checks, peer review, and prolonged engagement. Member checking involves taking data, analyses, and interpretations back to participants to judge accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Peer review is an external check method where a knowledgeable colleague of the researcher is used as a sounding board or "devil's advocate" to keep the researcher honest and ask questions about the study (Creswell, 2013; Schwandt, 2015). Prolonged engagement

involved the researcher familiarizing themselves with the site and participants and building rapport with participants and site managers (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability is similar to reliability and ensures a logical process of inquiry that is well documented (Schwandt, 2015). Dependability in this study was established through data triangulation and the development of an audit trail. Data triangulation is the use of multiple and different data sources to substantiate evidence (Creswell, 2013). Data was collected from multiple sources (interviews, documents, photographs, and graphic representations) to ensure the integrity of the data. An audit trail is “a systematically maintained documentation system” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 10). The researcher organized all materials from the study to include; personal notes, data, a description of procedures, explanations of concepts, and any documents (Schwandt, 2015).

Confirmability is similar to objectivity and links assertions, findings, and interpretations back to the data (Schwandt, 2015). Confirmability in this study was established through auditing and peer debriefing. External audits of the data will be conducted by an auditor with no connection to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher sought the assistance of someone familiar with the research topic to review data and findings, ask difficult questions, and basically keep the researcher honest (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability is similar to external validity and deals with findings transferring from one case to another (Schwandt, 2015). Transferability in this study was established by using thick descriptions of the setting, procedures, and assumptions used in the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These thick descriptions were the responsibility of the researcher.

Ethical Considerations

Researchers must consider ethical issues to protect research participants, protect the integrity of the research, and guard against any possible negative reflections on the organization or institution involved in the study (Creswell, 2018). During this study, many steps were taken to ensure the research is carried out in an ethical manner. First, approval was obtained from Liberty University's IRB, the superintendents of both school districts which house the ALCs of focus, and the administrators of the ALCs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Anonymity of all participants and sites was ensured by using pseudonyms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Appropriate consent and assent forms were obtained from all participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant was informed of the general purpose of the study and understood that their participation was voluntary (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All data from the study was secured by using password protection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher ensured that all data from interviews, graphic representations, and document analysis was honestly and accurately reported (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

This qualitative multiple case study gathered data to understand what factors contribute to the success of students in an ALC with an online curriculum in Central Virginia. The study utilized a multiple case study approach to examine the three student participants or cases. Teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals who worked with the three students were included in the study along with parents of each participant to provide a deeper understanding of the participants and their success in the ALC setting. Multiple sources of data were collected to provide an in-depth understanding of these factors (Yin, 2018). Data analysis followed the multiple case study analysis prescribed by Yin (2018). This chapter provided detailed

information on the research methodology by describing the research design, setting, participants, procedures, researcher's role, data collection methods, data analysis, trustworthiness methods, and ethical considerations of the researcher.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to discover the factors which contribute to the success of students in alternative learning centers with an online curriculum in Central Virginia. Three cases located between two ALC sites were used to gather data. Cases include three students of ALCs and their support systems. Data was gathered from participants utilizing document and artifact analysis, graphic representations of success, and interviews. This chapter begins with a description of each participant. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants and ALC sites. Next, the themes that arose from data analysis are discussed and research questions are answered. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Participants

This study included three cases. The cases were ALC students and their support systems. For each case, the support system included a parent, a teacher, and the site or ALC administrator. Participants for this study were chosen using purposeful sampling coupled with criterion sampling. Participants included three students, three parents of these students, two ALC teachers who worked with the students, and two administrators of the ALC sites. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to ensure confidentiality. Verbatim quotes were used as often as possible to reflect the voice of participants. Participant demographic information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant Name	Participant Type	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Education
Lauren	Student	Female	14	African American	Current 9 th Grader
Michelle	Parent	Female	35	African American	Bachelor's Degree
Jase	Student	Male	17	Caucasian	Current 11 th grader
Mike	Parent	Male	36	Caucasian	High School Diploma
Mark	Teacher	Male	39	Caucasian	Bachelor's Degree
Todd	Site Administrator	Male	38	African American	Doctorate
Travis	Student	Male	17	Caucasian	Current 12 th Grader
Judy	Parent	Female	46	Caucasian	Less than High School Diploma
Shirley	Site Administrator	Female	52	African American	Master's Degree
Karen	Teacher	Female	44	African American	Master's Degree

Lauren

Lauren was a 14-year-old African American female student at Eastern Learning Center. She attended the learning center for one school year. At the time of the study, she was a ninth grader who had met all criteria to transition back to the traditional school setting. Lauren can best be described as a vibrant young lady who gets along well with everyone. Her positive attitude was contagious. Lauren had one older sister. They both lived with her mother, who was a single parent. Lauren's father passed away suddenly when she was three years old.

Academic struggles became evident for Lauren during her first grade year. She had difficulty with reading, grammar, and math. Lauren's first-grade teacher noted that she did not

always use time wisely, did not always complete classwork and homework, and did not work independently. At the end of the 2010-2011 school year, Lauren was retained in the first grade. Lauren still struggled with some reading and math concepts during her second time in first grade and continued to struggle in second grade. She entered third grade in 2013 working below grade level. Her report card consisted of mainly Ds and Fs. She was retained again in third grade. Due to academic concerns, her teacher recommended Lauren go through the Child Study process. This process took an in depth look at Lauren. Sociocultural, educational, and psychological evaluations were completed. Lauren was found ineligible for any special education services.

Lauren made improvements during her second year of third grade, but continued to display weaknesses in several academic areas throughout her elementary school experience. Lauren has attended school regularly since kindergarten and has no discipline infractions in her cumulative record. Many teachers described her as outgoing, friendly, sweet, and hard-working. Yet, for some reason she was not meeting academic success in the traditional academic setting. Math and English would remain areas of struggle during sixth grade. Yet, her sixth-grade year would be a turning point for Lauren.

Lauren was recommended for Eastern Learning Center by her sixth-grade assistant principal. She was overage, due to being retained in first grade and again in third grade. Academic success in school seemed like an unattainable outcome before coming to Eastern Learning Center. During her sixth-grade year, Lauren realized that being behind academically and not with her correct peer group was not something she wanted to continue. Lauren stated, "I started to realize I really do need to catch up because I started missing out on a lot of

things that I really wanted to do as I got older.” Lauren’s mother felt like being behind and struggling academically was affecting Lauren’s self-esteem.

During her time at Eastern Learning Center, Lauren has made As and Bs. Her self-esteem, confidence in her ability, and overall attitude have improved during her time at Eastern Learning Center. Lauren stated, “I haven’t had A’s and B’s in a long time and just to see that, it makes me very happy.” She has been able to successfully complete academic material and has moved into the ninth grade. Due to her academic success, good attendance, and continued positive behavior; Lauren will transition to the high school for the 2019-2020 school year as a 10th grader.

Michelle

Michelle, Lauren’s mother, was a 35-year-old African American female. She was a single parent to Lauren and an older teenage daughter who would be entering a university in the Fall of 2019. Michelle had worked very hard as a single parent, going to school to earn a degree, and working full time. She emphasized that she wanted her daughters to succeed and stayed on them to do their best. Michelle expressed “They see how I have to stay up and study, study, study. So, you know, they want to work hard to get to where they need to be.”

Michelle believed education was valuable and did everything she could to help her daughters. She was a parent who would sit at the kitchen table in the evenings with her children to assist them with their homework. She had been very concerned about Lauren in the past stating, “She really hated school before. In elementary school, she would say mom, I just don’t like school and that kind of scared me.” After attending Eastern Learning Center for one year, Michelle saw such a change in Lauren. She believed this experience has made Lauren more confident and happier. Michelle expressed, “Coming to this program has made her really see

that she can always move on from what she has been through.” Michelle was visibly proud of her daughter and excited for what the future held for her now that she could transition back to high school with her same-aged peers.

Jase

Jase was a 17-year-old Caucasian male in the 11th grade. Jase had two younger brothers. All three boys lived with both parents, who were married. He had attended Eastern Learning Center for two years at the time of this study. Jase was a laid back young man who got along well with others. He struggled to complete work, which set him behind academically. When asked to describe his strengths and weaknesses, Jase mentioned, “I don’t work as well doing paperwork. Sometimes I struggle just to get things done. I need to take my own pace to get it done instead of working fast.” He admitted to not being motivated and feeling like there was no way out of his academic failure. Jase was placed at Eastern Learning Center in 2017 after failing ninth grade.

Jase seemed to move along well in school until he reached third grade. He earned many Ds and Fs during that year and was described by his teacher as having great difficulty completing tasks, as well as, chronic inattention. Jase’s report card during his third grade year noted that he struggled to follow directions, was inattentive, did not use time wisely, and did not respect school rules or authority. During that year, a child study team convened to discuss Jase’s progress. The team decided to proceed with a complete evaluation to gather more information. It was noted that Jase required a great deal of one-on-one support. Further testing demonstrated that Jase was not a child in need of special education services.

Jase continued to struggle with academics in the fourth and fifth grades. Upon entry in middle school, Jase began to fall further and further behind. The prominent grades on his report

cards from sixth through eighth grade were Ds and Fs. Middle school also began an increase in disciplinary infractions that would continue in his ninth grade year. These infractions included disruptive demonstrations, the use of profanity and other inappropriate language, tardies to class, and several incidences of skipping class. Jase earned four Fs and one D during his ninth-grade year and skipping class became an issue.

It was at that point that he was recommended for Eastern Learning Center. While at Eastern Learning Center, Jase has made great academic and behavioral improvements. There have been no disciplinary infractions in his tenure there. His grades have improved and he is no longer failing subjects. Jase stated,

I used to wander the halls, I just didn't want to do the work, so I'd get in trouble for that.

Now, I actually want to work. I want to come to school. I used to make up lies, I'm not feeling good, stuff like that.

After being at the Eastern Learning Center, he now sees success as an option. So much so, that he decided to stay at Eastern Learning Center instead of transitioning back to the traditional high school setting. Jase felt that it was in his best interest to finish his senior year at the learning center even though he met the qualifications to transition back. He will be a senior during the 2019-2020 school year.

Mike

Mike, a 36-year-old Caucasian male, was Jase's father. He and his wife had three teenage boys, with Jase being the oldest. He discussed that he and his wife had Jase when they were both 18. This was a challenge for them both and presented "a learning curve because we were still trying to raise ourselves." Mike and his wife graduated from high school and went to work to support their family. Mike emphasized that he tried to teach all of his sons a strong

work-ethic and to have respect for others. Mike valued education, but believed everything truly starts at home. It was evident during our interview that Mike wanted to ensure he provided for his family and instilled values in his children that would help them to be productive and happy adults.

Mike felt that in general, teachers want to make a difference, but “incur a lot of hardships.” He noted that class sizes, an increase in student discipline, the number of students that require special attention, and number of items on teachers’ plates make it difficult for them to do their job well. He pointed to these issues as reasons for Jase struggling. Mike also believed that there was a lack of consistency and attention to detail with Jase’s teachers; especially when he was in middle school. Mike expressed that Jase struggled to sit all day in the traditional setting and was easily distracted, which was a challenge. Mike stated, “Young people are not designed to sit in a chair eight hours a day. I am a firm believer that the mind can only absorb what the butt can stand.” Such adages were sprinkled throughout our interview, demonstrating Mike’s beliefs and sense of humor.

Mike saw Eastern Learning Center as a saving grace for his son. “It’s reinstilled that love of learning where it was. He is actually enjoying coming to school and learning and being in that environment.” Mike could visualize Jase being successful since he was slated to graduate during the next school year. He conveyed his overall excitement about the program at Eastern Learning Center and praised the staff for their hard work with students.

Mark

Mark was a 39-year-old Caucasian male who had been an educator for 16 years. Mark was the lead teacher at Eastern Learning Center and had worked with Lauren and Jase. He began teaching at the school upon its formation three years ago. Before coming to Eastern Learning

Center, he taught at a high school in the district. It was immediately noticeable that Mark had a true heart for the students at Eastern Learning Center. He was an educator that cared and was willing to do whatever it took to help students succeed socially, academically, and behaviorally.

An evident strength of Mark was his ability to build trusting relationships with students. Mark stated, "I feel like I know more about each individual student than any of the years I taught before I started teaching here." He attributed the ability to really work on these relationships to the smaller setting of the center. When observing Mark with students, the rapport was striking. He had a calming way with students that was inspirational. Discussions with students were permeated with true care and concern. Students were comfortable coming to him for assistance and he had no problem taking time to work with them. Mark expressed, "They know we care. They know they can talk to us if they need something." It was evident Mark helped create this culture for students at Eastern Learning Center.

Meeting with individual students to keep them on track was also important to Mark. These meetings included goal setting for students. For Mark, "Goal setting is important, because it gives you something you're working towards and you have a way to go back and see if you attained something." Mark sits with students when they first enter Eastern Learning Center to discuss goals and work out a plan of how to attain those goals. When students are not meeting their behavioral or academic goals, Mark pulls them aside to have private conversations and help students get back on track. Again, his love of students cannot go unnoticed. Another example of Mark's true dedication to Eastern Learning Center and its students is his drive to find hands-on and interactive activities for them to participate in. Mark has made it possible for students to participate in woodworking, gardening, exercise activities, and video recording. He knows

students need to do more than just sit and work all day. He enjoyed working alongside students inside and outside. These extra activities have strengthened his bond with students.

Todd

Todd was a 38-year-old African American male who served as the administrator of Eastern Learning Center. Todd had worked in the field of education for 17 years. He had worked as the administrator of Eastern Learning Center since its opening and had interacted with Lauren and Jase. He was part of the Central Office staff in the district and was not onsite at Eastern Learning Center, though he visited almost daily. Todd was the epitome of optimism and relentlessness. His unwavering belief that there was potential within each student was refreshing and inspirational. Todd asserted, “I refuse to give up even when they’ve visibly given up. I truly believe that every kid can succeed, every kid can be successful and it’s our job.”

Todd placed great emphasis on making sure he picked the right teachers for Eastern Learning Center. “It takes a different type of teacher. It needs to be someone that knows that every day is a new day. I need someone who cares.” When he interviewed teachers, they had to have something different than the average teacher. He wanted to ensure that the teachers were “an extension of me and will do the same things that I will do.” Todd put much time and effort to having teachers who were going to work hard for students and help them succeed. Todd’s passion for the work of the ALC showed in every answer during our interview. This was truly a work of heart for him. His priority was helping seemingly hopeless students find hope and success.

Travis

Travis was a 17-year-old Caucasian male. At the time of the study, Travis was a senior and had attended Central Learning Center for two years. Travis and his younger brother lived

with their mother, who was a single parent. Travis enjoyed bike riding and was excited about graduating at the end of the 2018-2019 school year. Upon meeting Travis, it was evident that he was a kind-hearted, polite young man who wanted to please those around him. He admitted that he needs to be pushed and motivated. He over and over stated his appreciation for the staff at Central Learning Center, who had pushed him and held him accountable.

Travis was found eligible for an IEP in 2007 due to a learning disability believed to be caused by lead poisoning. He had always struggled in some academic areas, but was never retained in a grade level. Travis was placed at Central Learning Center during the Fall of his 10th grade year in high school. The placement was a decision made by the district's school board due to Travis being in possession of marijuana on school property. At the time of his placement, Travis was failing English 10 and was earning Ds in many other courses.

During his time at Central Learning Center, Travis has made improvements in grades and behavior. He was on schedule to graduate from high school at the end of the 2019 school year. He, like many other alternative learning center students, chose to stay at Central Learning Center despite having met the requirements to transition back to the traditional setting. Travis stated,

It was honestly better for me. Being at the high school, I think I would've failed and I wouldn't be able to graduate because of all the bad influences and the overwhelming homework and everything. This was the better choice for me.

Judy

Judy was a 46-year-old Caucasian female who did not graduate from high school. She was a single mom to Travis and a younger brother, and worked hard to make sure they were taken care of. Judy also believed that learning should begin at home and saw her role as supporting and helping her sons through their time in school. Every answer from Judy during

our interview was infused with love and care for her child. She was thankful that Travis was on track to graduate in June of 2019.

Judy spoke enthusiastically about Central Learning Center and its staff. She felt that Travis's time there had changed his trajectory. She had such a strong belief in the learning center that she wanted Travis to stay even when he had met requirements to transition back to the traditional school setting. Judy stated, "He bucked me on the second year, because I kind of made him come here, but I think he knows now that it's for his best interest." Judy over and over spoke of the family environment at Central Learning Center. She felt the principal, Shirley, was "like a second mom to my son." Judy noted the personal relationships the principal formed with students, her passion for her job, and her consistent contact with parents. "She's awesome. I love her."

What struck me most about Judy was her true desire to help me. Throughout the process she mentioned several times that she hoped she had been helpful. She was so excited about her son's experience and wanted other children to benefit from this type of environment. Judy expressed, "I wish that they could work with younger children as well. I see my younger son struggle with severe ADHD. I wish he had the same kind of setting." She was grateful that there were people who cared about her son, loved him, and helped him succeed.

Shirley

A 52-year-old African American female, Shirley was an example of motivation, hard work, and determination. Her positivity and love for education was contagious. She had been an educator for 15 years and worked as the Principal of Central Learning Center for 6 years. She worked directly with Travis during his time there. Before becoming a principal at Central Learning Center, she worked as a teacher in the program. Her passion for working with at risk

youth was illuminated in every answer during our interview. She felt working with at risk youth was her life's purpose stating, "Somebody has to give them a chance." She further explained

I'm very passionate about working with kids that have, for some reason, been dealt a bad hand and they need to come to school and still be educated. It's hard for them to focus education when they have so many external factors going on at home.

Shirley loved the children at the center and demonstrated that in everything she did. She prided herself on building relationships with staff, students, and parents. She diligently kept in touch with parents to make them aware of their child's progress. Positive calls to parents were also a part of her weekly regiment. Shirley wanted students at school to learn and would go to their home to pick them up if they were absent. If students came to school with their hair in disarray, Shirley had a hair kit in her office to take care of this need. Parents at the center described her as a mother figure to their children. Shirley expressed that one of her strengths was "Being able to energize, motivate, get the kids to understand that they are somebody. I don't count them out for their mistakes that they've made in the past. I think I'm a good relationship builder."

Upon research visits to the center, it was clear that Shirley had built trusting relationships with each student. Students were comfortable coming to her for big and small issues. She was a visible presence in every class every day. It was also evident that she worked hard to build a culture at Central Learning Center where all were welcomed and accepted. She was a champion for each student, doing whatever was necessary to help them succeed. While nurturing and caring, Shirley also held staff and students accountable. She was a no nonsense type of leader and expressed, "If you did something I'm going to call you on the carpet about it, we're going to

address it, we're going to rectify it, and we're going to move on and not discuss it again." Her leadership style was exceptional and her love for her students contagious.

Karen

Karen was a 44-year-old African American female with 19 years of experience as an educator. She had worked at Central Learning Center for two years as a learning specialist with a special education background. Since Travis had an IEP, Karen had worked directly with him during his time at Central Learning Center. She had always worked with students who had special needs. My first impression of Karen was that she was a compassionate teacher with a heart for students. She was the type of teacher who felt it was normal to go above and beyond to meet the needs of students. Her sweet, caring nature came through in each answer during our interview.

Karen expressed her strengths as an educator by stating, "I consider myself to have good rapport with students, I love content, I love learning, and I try to make learning fun." Karen felt it was important that the basic needs of students were met first. Students could ask her for supplies or other items they needed. She was adamant that true learning would only occur after these needs were met. She loved the small setting offered at Central Learning Center and felt it helped make students more comfortable. She appreciated having the ability to work one on one with students and help them as needed. Karen believed this setting made it easier for her to tell when students were struggling and assist. Her desire was to help students become better and she was willing to try new approaches or stay after school to make this happen.

Results

The results of the study were derived from conducting a cross-case synthesis. A within-case analysis of each individual case was conducted first, then patterns from all cases were

compared (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). Utilizing this analytic strategy ensured the integrity of each individual case and allowed for comparison of patterns across all three cases (Yin, 2018). Documents and artifacts, graphic representations, and participant interviews were included in the within-case and cross-case analyses. Codes were assigned to each idea that emerged during analysis. Themes were developed from the codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Credibility, dependability, and confirmability of study findings were addressed through several means to include member checking, auditing, peer review, and peer debriefing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking was employed to judge the accuracy of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were provided their interview transcriptions and a summary of the study findings to review and provide comments. No participant disputed the accuracy of their interview transcription or study findings. Auditing of the data, peer review, and peer debriefing were conducted by an educator familiar with the research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These methods worked to confirm that the study was conducted and data analyzed in an accurate and honest manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2015).

Theme Development

Emergent themes from data analysis are described in this section. Data was analyzed by the method outlined in Chapter Three. Themes were developed from documents and artifacts, graphic representations of success from participants, and participant interviews. These themes emerged during within-case analysis and were then compared using a cross-case synthesis. Items from the data collection process were coded using the Atlas.ti software. Codes were then grouped into themes. A table of themes and their total occurrence across all three cases is presented in Table 2. Table 3 presents the occurrence of the themes within each case. Data

analysis revealed eight themes. The first six themes are the overarching, major themes that occurred most often in the overall data from interviews, graphic representations, and document analysis. These first six themes will be discussed in this section. The final two themes are minor themes. These two themes emerged in each case, but not to the extent of the other six themes. Though these two minor themes certainly play a role in success, they were not as prevalent. The theme of sense of hope very possibly came about due to the success students were feeling from the other aspects of each ALC. This theme included increased confidence and students seeing success as an option. This feeling of hope was most likely an effect of the other themes in action. Parent involvement was the theme of least prevalence overall. Each parent was involved to some degree, but not overwhelmingly so. Mike actually spoke to being less involved at the ALC than he was in the traditional setting, due to the trust he had in them taking care of his son, Jace. Again, the two minor themes are areas ALC leaders should consider, but were not the major aspects that contributed to student success.

Table 2

Codes and Themes Overall

Codes	Repetition of Information	Themes
#1 Personal space	14	Learning Center Structure and Staff Support
#2 Structure of rules	20	
#3 Small class size	65	
#4 Less distractions	23	
#5 One-on-one help	23	
#6 Staff monitors progress	29	
#7 Staff helps students	47	
#8 Goal setting and tracking	112	Goals and Accountability
#9 Incentives	22	
#10 Students held accountable	15	
#11 High expectations	14	
#12 Good rapport with staff	30	Trusting Relationships
#13 Connections	32	
#14 Build relationships	35	
#15 Trust	20	
#16 Self-monitor academics	24	
#17 Asks for help	41	Ability to Self- Regulate
#18 Study skills	19	
#19 Self-regulate behavior	27	
#20 Student can self-pace	62	Personalized Instruction
#21 Can take breaks	20	
#22 Can move ahead	15	
#23 Multiple chances at mastery	10	
#24 Teachers care	39	Teacher Qualities
#25 Believe in students	12	
#26 Give a second chance	32	
#27 Motivate students	23	
#28 Increased confidence	26	Sense of Hope
#29 Sense of belonging	2	
#30 Positive attitude	33	
#31 Can see success is an option	14	
#32 Parent communication	20	Parent Involvement
#33 Parent checks progress	9	
#34 Parent helps at home	18	

Table 3

Occurrence of Themes within Each Case

Theme	Occurrences Case 1 (Lauren)	Occurrences Case 2 (Jase)	Occurrences Case 3 (Travis)	Total Occurrences Across Cases
Learning center structure and staff support	73	84	64	221
Goals and accountability	63	62	38	163
Trusting relationships	33	37	47	117
Ability to self-regulate	45	41	25	111
Personalized instruction	35	64	8	107
Teacher qualities	27	43	36	106
Sense of hope	31	31	13	75
Parent involvement	17	11	19	47

Learning center structure and staff support. Learning center structure and staff support was the highest overall theme during cross-case analysis. This theme was also the highest for each within-case analysis. This theme was evident in discussions with each participant and analysis of various documents from the sites. Although two different ALC sites were used in this study, both created a structure that allowed for less distractions, smaller class sizes, more personal space for students, and a tight set of rules. Central Learning Center had a student to teacher ratio of 8:1 to 10:1. Eastern Learning Center had a student to teacher ratio of 10:1. This structure included the ability for site administrators and teachers to give students more attention, provide more one-on-one or individualized assistance, and closely monitor the progress of each student. Shirley noted that at Central Learning Center,

Everything here is structured. The environment here is very small, which allows us to run a more structured program. The lack of stimulation from a large crowd improves behavior and academics. We have set up a learning center environment with tables in every classroom where teachers and students can collaborate during small group time.

Central Learning Center and Eastern Learning Center both implemented a structure in their buildings which included a schedule for each day and a set of rules for students to abide by. The smaller class sizes and overall smaller student body size made monitoring these schedules and rules a simpler task for staff members. Students at Central Learning Center abided by a stricter set of rules, even having to sign a contract agreement upon enrollment in the program. The contract agreement was one of the documents analyzed and includes rules that address attendance, punctuality to class, dress code compliance, bus expectations, academic effort, and overall behavior expectations. The student and parent must sign the agreement. Consequences were outlined, one of which is possible removal from the program. When students meet the terms of the contract, they can earn their way out of the normal uniform type dress code. Students of Eastern Learning Center who abide by rules and keep up with their academic work can earn time doing extra activities. These may include gardening or time working on video/media projects for the local school system.

Pictures from each site also revealed the availability of personal space for each student, the structure of sites and individual classrooms, and areas for small group pullout (see Figures 3 and 4).

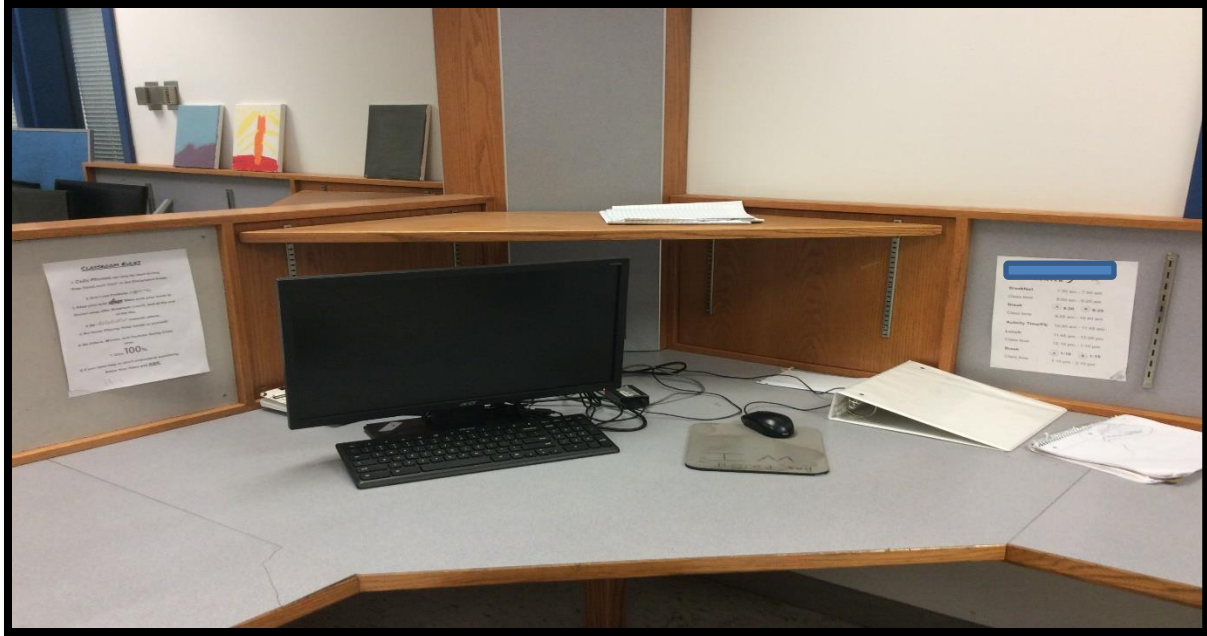


Figure 3. Eastern Learning Center site picture. Student work space at Eastern Learning Center. Each student had a similar space to themselves to complete work.



Figure 4. Central Learning Center site picture. Student work space at Central Learning Center. There were several different classrooms, but each had ample space for students to work. Tables were spread out, often with just one student at each table. There were larger tables for small group pullout.

Most noticeable with site pictures was the lack of clutter and students being crammed into classrooms, which is often a practice in traditional school settings. Students at both Central Learning Center and Eastern Learning Center had space for their belongings and space to work without being infringed upon by other students. Eastern Learning Center even had a personal workstation for each student. These workstations were spread out, had counter space for each student to work, and held a computer for each student. The space was very similar to workstations that could be found in an office area of a business. Mark even stated, “I would say it’s more space per student than in any school that you can go in. I think having space is a big thing. Every student has their own area.” The availability of personal space and smaller classes lends itself to less distractions, which was noted by each student. When asked if anything about her had changed since being at Eastern Learning Center, Lauren stated, “My focusing. In regular school, I used to get so distracted all the time, but here I stay really focused all the time. It’s a small group.”

Another prevalent idea throughout the interview process was the availability of staff members to assist students with academics and/or behavior. Each parent noted the overwhelming class sizes in traditional school settings as a reason their child was not previously successful. Travis noted,

At [the high school] if you were behind or something in the class, they wouldn’t focus on you as much because they have a whole other class to teach. Here, they’re really good about getting one-on-one with students. The teachers can give more time to you instead of having a whole big classroom of like 20 kids to deal with.

Lauren and Jase also talked about teachers helping them with their academic work. Todd, the administrator for Eastern Learning Center explained, “We do breakouts with the students and I

am ensuring that the teachers are doing one-to-one small groups.” The extra attention from staff members made a definite impression on students and parents.

The final aspect of this theme was the ability of staff members to monitor the academic and/or behavioral progress of each student. Shirley explained that, “The teacher is able to zone in on the weak areas of the students, that might just be lost in a regular population of a class of 25. They know exactly where they are and what’s going on.” Shirley went on to discuss how monitoring student progress allows her and her staff to better assist students. Judy believed a major part of Travis’s success at Central Learning Center was due to the staff monitoring his progress. “They stay on top of him. When they see that he’s slacking, they get on him and keep in touch with me. The teacher has more time it seems.” Most participants felt like the close monitoring of students is something that is not possible in the traditional setting where teachers often have multiple classes of 25 to 30 students.

Goals and accountability. The theme of goals and accountability developed from codes involving the actual goal setting process, tracking of student goals, accountability, high expectations for students, and incentives offered for students when goals were met. This theme was the second in overall prevalence during the cross-case analysis. It also ranked second for Case 1, but third for Case 2 and Case 3. This theme was deemed an important aspect of student success by each of the 10 participants during interview sessions and in their graphic representations. Goal setting coupled with forming a plan to attain goals is an aspect of self-regulation theory and could be considered a self-regulation strategy. Goals and accountability were determined to be a separate theme for this study for two reasons. First, the prevalence of codes specifically about goals made this area stand out as a major contributor to student success and motivation. Second, when addressing goal setting as a self-regulation strategy, Cleary and

Zimmerman (2004) state, “Highly self-regulated learners approach learning tasks in a mindful, confident manner, proactively set goals, and develop a plan for attaining those goals” (p. 538). The three students of focus in this study did not fit this description. Goal setting was a process led by ALC staff members initially. The staff members assisted students in goal setting, developing a plan, and goal tracking. While the students did become more goal focused while at the ALC, they were not initially proactive in the process.

All three students sat down with either the site administrator or teachers upon their enrollment in the center and discussed what their goals should be. Mark stated, “Sitting down and saying, ‘Hey, if this is what you want, you’re gonna have to work really hard’ is helpful. It’s a good thing to give them something to work towards.” Staff members routinely sat down with students at both centers to review their goals and where they are in the process of attaining the goal. Staff members held students accountable during these conversations and helped them break the goal down into workable pieces.

Lauren’s goals were solely academic, while Jase and Travis had academic and behavior goals. Each student and their parent mentioned the goal to graduate as a driving force in their overall success. Jase mentioned, “The goals put me on track. [They] said, ‘Just get this amount done’. Then I just kept working.” Jase discussed that he was in his third year of ninth grade when he entered Eastern Learning Center and did not see a way out. He was feeling hopeless before entering Eastern, setting goals, achieving goals, and slowly seeing himself come out of the depths of academic failure. Now, he has elected to stay in Eastern until he graduates so he can continue on the path of success. Travis and his mother also chose for him to stay at Central due to feeling it was the best environment to get him to graduation. As we discussed goal setting Travis felt that, “Reaching a goal that you set for yourself would be success in my definition.”

Both sites offer online classes with an opportunity to move ahead, but Eastern Learning Center has a more focused online aspect that enhances the goal setting process. Mark explained

If you work really hard, we can really get a year and a half's work done in a year. So, basically, in two years' time, you can get through three years of schooling. And then if you throw in, if they're willing to do summer school, we can get a couple more credits there. So, a lot of kids have really bought into that.

The ability to set goals that allow students to move ahead, catch up with their correct age group, and possibly graduate ahead of schedule motivates students to focus and work harder than they previously had. Lauren was focused on getting back with her same-aged peers. She voiced, "That's all I focused on, getting in my grade. So, my main thing is just to come here every day, work really hard, get through the classes, so I can go to high school." Lauren's graphic representation of success focused on the excitement that comes along with accomplishing goals and in her explanation she discusses her goal of graduation (see Figure 5). Her mother, Michelle's, graphic of success also spoke to the importance of setting and accomplishing goals (see Figure 6).

The key to being successful is to be happy and work hard to accomplish all your dreams and goals. My goal is to graduate high school with a high gpa than go to college finish it and open my own business.



Figure 5. Lauren's graphic representation of success. Lauren provided this image to represent what success means to her. Her explanation included accomplishing goals and her specific goal of graduating.

**I'M GOING TO
MAKE YOU SO
PROUD.**
- note to self.

Figure 6. Michelle's (Lauren's Mom) graphic representation of success. Michelle chose this image to represent what success meant to her. Her explanation for the image was, "This means success to me because I set goals for myself some accomplished and others I'm still working on."

Shirley provided two graphics. One was a picture of a flower, while the other showed students working in the center (see Figures 7 and 8). She discussed the students having behavior and academic issues in their previous setting, but setting goals and improving while at Central Learning Center. She explained, “The students are beginning to blossom, where there is hidden potential in each of them, just like petals on a flower” (see Figure 8). The graphic provided by Travis also aligned with the theme of goals. Travis’s graphic showed students throwing graduation caps and with it, he expressed being the first family member on his mom’s side of the family to graduate from high school (see Figure 9). Setting and achieving goals was a resounding theme throughout the graphic representations of all participants.



Figure 7. Shirley’s (Site Administrator) graphic representation of success: Part 1. Shirley included this picture of a flower to represent how the students at the center blossom.

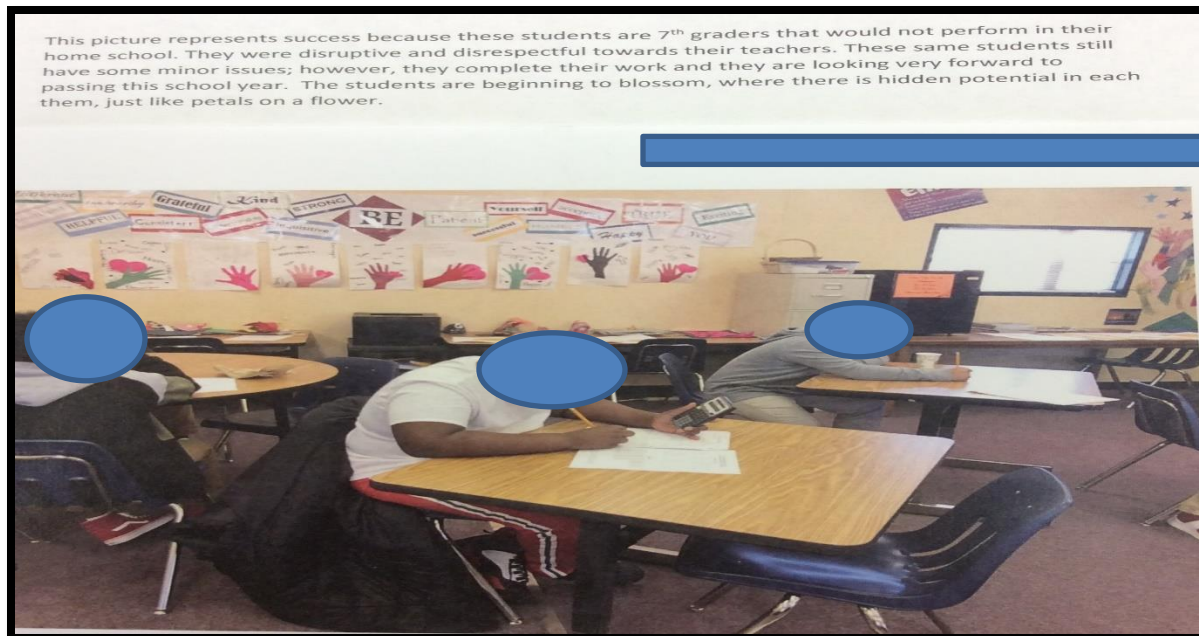


Figure 8. Shirley's (Site Administrator) graphic representation of success: Part 2. Shirley took this picture of students working to describe what success meant to her. Her explanation at the top describes how these students were not performing in their home schools, but now are completing work and passing their grade.



Figure 9. Travis's graphic representation of success. Travis provided this picture to represent what success meant to him. In his description, he explained that graduating was his goal. He goes on to express that he would be the first family member on his mother's side to graduate from high school.

Trusting relationships. The theme of trusting relationships emerged from codes focused on students and staff having connections and trust. It ranked third in overall prevalence, fifth for Case 1, sixth for Case 2, and second for Case 3. This theme was woven throughout interviews with each participant. Several graphic representations also expressed this theme by displaying connections between people and portraying teamwork. Parents and students expressed that relationships with teachers and site administrators were a major aspect in changing their trajectory. Bonds and connections with staff members seemed much deeper than previously experienced in the traditional classroom setting. Even Mark felt the relationships at the learning center were of a different caliber than when he taught in the traditional setting. He elaborated, “I feel like I know more about each individual student than any of the years I taught before I started teaching here.”

Students also discussed staff members trying to make connections with them. Teachers and site administrators take the time to have conversations with students to get to know them better and find ways to help them. These connections made students feel the staff at the learning centers truly cared about them. The effort put forth by teachers and administrators to make connections and build relationships helped students and parents trust them. Jase explained, “They didn’t have time to sit down with each student at the high school. They were just trying to jam the lesson in. Here, there’s that connection.” Mike, Jase’s father, expressed “[The teacher] has taken an interest in [Jase]. You know, sometimes it’s the spark a child needs.”

Karen felt having good rapport with students was definitely a strength of hers. She believed she had built this rapport with Travis and was better able to help him because of this. Karen stated, “I can notice when he’s getting uptight or nervous. Then I can pull him out and kind of talk to him to bring it back together.” Travis expressed that having good relationships

with his teacher and administrator helped him feel comfortable and work harder. Staff at both centers worked intentionally to build trust, form relationships, and connect with students. Interviews and graphic representations from participants revealed that the relationships formed create a culture of trust that allows staff to better assist students.

Ability to self-regulate. The theme of self-regulation ranked fourth overall, third for Case 1, and fifth for Case 2 and Case 3. This theme focused on students' ability to self-regulate their behaviors and learning practices (Bandura, 1991; Zimmerman, 1986). This theme was strongly tied to the second theory guiding this study, self-regulation theory. Basically, students have influence over their behaviors or actions and can adapt these behaviors or actions (Zimmerman, 1986, 2002). Codes that formed this theme dealt with students self-monitoring their academics, self-regulating behavior, asking for help, and using study skills. During interview discussions, it was clear that students did not enter the learning centers already equipped with these skills. Students and parents discussed these skills being formulated and strengthened while at the learning centers. Teachers and site administrators also discussed teaching students these skills or encouraging them to help strengthen these skills.

Each student discussed the ability to ask for help. While in the traditional setting, these students did not ask for help due to not being comfortable or feeling a stigma was attached to asking. Travis stated,

I feel better doing the things that I wasn't doing like asking for help and seeking everything here than I did at the high school. It's changed my ability to ask a question.

My real weakness in high school was not asking questions whenever I actually needed to. Travis's mother agreed, "He was scared to ask. I don't know, maybe it was embarrassment. Here, I think he can verbalize better if he's struggling." Shirley and Karen reiterated not only

Travis's ability to now ask for help, but his pure desire to seek help to improve his academic behaviors. Jase's discussion of asking for help was very similar to Travis's. Jase explained, "Getting help is different. It's a whole lot easier here. When you're at the high school, you feel like you're being a bother to ask for help. Here, I am comfortable."

Each student voiced their ability to use study skills when needed for quizzes and tests. Their parents expressed seeing them study while at home. More impressive with each student was their ability to monitor their grades and overall academic progress, as well as regulate their behaviors when necessary. Much of the self-monitoring of grades was made easier with the online curriculum. Mark elaborated, "At any point in time, they know exactly where they're at. When they complete assignments, it is always live, real time. They don't have to wait for a teacher." Even though Central Learning Center is more of a blended learning environment than Eastern Learning Center, Travis also discussed wanting to know his academic standing. Travis expressed that with Apex, "It tells you the grade that you currently have in that class. It also tells you what assignments are next. It has helped me stay on track."

Lauren discussed how she has learned to regulate her behaviors when it comes to academics when she stated, "I just say, [Lauren] focus. You've got this. You're going to get through this class, it's nothing." Each student felt they became better at regulating their academic habits and behaviors. Each parent also saw an improvement in the academic discipline of their child. Mark explained, "It's just learning how to control emotions and that is something we work on every day. It's not gonna happen overnight." Mark and Todd talked about how the staff at Eastern Learning Center work with students each day to help them regulate behaviors and academic work ethic. The staff at both centers were vigilant about sitting down with students to have conversations about how to improve. Their approach was to ask students questions and

guide them through how to improve. One motivational sign in Eastern Learning Center read, ‘It doesn’t work unless you do.’ Students were in an environment that constantly reminded them of the need to improve, the need to make it happen for themselves.

Personalized instruction. The theme of personalized instruction is certainly linked to the online curriculum that each student had access to, but it is also strongly connected to the culture created at the centers by staff members. Personalized instruction was fifth in overall prevalence across all cases, fourth for Case 1, second for Case 2, and last for Case 3. This theme emerged from codes focused on students being able to self-pace their work, take breaks, move ahead in curriculum, and have multiple chances at mastery. Based on the comments of each participant, these opportunities would most likely not be available to students if they were in a traditional school setting. The ability to personalize instruction for students is a student-centered approach to learning with an awareness that a one-size fits all approach is not what is best for students. Each student learns differently and comes with different needs and desires. Personalization of education allows students the opportunity to get what they need when they need it.

First, when examining the online curriculum component of each learning center, each is set up for students to have multiple chances at mastery. Both the Apex and GradPoint systems will not allow students to move forward if quiz or test grades are below 60%. Mark explained,

They have to get 60 or higher to move on. It allows them to retry. Usually, what we do is, go back over the quiz and show them what they got wrong and talk about it. And it doesn’t take points off for late, I think we chose not to do that.

Central Learning Center has some curriculum components that are not online. Even with these components, teachers have a goal in mind of students learning and mastering the content. Karen discussed modifying assignments if students are not successful the first time and reteaching

students when necessary. She even tutors students after the school day has ended. Second chances at mastery are the norm for each student, not the exception. The focus is always on what is best for students, not teachers. Students are not penalized for not mastering the concept the first time, rather they are encouraged and assisted to master the concept the next time.

Another component of the online curriculum that focuses on personalizing the experience for students is its delivery of content. Both programs utilize pictures, audio, video, graphs, notes, and interactive charts to teach skills. With these additions, various student learning modalities are utilized. If students do not understand the skill by using the notes, they can use an audio or visual aspect to enhance their understanding. When discussing aspects of the curriculum that helped him, Jase stated, “There’s graphs, videos, just countless things that you could do and just look at. You go back too if you didn’t remember how to do this.”

Lauren, Jase, and Travis discussed the ability to move around or take breaks when they needed. Again, this is something that is not normally allowed in traditional settings. Jase mentioned, “If we take those breaks, it helps me get back on track and where I need to be.” When Karen talked about Travis, she felt there were times he needed a break or time-out to regroup and get back on track. This was freely offered to all students.

Students’ ability to self-pace their instruction was a considerable piece of their success. Jase even stated, “I need to take my own pace to get it done instead of working fast. At the high school, I’d still be behind and struggling.” Jase’s father, Mike, even sees the benefits of Jase being able to work at his own pace. Mike explained,

It allows them to work at their own pace. It allows them that time that he can take a break if he needs it or he can push through, you know, and be two or three days ahead. I

think it's beneficial because not every day we come in to be the best we can be and that's the unfortunate thing about humans.

Students have the ability to take their time, revisit material, and decide what will be accomplished each day. This ability to self-pace has been a difference maker for each student. Lauren has used the ability to self-pace to move ahead. She has been able to master more material than she would have in the traditional setting. Lauren expressed, "This is like definitely a good opportunity, a second chance for me. I'm pushing to get back to my right grade." The ability for students to pace their own work speed is an opportunity that has motivated students and helped them from feeling a sense of hopelessness.

Teacher qualities. Teacher qualities ranked sixth in overall occurrence throughout all cases, sixth in Case 1, and fourth in Case 2 and Case 3. The theme of teacher qualities developed from codes based on teachers caring for students, believing in students, motivating students, and giving students a second chance. This theme demonstrated that the type of teacher students had matters and influences the overall success of students. Parents and students in each case spoke passionately about teachers caring for them and the difference that made. Site administrators from Eastern Learning Center and Central Learning Center discussed the importance of selecting and hiring teachers that possessed qualities that were different than the average teacher. Shirley explained,

All of these teachers were hand-picked by me. These teachers know that there's a greater need with this population, so they work with the students. If they ask a question they don't shut them down or just ignore them, they take the time. So, it's key in getting the right people to teach these types of students.

Todd agreed that the type of teacher hired at alternative learning centers matters greatly. Todd elaborated,

For [Eastern Learning Center], it takes a different type of teacher. It takes someone who knows that every day is a new day and I value what I'm doing although I am not getting a thank you. I need someone who cares. I need to know the person I am leaving here is an extension of me and will do the same things that I will do. What I am hoping is that when people see they know we are doing what's right for kids.

When interviewing the two teachers that were participants in this study, it was evident that their level of passion for teaching was intense. When asked about the students and their improvement, there was a look of excitement and joy in their countenance. Karen and Mark loved their job. They wanted to make a difference in the lives of children who others had possibly given up on. It radiated through them and was inspirational. Todd summed it up when he stated, "What stands out is that their hearts are so different."

Each parent felt teachers at the centers had believed in their children and motivated them to improve. Mike believed, "[Mark] has pushed [Jase] a little bit. He has been a positive influence. The teachers care. [Mark] has a general passion for not wanting to...not giving up on kids." Travis also recognized that the staff at Central Learning Center cared about him and motivated him to improve. His mom, Judy, expressed, "They motivate him more and more. It's like a family." Also weaved throughout discussions with each participant was the ability and desire for students to have a second chance. There seemed to be more tolerance of mistakes with behavior and academics. Staff members really desired to work with students to help them. Karen was always willing to modify assignments for Travis. Mark was adamant that he needed to sit down and talk to students struggling with behaviors and not just immediately assign a

consequence. Todd explained, “I would prefer every day be a new day. The environment we are creating is hopefully one which they feel nobody’s holding over my head that I am ‘bad.’” This theme also emerged from Mike’s graphic representation of success. He took a picture of a sunrise and stated, “It’s the start of a new day and new beginnings and all of the chances in life. That no matter what happened yesterday, today is a new day.” (see Figure 10). The second chances given by teachers and administrators was truly to opportunity Lauren, Jase, and Travis needed to be successful.

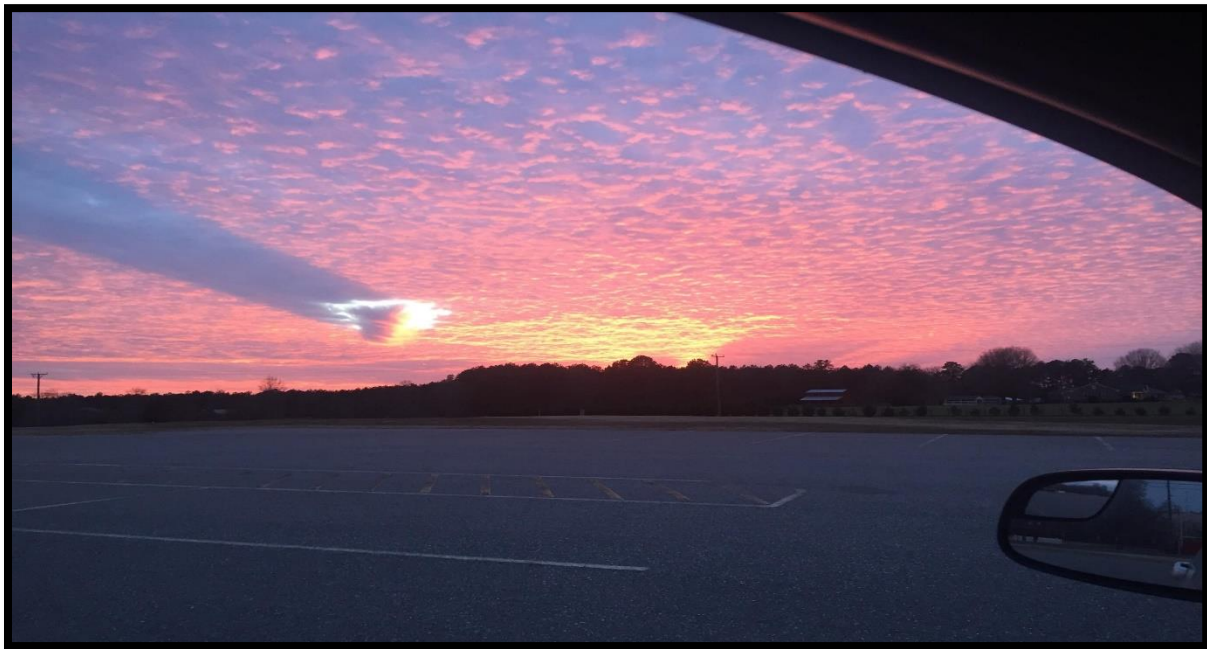


Figure 10. Mike’s graphic representation of success. Mike took this picture of a sunrise to demonstrate what success meant to him. His explanation discussed how every day holds new chances and the mistakes of yesterday do not matter.

Answers to Research Questions

This section provides answers to the central research question and the five sub-questions used for this study. Interview questions were developed to ensure that each research question was addressed. Direct quotes from participants are used when appropriate and relevant to the

questions. Graphic representations from participants, site pictures, and other site documents were also analyzed and used to determine answers to the research questions.

Central question. What factors contribute to the success of students in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia? This was the overriding question for this study. This central question was broken down into five sub-questions to delve into specific factors that contributed to student success. Answers to each sub-question will in turn answer the overriding central question using themes that developed from data, interviews, graphic representations of success, and various documents and artifacts.

Sub-question 1. What environmental factors contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia? This question is based on Bandura's social cognitive theory which posits that learning takes place through interactions with our environment (Bandura, 1969). The environmental factors may come from home environments and the actual learning environment. The most prevalent theme of learning center structure answers this question. Codes of personal space, small class sizes, the structure of rules, and less distractions are all environmental factors mentioned in participant interviews, seen in pictures of both sites, and found in documents from the sites. Site pictures showed that each student had ample personal space to learn, complete work, and not be disturbed by other students (see Figures 3 and 4). Each student, parent, and staff member believed the environment of the learning centers aided in student success. Mike mentioned, "[Jase] feeds off the environment he is in." Mike went on to describe the traditional setting that Jase was coming from by stating, "It's almost like herding cats. You know, overwhelming class sizes, the number of kids, those that act out." It was evident that each participant saw the environments of the learning centers as different from their prior experiences and beneficial to student growth and success.

Another aspect of environmental factors that came up during interviews was the home environment each student came from. Though this was a minor theme, it was mentioned by students and parents. Each parent valued their child's education and made comments about learning beginning at home. Though the students came from different home environments, the core belief in each home was similar. Parents wanted their child to receive a good education, do their best, and graduate.

Sub-question 2. What social support factors contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia? Sub-question 2 focuses on the social support factors, such as interactions with teachers, administrators, peers, and parents, that may contribute to the success of students. Again, Bandura's social cognitive theory proposes that learning takes place through interactions with people (Bandura, 1969). This question was answered through the themes of trusting relationships and teacher qualities. Students interacted with their teachers and site administrators daily. These interactions made an impression on students and parents alike. Students and parents described the relationships with staff and various qualities of staff as important aspects that aided in student success. There was a level of comfort created that students had not experienced in the traditional school setting. Staff members worked to build relationships with students, to gain student trust, to have rapport with students, and to make connections all in an effort to better assist them academically, behaviorally, and socially. Mark spoke in great detail about building relationships with students. He explained,

Sometimes I can look and when this kid comes in the door, I know that there's something going wrong at home, without even a word being said, just by body language. I kind of know what's going on in their families, know what's going on in their life. And I think

just knowing that and having the chance to talk, it diffuses a lot of things. They know we care. They know they can talk to us if they need anything.

Each student and parent described their interactions with teachers and site administrators as positive. Parents even felt staff members were a positive influence on their children.

Teacher qualities were also social support factors for students. The specific codes of care and giving students a second chance were ways students felt supported. Each student and parent believed the staff cared about them and would do anything to help them succeed. Students were not afraid to make a mistake because they knew the teachers and site administrators would still be there for them and help them along. Shirley was passionate about the need for students to have a second chance. She expressed, “The kids are lost, so you ask the question, if you don’t do it, who will? So that’s pretty much our motto. Somebody has to give them a chance.” Students were adamant that this was a different type of support than they had experienced in other settings.

Other interactions that were revealed during interviews also played a role in the success of students. Each parent and staff member described the three students as getting along well with others when asked about their peer interactions. Lauren, Jase, and Travis also felt like they could get along with anyone. If a peer was doing something they did not like, they were able to either ignore it or address it in a mature manner. Michelle described how Lauren handled an issue with a female peer at the learning center. She stated,

She came home saying, ‘I think [a student] took my lip gloss, but you know mom, that’s okay. I’m not going to worry about it because I know she has a problem with taking things.’ She’s not like, ‘Oh I feel like fighting somebody because they did this.’ She

pretty much resolves conflict on her own. She doesn't make a big deal. She knows what she's here for.

Each student described peer interactions at the centers as pleasant. This lack of negative peer interactions may have helped them focus on their academic and/or behavior goals. Though a minor theme, parent involvement also played a role. Each student felt their parents supported and valued their education and would help them at home if they needed. Michelle and Judy discussed pushing their children to do well and checking in at the learning centers to ensure they were making adequate progress. This was an extra layer of positive social interactions that supported each student.

Sub-question 3. What emotional support factors contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia? The three students who participated in this multiple case study entered the ALCs for different reasons, but each was in need of emotional support. Rather, due to a cycle of academic failure, a string of small behavior referrals, or a major behavior infraction; students entered the learning centers with a lack of hope. Jase discussed being very far behind in high school, "It's like a hole you're never going to get out of, I was screwed. I just wasn't motivated." Mike and Michelle described their children as not liking school. Michelle went as far to say that Lauren's self-esteem was low due to not being with her same-aged peers.

The answer to this question came from the theme of teacher qualities and the theme of goals and accountability. The codes of teachers believing in students and motivating students were part of emotional support factors. Lauren, Jase, and Travis had all lost hope and a belief in themselves upon entering the alternative learning centers. Knowing that their teachers saw potential in them and believed they could be successful played a major role in changing their

trajectory. These students had lost motivation, but teachers and administrators at Eastern and Central Learning Centers were able to motivate them. When speaking of the staff and Travis's improved motivation, Judy stated, "They're great. They motivate him, they stay on top of him. It's been all positive and great for [Travis]."

Goals and accountability were also a form of emotional support. Codes in this theme were goal setting and tracking, incentives, students being held accountable, and high expectations. Students in this study had not previously experienced this type of dynamic in school. They felt a little like they were on their own before, thus, the feeling of hopelessness they entered the ALC with. Goal setting and tracking was a way to support students by helping them see what could be. They were previously unsure of themselves. With every small goal achieved came more hope and more confidence. This theme was evident during interviews with all participants, in reviewing site documents like contracts and expectations, and in many of the participants' graphic representations of success. Actually, eight of the graphic representations connected back to goals in some way. When discussing the importance of goals and accountability, Todd mentioned, "We have to help the kids take ownership of how they got here and how do you now move forward."

Though a minor theme, codes related to having a sense of hope, were also emotional support factors for each of the students. Each student felt the positive attitudes of teachers helped them to change their attitude. Students also discussed being able to see success as an option now, where they had not before. Because of this, their confidence increased. Todd described this change in Lauren, expressing, "Her grades and self-esteem were down and now she....she immediately came into the program and she started to see success. She started looking

like a different person.” Students also felt that they fit in or belonged in the ALC setting. Jase explained, “Here, you can kind of do your own thing or be who you want to be.”

Sub-question 4. What academic support factors contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia? Each student involved in this study was previously experiencing some degree of academic failure. Neither Lauren nor Jase were with their same-aged peers. Lauren, Jase, and Travis all made improvements in their grades while at the alternative learning center. Lauren was able to catch up to her same-aged peers and successfully met requirements to transition back to high school. Travis was on track to graduate in May of 2019 and Jase in May of 2020. Based on participant feedback, these academic improvements were due to various types of support received while at the ALCs.

Answers to this question about academic support factors were derived from the theme of learning center structure and staff support and personalized instruction. Specific codes that answered this question dealt with one-on-one help, staff members helping students, staff monitoring student progress, students being able to pace their own instruction, students being able to take breaks as needed, the ability of students to move ahead in the curriculum, and having multiple chances at mastery. These codes were found in each participant interview, curriculum information, and student academic records. Each student mentioned that in the traditional setting, they did not feel teachers had the time to help them. The one-on-one help they received at the learning centers was invaluable to them. Travis stated, “My grades have improved a lot. It’s really fun and one-on-one here. The teachers can give more time to you instead of having a whole big classroom to deal with. They can be more individualized with it.” Jase and Travis discussed how the staff members monitor their progress and keep them on track, also something that did not occur in the traditional school setting for them.

Whereas, one-on-one help was a major factor for Travis, being able to self-pace was of major importance to Lauren and Jase. Lauren was motivated to improve academically due to being able to move ahead. She knew she would have help from teachers to accomplish this. Jase felt like he could only be academically successful if he was able to pace his own instruction and take breaks. His belief in this was so strong that he chose to stay at Eastern Learning Center even though he met all requirements to transition back to the traditional high school setting. Jase stated, "I've just gotten so much more done than I would have at the high school. I'd still be behind and struggling. I'd rather stay here and work at my own pace."

The online curriculum itself was a type of academic support. The Apex and GradPoint learning systems presented information to students in various ways, allowed students to go back and review material, allowed students to work at their own pace, and provided multiple chances at mastery. Students could not move on to the next lesson until they scored 60 or above on quizzes and tests in their current lesson. Grades on these learning systems were immediate. Students did not have to wait for work to be graded by a teacher. They were able to have real-time feedback to know how they were performing. Teachers were always on hand if assistance or more explanation on a skill was needed.

Sub-question 5. What self-regulatory skills contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum in Central Virginia? Even though the staff of both learning centers help students and monitor their progress, there must be some level of self-regulation with each student to attain their academic and/or behavior goals. The answer to this question emerged from codes associated with the theme of ability to self-regulate. Codes within this theme demonstrated the ability of students to self-monitor their academic progress, self-

regulate their behavior, ask for help, and utilize study skills. These answers were derived from interviews with students, parents, and staff members.

Students did not feel they possessed these skills before coming to the learning centers. Each parent also believed their child's self-regulatory skills had improved since being enrolled in the learning centers. Teachers and site administrators noted an improvement in each student's study skills and ability to monitor their progress and regulate their behaviors. Lauren, Jase, and Travis spoke in detail about not wanting to ask for help before coming to the ALCs. They felt there was a stigma attached to asking for help, that other students would think they were dumb, or that teachers just did not have the time or desire to help them. Upon reflection, they can each see that now they have no problem asking for help at any moment. They realize the teachers are readily available to help them and see that as a part of their improvement.

Students also discussed checking their grades on a regular basis so they knew where they were and what they needed to accomplish. Lauren and Jase had the ability to and did check their grades daily. Travis mentioned that he asked on a weekly basis. The self-regulation of behaviors was a large area of growth for Jase. Jase explained,

Being here has helped me a lot. I actually want to work. I want to come to school. I used to make up lies, 'I'm not feeling good.' I may have missed a handful of days here. But also, I used to wander the halls [at high school]. I just didn't want to do the work, so I'd get in trouble for that. I used to wander, but now I actually sit at my desk. I'll get up and walk around to take a break, but that's about it.

Each student seemed more concerned about their progress, what they needed to do, and how they needed to do it than before.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter Four was to give an account of the findings of this study. A description of each participant was included to assist with understanding the overall data. Data collected from interviews, graphic representations of success, and documents and artifacts was analyzed using within-case analysis then cross-case synthesis method. Data analysis of this qualitative multiple case study revealed themes within each case, as well as, common themes between cases. The six most prevalent and impactful themes overall were a) learning center structure and staff support, b) goals and accountability, c) trusting relationships, d) ability to self-regulate, e) personalized instruction, and f) teacher qualities. Each research question was answered using the codes that formed these six themes. Quotes were utilized where relevant, so the voices of participants could provide a deeper meaning to themes and research question answers.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to determine what factors contribute to the success of students in alternative learning centers with online curriculums in Central Virginia. This Chapter will include a summary of the findings of the study by addressing each research question. The findings will then be discussed giving consideration to empirical and theoretical literature. Next, the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study will be examined. Lastly, the delimitations, limitations, and recommendations for future research will be addressed. Chapter Five will close with a summary of the study.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study are presented by answering each research question using data collected from participant interviews, participant graphic representations of success, and various archival data and documents pertaining to the study. A thorough analysis of the data was conducted first using a within-case analysis method and then a cross-case synthesis. From the analysis, six major themes emerged. The prevalent themes were a) learning center structure and staff support, b) goals and accountability, c) trusting relationships, d) ability to self-regulate, e) personalized instruction, and f) teacher qualities. Correlation of themes and research questions was then considered. Using this method, each research question was answered. Each question is presented then answered using the major themes and specific data from participant interviews, graphic representations, or documents and archival data.

Central Research Question

The central question asked about the factors that contribute to student success in an ALC with an online curriculum in Central Virginia. Each of the six themes conveyed an answer to

this question. Participants' responses to interview questions, graphic representations of success, and documents and artifacts that were analyzed yielded numerous factors that aided students on their path to academic and behavioral success. The major factors that contributed to student success were the structure of the learning center, support from staff members, goal setting and accountability, trusting relationships with staff, the ability of students to self-regulate, personalized instruction, and specific teacher qualities. Minor factors that emerged from data analysis were the development of a sense of hope while enrolled in the ALC and parent involvement. All of these factors were common among the three cases, though not necessarily in the same order of prevalence.

Abundantly clear was that each participant felt that the three students of focus would not have reached success without enrollment in the ALC setting. The aforementioned factors converged in each of the three cases to change the trajectory of the students. Also clear was that each student of focus encountered a different experience at the ALC than they had in the traditional classroom setting. When describing what Eastern Learning Center offered, Todd expressed,

Our philosophy is that kids need something different. Kids, all kids, regardless of their background, socioeconomic status, disability, race, or gender; if you are giving them the best you are going to get something different, you are going to get something better in the end. And that's our goal.

The factors that developed from data analysis demonstrate the difference offered by the learning centers. The central question was further broken down into five sub-questions to specifically address the learning theories guiding the study.

Sub-question One

Sub-question one focused on which environmental factors contribute to student success in an ALC with an online curriculum in Central Virginia. The study revealed that there were numerous factors in the learning environment that were major factors in student success and a few minor elements of students' home environments that contributed to student success. The learning centers offered students a great deal of personal space, small class sizes, less distractions, and more structure and rules than previously experienced. These factors, which emerged from various documents and participant interviews, were prevalent in each case and across all three cases. The environments of the two learning centers in this study were less chaotic than what the three students experienced in their traditional school settings. Each student and their parent mentioned being easily distracted. They each felt that the smaller class sizes, overall structure, and personal space offered at the learning centers helped students maintain focus on instruction. Jase expressed,

At the high school, it's just so crowded. Here you can kind of do your own thing or be who you want to be. You have your own little area. You can have all the stuff you want and you don't have to worry about anybody messing with it.

Also mentioned in each interview was that the students' parents valued their education. Each student knew their parent wanted them to succeed and would assist them in any way possible. Each parent participant indicated that learning begins at home. They felt they were the genesis of their child's learning and they did their best to teach the importance of education, values, and overall character at home.

Sub-question Two

Sub-question two asked which social support factors contribute to student success in an ALC with an online curriculum in Central Virginia. Based on participant responses to interview questions, trusting relationships, certain teacher qualities, help from parents at home, and positive peer relations contributed to student success. Each participant indicated that teachers at the learning centers truly cared for students and were always willing to give students a second chance. These teachers did not hold the mistakes of yesterday against students. Students were allowed to have a bad moment and still be loved by their teacher the next day. Todd spoke to specific teacher qualities when he stated, “It takes a different type of teacher. It takes someone who knows that very day is a new day...I need someone who cares.”

Graphic representations of success and participant interviews revealed the importance of students and staff having trusting relationships. Students felt like teachers and administrators at the learning centers were intentional about making connections with them, building trust and rapport, and working on a relationship. This was reiterated in staff and parent interviews. Site administrators and teachers felt that they had the time to truly get to know students. Further, they believed the relationships formed allowed them to relate to students, know when students were having a rough day, and better assist students with their behavioral or academic goals. Students were more open to receiving assistance from the staff because of the strong relationships formed. Each staff member spoke to the importance of relationships. Shirley stated, “I have a relationship with every one of them, and not only them but their parents.” In line with the importance of strong relationships between students and staff was positive peer relationships and interactions. Though not a major theme, each participant spoke to the ability of students to get along well with others. The students in this study did not allow others to distract

them or get them off track. The absence of negative peer interactions was perceived by participants as a helpful factor in each student's success.

Sub-question Three

Sub-question three focused on the emotional support factors that contribute to student success in an ALC with an online curriculum in Central Virginia. Goal setting and accountability was a major theme revealed that secured factors for this question. Teacher qualities of believing in students and being able to motivate students also provided emotional support for each student in this study. A minor theme that contributed to answering sub-question three was students gaining a sense of hope. Each participant revealed in interviews that students felt that they fit in or belonged at the center. This feeling along with positive attitudes of all participants and the ability of students to finally see success, provided hope for the students, and helped them to move forward.

The over-arching factor for emotional support was the ability of students to set goals, the continual tracking of goals, students being held to high expectations, and accountability for goals. This theme emerged repeatedly in participant interviews, graphic representations of success, and some documents and artifacts. This theme was consistent in each case. Students felt the goals helped them focus. When speaking of the importance of goals, Todd mentioned, "Kids take ownership of how they got here and how do you now move forward." During interviews with Lauren, Jase, and Travis it was evident that goals were a major motivating factor for them. Each mentioned wanting to graduate and have a career. Reaching goals and graduating were also parts of the graphic representation of success from each student.

Sub-question Four

Sub-question four examined which academic support factors contribute to student success in an ALC with an online curriculum in Central Virginia. Participant interviews revealed that one-on-one help from staff members, the willingness of staff members to help, and staff members monitoring student progress were all academic support factors that helped students succeed. Further, interviews and document analysis demonstrated aspects of the curriculum and instruction that aided students. The major factors that helped students succeed were the ability of students to self-pace their instruction, students being able to take breaks when needed, and having multiple chances at mastery. These factors prevailed across all three cases. Of major importance to Travis was the one-on-one help. At one point in the interview, he apologized for mentioning one-on-one help so much. He felt strongly that the opportunity to sit down with a teacher or even Shirley, the administrator, to receive personalized help benefited him and changed his performance.

When examining the curriculum and hearing from participants about aspects of the curriculum that were helpful, it was evident that the online curriculum offered many things that students had not encountered before. The curriculum provided students the opportunity to work at their own pace. They could come in having a rough day and still catch up tomorrow. They could also move ahead. This aspect was of special importance to Lauren whose main goal was to catch up to her same-aged peer group. The ability to move ahead in the curriculum was a great motivating factor for Lauren. Once she saw success as an option and could visibly see herself progressing, she worked even harder to move ahead. She will transition back to the traditional setting in the 2019-2020 school year as a tenth grader and be among same-aged peers. The curriculum also offered students multiple chances at mastery, something none had ever

experienced. Students were able to go back and retake quizzes or tests that they did not do well on the first time through. Even in the blended learning section of the instructional setting, Travis was allotted second chances on assignments. Karen was more concerned with students being able to master a concept than just putting a grade in the gradebook. The aforementioned academic supports helped each student in this study make academic improvement and see success in school as a reality.

Sub-question Five

Sub-question five asked which self-regulatory skills contribute to student success in an ALC with an online curriculum in Central Virginia. The ability to self-regulate ranked fourth in the overall cross-case synthesis of themes, yet self-regulations skills had a positive effect on each student in the study. Lauren, Jase, and Travis felt their ability to self-regulate their actions, academic discipline, and behaviors greatly improved while enrolled in the alternative learning center. Mark, Todd, Karen, and Shirley discussed alternative learning center staff working intentionally to develop these skills in students. The specific self-regulatory skills which emerged from the data analysis were the ability of students to self-monitor their academic progress, the ability of students to self-regulate their behavior, students' ability to ask for help, and students' study skills.

The online format followed with every course at Eastern Learning Center made it especially uncomplicated for Lauren and Jase to monitor their own academic progress. The two could see quiz and test grades immediately and could see overall class progress at a simple keystroke. Both mentioned the ease as helpful for them. The immediate feedback offered was a motivational factor for them. Travis also discussed the desire to check his grades that had not previously been present. Even though some of his classes were partly direct instruction, he

expressed a desire to come ask his teachers about his grades frequently. Another factor of interest with self-regulation strategies was the students' ability and desire to ask for help. Again, this desire had not existed before placement in the ALC. Teachers, administrators, and parents noted that Lauren, Jase, and Travis had gradually developed the desire to ask for help with their academics and other areas. Some felt it was due to a less threatening or judgmental environment coupled with strong relationships with ALC staff. When asked how enrollment in the ALC changed his strengths and weaknesses, Travis stated, "It's changed my ability to ask a question. My real weakness at the high school was not asking questions whenever I actually needed to. It seemed embarrassing to raise your hand and ask for help." Each student was able to use self-regulatory skills to reach the goals they set. The development of these skills in the ALC setting helped Lauren, Jase, and Travis make academic and behavioral improvements necessary to meet their personal goals.

Discussion

Empirical and theoretical literature from Chapter Two will be revisited as findings of this multiple case study are discussed. The discussion will include how the findings of the study corroborate, extend, and diverge from the previous research. The discussion will also include novel contributions to the field of education. Empirical literature will be discussed first, followed by theoretical literature.

Empirical Literature

Though not a new concept, alternative education continues to be a topic in need of further study (Carswell et al., 2014; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Free, 2017; Jordan et al., 2017). Various types of alternative school models exist, yet there is lack of a standard, clear definition for the type and purpose of these settings (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Caroleo, 2014; Free, 2017; Lehr et

al., 2009; Raywid, 1999; Ross & Mathison, 2008; Schwab et al., 2016). The majority of students placed in an AES are at risk of educational failure and many even drop out of school altogether (Caroleo, 2014; Free, 2017; Jordan et al., 2017; Quinn et al., 2006). To further complicate the arena of alternative education, there is often a negative stigma and deficit mindset attached to these settings (Aron, 2006; Caroleo, 2014; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Foley & Pang, 2006; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Plows et al., 2017; Vadeboncoeur & Velloso, 2016). Though there is a wide array of research on students who experience negative outcomes in the AES setting, there are students who have positive experiences and outcomes (Garner, 2016; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016). Research on students who have positive outcomes in an AES and how the AES meets the needs of these students is lacking (Aron, 2006; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Garner, 2016). This multiple case study focused on an understudied AES model, the alternative learning center (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). The two ALC sites for this study also utilized an online curriculum component, which may promote student learning and have benefits for at risk students (Corry & Carlson-Bancroft, 2014; Karahan & Roehrig, 2016). Further, this study examined students who were successful in the ALC environment and what specific factors contributed to their success.

The stigma of alternative education and outcomes. Alternative education settings are often wrapped in negative stigmas and tied to negative student outcomes (Aron, 2006; Caroleo, 2014; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Plows et al., 2016; Vadeboncoeur & Velloso, 2016). The AES and students placed there are habitually viewed through a deficit mindset. There is much research on negative student outcomes in the AES (Garner, 2016; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Research on alternative settings also suggests that students placed there earn less credits per semester, have less than ideal attendance, have access for fewer

resources, and do not receive an equitable education (Kennedy-Lewis, 2016; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016). Alternative settings are also viewed as having ineffective teachers and a poor quality of education (Aron, 2006; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Vadeboncoeur & Velloso, 2016). Findings from the current study diverge from the aforementioned findings.

This multiple case study on factors that contribute to student success in an ALC with an online curriculum provides findings that show students who were previously unsuccessful in the traditional classroom setting can attend an AES and encounter success. Each student in this study was failing core subject areas in the traditional setting. Specifically, Lauren and Jase were two years behind their same-aged peers. Travis was also failing subject areas. Jase and Travis had both experienced some minor behavior issues as well based on school discipline records. Academic records on all three students showed that their grades improved during their time in the ALC. Lauren and Jase had even made the honor roll on different occasions. Lauren will transition to a traditional high school setting during the 2019-2020 school year due to moving successfully through two grade levels of content during her one year in the ALC. Jase is on track to graduate in 2020 and Travis graduated from high school in June of 2019. Each student was an example of a successful outcome from an alternative setting. On top of the academic success, Jase and Travis were not displaying any behavior issues in the ALC.

To further diverge from previous findings, data from this study did not include information on teachers being ineffective. In contrast, two major themes that emerged from data analysis shed a positive light on teachers and administrators in the ALC settings. Teachers building trusting relationships with students and specific teacher qualities were factors contributing to student success (see Table 2). Each parent and student who participated in this

study spoke enthusiastically of the teachers in the ALC. Students in this study also had access to ample resources to aid their academic progress. One-on-one help and staff members monitoring progress were resources that emerged as contributing factors to their success (see Table 2).

These findings showed that ineffective teachers, negative outcomes, and lack of resources do not have to be the norm for alternative settings. There are quality teachers and quality educational experiences available to students in an AES. Further, students placed in an AES do have positive outcomes. When viewing these settings, educators and district leaders need to focus on the type of environment that is cultivated, the quality of staff hired, and resources allocated to help students receive what they need.

ALC model. Current research suggests that the ALC model can provide academic support that meets individual needs of students and helps them graduate or transition back to the traditional school setting (Henderson et al., 2018). The findings of this study corroborate the current research by demonstrating the ALC model can deliver individualized support that assists students in making the academic and/or behavioral improvements necessary for transition back to a traditional classroom setting or graduation. Each student in this study received small group instruction and one-on-one help that facilitated their improvement. Due to the individualized support received in the ALC, Travis graduated in June of 2019 and Lauren will transition back to the traditional setting as a tenth grader in the 2019-2020 school year. Jase qualifies for transition back to the traditional setting, but has chosen to remain at Eastern Learning Center because he feels it best meets his needs and will help him graduate in 2020. Each participant spoke about the personal attention and assistance offered to each student in the ALC. Data from interviews, documents, and artifacts shows that this support and attention offered at the ALC prompted students to improve.

This study also offers two novel contributions to the current research on the ALC model by providing data on student success in an ALC with an online curriculum component and examining the perspectives of parents who have students enrolled in an ALC with an online curriculum component. Parent perspectives on the AES in general is lacking in the current body of research (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). No research was found which included the perspective of parents who had students in an ALC setting. The three parents included in this study offered insight into the factors they believed helped their children be successful. Hearing the voices of these parents provided deeper meaning and understanding of the ALC and how staff members were able to meet the needs of students and provide positive outcomes. Each parent spoke about the level of help their child received in the ALC, relationships with staff members, smaller class sizes, and the overall caring environment that existed in each ALC. Judy commented that Central Learning Center was a welcoming, family environment. She went on to say, “[The principal] is like his second mom. There’s more of a personable relationship. It’s like a family here.” Judy also mentioned that while a member of the Central Learning Center student body, Travis’s grades were higher than they had been since he was in the fourth grade. She raved that she wished Travis would have had a program like this earlier and desired the local school system to begin a program for elementary school-aged children. Judy, Mike, and Michelle offered valuable insights into the aspects of each program that helped their children and aspects of traditional settings that served an opposite purpose.

Online learning. The second novel contribution to the current body of research is offering data on student success in an ALC with an online curriculum component. As previously asserted, research is lacking on the ALC model in general (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). Research on student success in an ALC with an online curriculum component is absent from

current literature. This study presents findings on this topic that breakdown the specific facets of such an ALC model that contribute to student success. Specifically, themes which developed from data analysis demonstrate that the online curriculum component allowed for students to self-pace their instruction, have multiple attempts at mastery, and engage in personalized instruction. Blended learning approaches such as small group or one-on-one instruction allowed the students the extra support needed to meet success. When discussing the online curriculum component, Jase expressed,

I'd rather stay here. I can finish a whole lot faster here because I can work at my own pace. So, if I know it, I can just go ahead and knock it all out. Then I won't have to come the next semester, because I only need two more classes.

Jase had met the requirements to transition back to the traditional high school setting, but chose to stay at Eastern Learning Center to complete his senior year during the 2019-2020 school year. The self-paced and personalized instruction offered at the ALC motivated Jase to stay and finish early.

Each student in this study attended an ALC with an online curriculum component. Current research on online learning and blended learning environments shows that these formats increase critical thinking, create more personalized educational experiences, allow for self-paced instruction, and create higher levels of student engagement and motivation (Christensen et al., 2011; Corry & Carlson-Bancroft, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Zieleszinski, & Goldman, 2014; Greene & Hale, 2017). Data from the study corroborates these findings and demonstrates that this online component was a factor in student success due to how it set the tone for personalized instruction which allowed students to self-pace. The online format also pushed students to work on their self-regulation strategies, which were taught and reinforced by ALC staff members.

Some educators believe, “The future of learning will be a student-paced culture as opposed to our current forms of custodial education, which are teacher-based” (Myers, 2011, p. 4). Based on data from this multiple case study, the student-paced culture of each ALC with the online curriculum component better suited the needs of these students who were failing in the traditional, teacher-centered learning environment. Lauren and Jase spoke specifically about how being able to self-pace their learning was a large motivational factor for them. Online learning also provides students with opportunities they may not have otherwise been exposed to, while at the same time helping them to be more self-regulated learners (Corry & Carlson-Bancroft, 2014; Greene & Hale, 2017; Huh & Reigeluth, 2018; Karahan & Roehig, 2016). Again, data from this study confirms this research. Lauren was able to catch up to her same-aged peers after being two years behind. The use of self-regulation strategies was a strong theme that emerged from the data. Online learning offered these students an environment they had not previously had which allowed them to meet success.

Personalized learning. Tied to the use of an online curriculum component is the personalization of education. Personalized learning focuses on meeting the needs of the learner and allowing flexibility in the learning process (Arbor, 2017; Basham, Hall et al., 2016; Bingham, 2017; Childress & Benson, 2014; Lim et al., 2007). This type of learning requires students to use self-regulation skills that normally must be taught (Basham, Smith, & Satter, 2016; Bingham, 2017; Watson & Watson, 2011). Having access to personalized education can motivate students, meet the needs of students, engage students in the learning process, and enhance overall learning (Bingham, 2017; Childress & Benson, 2014; Prain et al., 2013). Evidence from the findings of this study corroborate the current research on personalization.

The theme of personalization was fifth in overall prevalence upon data analysis. Personalization of education or instruction is something none of the three students had previously experienced. Findings from this study also indicate that the self-regulation skills and strategies had to be taught and reinforced by ALC staff members, just as previous research indicated. These skills were not innate in the students of focus. Being able to have a personalized educational experience was a factor in the success of Lauren, Jase, and Travis. Lauren and Jase especially spoke about how being able to self-pace was motivational to them. The particular aspects of being able to self-pace instruction, take breaks, move ahead in the curriculum, and have multiple chances at mastery were of great importance to each student.

Factors for student success. Personalization was one of six major themes which emerged as a factor for student success from this study. Plows et al. (2017) indicated that success is unique to each student and depends on what is meaningful to that student. The body of research on factors for student success specifies that regardless of how success is defined for an individual, there are certain factors that promote success (D'Angleo & Zemanick, 2009; Huh & Reigeluth, 2018; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011, 2012; Roblyer et al., 2008). Factors previously found to influence student success included the learning environment, relationships with staff members, student teacher interactions, class sizes, expectations, structure of the day, characteristics of learners, instructional design, feedback from teachers, and school culture (D'Angleo & Zemanick, 2009; Huh & Reigeluth, 2018; Lim et al., 2007; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011, 2012; Roblyer et al., 2008). Research is absent on student success in an ALC with an online curriculum.

Findings from this study confirm the previous findings on which factors contribute to student success. Each area previously indicated were corroborated by this study either as a major

theme or a code within a major theme (see Table 2). Findings from this study extend the current body of research by offering data on additional factors that contribute to student success and by demonstrating the presence of these factors in an ALC with an online curriculum. Additional factors which emerged from this study were having access to one-on-one help from staff, staff members monitoring student process, goal setting and tracking, personalization of instruction, and the ability of students to use self-regulation skills (see Table 2). Lauren and Travis specifically referenced setting and reaching goals in their graphic representations of success (see Figures 5 and 9). The other additional themes emerged from interviews with all participants and some document and artifact analysis. The results of this multiple case study clearly provide many factors that lead to student success that would be easily replicated in other AES and even in some traditional classroom settings.

Theoretical Literature

Two theories formed the theoretical framework for this study. The main theory which guided the study was Bandura's social cognitive theory. This theory posited that people develop, change, and grow through their interactions and experiences (Miller, 2011). Social cognitive theory also proposed that people influence their own actions and situations in life, thus are contributors to the conditions of their life, not just products of these conditions (Bandura, 2001). Self-regulation theory occurs in harmony with social cognitive theory as it predicated that each person is "metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active" in their learning process (Zimmerman, 1989, p. 329). Simply, people are in control of their academic and behavioral learning. Both theories will be discussed in light of the findings of this study.

Social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory holds many assumptions about how learning occurs. A major component of this theory is the belief that people learn from social

modeling (Bandura, 1969, 2012). Social modeling has been previously linked to assisting in the development of behavioral and cognitive abilities (Bandura, 1969, 2012). Modeling has also been shown “to alter motivation, create and modify emotional proclivities, serve as social prompts that activate, channel, and support given styles of behavior, and shape images of reality” (Bandura, 2012, p. 3). The findings of this study confirm these previous findings. The students of focus in this study and all other participants spoke to how different types of social modeling aided in their academic and behavioral success. A large amount of social modeling can be found in the most prevalent theme of learning center structure and staff support. Each center implemented a tight rule structure. These rules were modeled by staff and other peers in the ALC. If any student of either ALC diverged from the rule structure, a staff member pulled the student aside to remind them of the rule and talk through the issue, asking the student questions, and talking through better choices. This was also the case with academic expectations. The staff closely monitored each student’s academic progress and talked with them to either encourage their progress or get them back on track when necessary. Another theme that demonstrated social modeling was the theme dealing with goal setting. Lauren, Jase, nor Travis had ever truly set goals before coming to the ALC. Staff members met with students to go over the goal setting process and helped students monitor their goals during their enrollment in the ALC. Modeling the goal setting process and consistent reminders helped students become goal oriented. These students would presumably not have been goal oriented without the modeling and emphasis from ALC staff.

Another component of social cognitive theory is a belief that people obtain and alter behaviors or knowledge through their interactions with people and the environment (Miller, 2011). Answers to sub-questions 1 and 2 corroborate this component of the theory. The

environment of the learning center was found to be a contributing factor to student success. Participants noted learning center structure and rules, more personal space, much smaller class sizes, and less distractions as components that were helpful in their behavioral and/or academic success. These environmental factors were noted during interviews and in document and artifact analysis. Site pictures were helpful in understanding the constant discussion of more personal space for students and less distractions. Since each student and parent indicated that students were easily distracted, it would certainly seem that an environment intentionally structured with less distractions would be more conducive to learning. Interactions with people that aided students in success were getting along well with peers and trusting relationships with teachers and ALC administrators. In addition to trusting relationships with ALC staff, students and parents emphasized the importance of teachers truly caring about them, believing in them, and giving them a second chance. Each interaction with teachers and staff members was viewed as positive. These positive interactions were motivating to students and made them feel that they were able to do the work, make changes were necessary, and be successful. The findings demonstrate that the sum of these interactions influenced the students' behavior, cognition, and motivation (Phillips, 2011).

This study extends social cognitive theory by applying to a setting where it has not previously been applied. This study focused on student success in an ALC with an online curriculum in Central Virginia. The ALC setting is an understudied version of alternative education (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). Viewing this study through a social cognitive lens demonstrates that the environment students are exposed to joined with the type of interactions they have with those in the environment are major factors in their chance of success. This

understanding could assist alternative and traditional school leadership in crafting school environments that foster learning and positive behavior.

Self-regulation theory. Self-regulation theory proposed that learners are active participants in the process of learning (Zimmerman, 1989). Learning does not just happen to someone, but requires the person be cognitively and behaviorally active in the process (Labuhn, et al., 2010; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007; Zimmerman, 1986, 1989, 2002, 2008). In an ALC setting with an online curriculum component, students must exhibit some level of self-regulation, as they can set the pace of learning (Huh & Reigeluth, 2018). Very possibly, students working with online curriculum need more self-regulation strategies than students in a traditional classroom setting (Hug & Reigeluth, 2018). Zimmerman (1989) believed that self-regulated learners use specific strategies, possess self-efficacy, and are committed to goals. This study validates the importance of self-regulation theory in an educational setting, confirms that learners are active participants in the process of learning, and corroborates the traits of a self-regulated learner.

Students in this study seemingly had not been using self-regulation strategies prior to their placement in the ALC. When asked about study skills, seeking help, or setting goals, students stated they had not really used any of these strategies in the traditional setting. In the traditional setting, all three students were failing academic subjects and two were having discipline issues. Upon enrolling in the ALC, students were taught some self-regulation strategies by staff members. Once students began to see success as an option, their self-confidence was boosted. This boost in self-confidence combined with staff members working to instill self-regulation strategies was just what students needed to develop into self-regulated learners. In self-regulation theory, Zimmerman (1989) pointed to self-regulated learners as those

who sought help or information, organized information, believed in their capabilities, and could put actions in place to attain goals. This study confirms that these traits exist in self-regulated learners. Lauren, Jase, and Travis began asking for help, believing in themselves, and working to achieve goals while in the ALC setting. Each student was an active participant in the learning process. This study demonstrates the importance of self-regulation by presenting students who were not successful prior to integrating self-regulation strategies into their learning. The motivation and overall involvement of Lauren, Jase, and Travis changed immensely during their time in the ALC. This change in regulation of behaviors was a catalyst to their academic and/or behavioral success.

Implications

Theoretical, empirical, and practical implications resulted from the findings of this multiple case study. Theoretical implications will include how the findings of this study effected the two theories guiding the study; social cognitive theory and self-regulation theory. Empirical implications will examine how the study contributes to the current research on the topic. Lastly, practical implications will present recommendations to the many stakeholders in educational settings to include; teachers, school administrators, district leadership, school support staff, parents, students, and community members.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical framework of this multiple case study connects social cognitive theory and self-regulation theory to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum component. Social cognitive theory postulated that learning does not occur in isolation, but that people's behavior, cognition, and personal components interact with the environment they are in to shape learning and behaviors (Bandura, 2002; Phillips, 2011). Self-

regulation theory proposed each person has “Self-reflective and self-reactive capabilities that enable them to exercise some control over their thoughts, feelings, motivation, and actions” (Bandura, 1991, p. 249). These two theories complement one another well, with self-regulation theory demonstrating that people are not solely regulated by external influences (Bandura, 1991). Data analysis of the study made it apparent that aspects of the ALC environment, interactions with staff and peers, and various components of self-regulation aided each student in their academic and/or behavioral improvement while in the ALC setting.

The findings of this study demonstrate social cognitive theory is a useful learning theory to explore when seeking to understand the learning process of students. District leadership may want to view learning through the social cognitive theory lens as they examine students who are not meeting success. Results of this study noted that interactions with teachers and administrators, modeling from teachers and administrators, and the learning environment created in the ALC were all factors that contributed to the success of students. The change of environment and the change of the amount and type of interactions with teachers and administrators were major factors that brought change in the students’ academic performance and/or behavior.

This study also has implications for self-regulation theory. Findings of the study demonstrate that students utilized various self-regulation strategies that helped propel them to improve their academics and in some cases behavior. Each student in this study played an active role in their learning process (Zimmerman, 1986, 2002; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2014). In addition to viewing the learning process through the social cognitive theory lens, educators and educational leaders should also view the process through the lens of self-regulation theory. The environment alone is not the answer to student improvement. Based on this study, educational

leaders should work to integrate self-regulation strategies to include goal setting into their school regimens. Of importance is the certitude that none of the three students of focus seemed to have previously utilized self-regulation strategies in the school setting. Strategies such as working to attain goals, seeking help and information, and monitoring their own progress were developed during their time at the ALC. The growth of these skills was cultivated by teachers and administrators at each ALC.

Empirical Implications

A gap exists in the current body of research on the ALC model, student success in an AES, and parent perspectives on an AES (Beken et al., 2009; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Foley & Pang, 2006; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Garner, 2016; Henderson & Barnes, 2016; Schwab et al., 2016). The findings of this study expand the current body of research by addressing the three aforementioned gaps. This study focused on the ALC setting, an underexplored model of alternative education settings (Henderson & Barnes, 2016). Many AES have negative stigmas associated with them (Caroleo, 2014; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Plows et al., 2017; Vadeboncoeur & Velloso, 2016). The ALC settings featured in this study seem to wipe away much of the negative undertones. Parent, student, and staff participants in this study spoke highly of the ALC and noted many times that the experience there was positive. Jase addressed the negative stigmas he felt about an AES when he stated, “I was hesitant to come here. For some reason, I always had this thing, that this was a place for kids that just got in trouble all the time.” Jase went on to mention that his feelings about the AES changed once he was in the program and that his experience at the ALC was very positive. Jase knew he needed this setting to be successful, even to the point of opting to stay so he could graduate in 2020. District leaders may want to consider the ALC model as an option for students. Educators, students, parents, and

community members should remove the negative stigma of an AES from their mind and consider it as a necessary setting to meet the needs of students who require something different to achieve their potential.

Literature is also lacking on positive student outcomes in the AES (Beken et al., 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Garner, 2016; Schwab et al., 2016). This study extends the current literature on this topic and demonstrates that there are students in AES who make improvements and have successful outcomes. Each student who participated in this multiple case study made academic improvements. Lauren, Jase, and Travis were previously failing many subject areas. Lauren and Jase were two grade levels behind. While in the ALC setting, both were able to catch up to their correct peer group and were actually achieving honor roll status. Travis was earning passing grades and graduated from high school in June of 2019. The two students who experienced minor behavior issues in the traditional school setting also improved their behavior. All three students have career goals in mind upon graduation. They each see success as an option and believe in themselves due to the success they found in the ALC.

The final gap in literature addressed by this study was the lack of perspectives from parents with children in an AES (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). Three parents of students in an ALC were included in this study. Many times, educators automatically believe that a parent of a student in any type of AES does not really know what is going on because they are not at school each day with the student, or they believe the parent does not care due to the student's prior failures or behavioral challenges. This study demonstrates that parents of students in an AES do have an idea of what occurs in the setting and value their child's education. Each parent included in this study discussed a value for education and a belief that learning starts at home.

The factors found to aid students in success were noted in the interviews and graphic representations of success of students, ALC staff members, and parents. Of special importance to each parent was the high quality of relationships staff members built with their child. They believed teachers and administrators at both ALC sites truly cared about their child and were making sure their child had everything they needed to achieve academic and/or behavioral success. Based on these findings, educators and educational leaders in traditional and alternative settings should focus on the importance of parent perspectives. Parents will always tell the story of a school setting and how they feel their child is treated in that setting. Each of these parents came away with a positive experience and were excited to tell that story. Engaging parents in the process of education and focusing on doing what is best for children will help eradicate the negative stigmas and stories so often found in AES and traditional school settings.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study extend to the various stakeholders of AESs. Teachers, administrators, district leaders, school support staff, parents, students, and community members are all concerned about student success. Administrators and district leaders dealing with alternative settings should examine the ALC model as a choice when designing or revitalizing AES. This model brings a blend of student types in and focuses on changing the educational system itself, not changing the student or the setting solely. Based on the findings of this study, administrators and district leaders should closely survey the environments of the AES they have developed for students. Does the AES include the components outlined in this study that contributed to student success? Are they selecting the appropriate staff to work with these at-risk students? Is the instruction designed to be personalized to meet the needs of each student? Are these learning environments designed to hold students who are in the way in other

settings, or are they designed to cultivate student success and motivate positive growth in students?

In addition, every school leader should reflect on the school environment they are a part of, even in traditional settings. How can the components outlined in this study; to include a) learning center structure and staff support, b) goals and accountability, c) trusting relationships, d) ability to self-regulate, e) personalized instruction, and f) teacher qualities, be implemented in traditional settings? Education in the United States is past the point of sticking with ‘We have always done it this way’ as an explanation. Educators can no longer go along with the one size fits all approach to learning. These ways of thinking are the reason why many students are not meeting success in traditional classroom settings. If nothing changes, nothing changes.

Educators and leaders in all educational settings must think outside of the box and be willing to take risks to change the trajectory of our educational system. Personalization of learning can and should occur in all settings. Childress and Benson (2014) noted “Personalized learning can meet all students where they are, motivate them based on their interests and academic level, accelerate their learning, and prepare them to become true lifelong learners” (p. 34). Further, personalized learning may be a solution to the challenge faced daily by educators to motivate and support students (Prain et al., 2013).

Implications for teachers and school support staff include working to personalize learning for students, building trusting relationships with students, caring about students, believing that students can succeed, giving students a second chance, and teaching students self-regulation strategies. Teachers and school leaders should also think about giving students multiple chances for mastering skills. Grades should be about mastery. Students in this study appreciated having a second chance at quizzes, tests, and other assignments. This was actually a factor in their

success. Truly, teachers and support staff should examine their current practices for instruction and classroom environment to determine if they are conducive to student success.

Parents can utilize the findings of this study to better understand what their child needs to be successful. Hopefully, this study will assist parents in advocating for the needs of their child. Students can also benefit from knowing what it takes to reach success. Students should begin to focus on self-regulation strategies such as goal setting, developing plans to obtain goals, and seeking help and information. This study demonstrates that these strategies aid in academic and behavioral success. Lastly, this study has implications for community members. The success of students in local school systems has a direct effect on the surrounding community. Student success is important to communities so graduates can become contributing members to their community and add value. Community members should look at the ALC setting as something necessary for some students to meet success. This can be important when school budgets are discussed. Community members are concerned with how their tax money is used. Understanding the possible need for an ALC or for more money in school budgets to achieve an environment that cultivates success can help community members support local school initiatives.

Delimitations and Limitations

Each research study includes delimitations and limitations. Delimitations are the boundaries set for the study by the researcher. Limitations for a study are the characteristics that influence the interpretation of the study. This section will include delimitations and limitations of this study.

Delimitations

Delimitations are intentional choices made by the researcher to define the boundaries of the study. Intrinsic to case study research is a choice of what is studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Part of what establishes case study research is a bounded system, or specific conditions, time periods, groups, locations, etc., that define the case (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The dominant delimitation for this study was that only two ALCs were used to determine participants. Further, these sites were in two school districts in Central Virginia. Another delimitation of the study was that the two learning centers did not utilize the same online learning formats or overall learning structures. Central Learning Center used Apex for online courses, whereas Eastern Learning Center used GradPoint. Central Learning Center also employed more of a blended learning format than Eastern Learning Center. A final delimitation was that only one teacher from each site was included in the study. Both centers had at least one other teacher that had worked with the students of focus, but only one from each center was chosen to be included in the study.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study was the generalization of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Case study findings are not generalizable to populations due to the small sample used (Yin, 2018). Another limitation is the prior experiences in education of each participant. Each participant entered the study with personal educational experiences that may have influenced their responses, beliefs, feelings, and actions. These limitations were out of the control of the researcher and may have influenced the overall findings of the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are many areas within the topic of student success in ALCs with online curriculums that could be further explored. First, a phenomenology focusing on the lived experiences of students who have graduated after being enrolled in an ALC with an online curriculum component would be beneficial. Hearing the voices of these students and what helped them reach success would add to the current literature on the topic and assist educators and educational leaders as they shape curriculum and learning environments in alternative and traditional classroom settings. Another area of study that would add to the current literature in this field would be a case study or phenomenology involving students who improved academics and or behavior while enrolled in an ALC with an online curriculum, and then transitioned back to the traditional setting. Such a study could follow the students to see if their success continued after the transition. If the transition was successful, students, teachers, and administrators could give insight into what made the transition an effective one.

A third study could compare student success factors in an ALC with an online curriculum component versus student success factors in an ALC without an online curriculum component. This study could be a multiple case study or phenomenology. Of interest in such a study would be if the factors remain similar regardless of the online component. Future qualitative and quantitative studies could also examine specific types of online curriculum components. This study involved two sites that used different online components. Eastern Learning Center used GradPoint, whereas Central Learning Center utilized Apex. Future studies could focus on one type of online curriculum and how students, teachers and administrators feel about the curriculum and how it aids students in academic success.

Still another qualitative multiple case study could include successful students in ALCs in other areas outside of Central Virginia. A phenomenology or case study could examine students with more severe behavior issues that made improvements in ALCs. While two students in this study had some behavior infractions on their school records, none would be considered severe. A study focused specifically on students with severe behaviors who experienced success in the ALC environment would add to the current body of literature. Lastly, this study focused on successful students who were enrolled in ALCs. A future qualitative study could explore a successful ALC site. Certain criteria would need to be established to determine what deems an ALC successful. Discovering what factors work together to make the site successful could aid all educators as they try to reach students in a cycle of academic or behavioral failure.

Summary

The findings of this multiple case study were summarized by responding to each research question. Findings were then discussed in light of their relationship, extension, or contribution to the empirical and theoretical literature from Chapter Two. Next, the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study were outlined. Delimitations and limitations of the study were considered. Lastly, recommendations for future research were explored. In conclusion, students across the nation are faced with academic and behavioral failure daily. All too often, these students are given up on, tossed into a program that stigmatizes them and exasperates their failure, or end up dropping out of school. Teachers and administrators are also often frustrated and feel like there is no hope for certain students, they do not know what else to do, or feel that they do not have the time or resources to give to these at risk students to help them improve. Many believe, “That the problem does not lie within the student; instead, they believe that the

traditional system of education is ineffective in meeting the diverse and rapidly changing needs of young people in today's society" (Quinn et al., 2006, p. 11).

For decades, alternative education programs have been utilized for at risk students who were not succeeding in the traditional school setting. These programs were often viewed in a negative light due to being almost prison-like and perpetuating the failure cycle (Caroleo, 2014; Carswell et al., 2014; Plows et al., 2016). However, the face of alternative education is evolving. For so long, these programs followed a deficit model and inherently believed that the students needed to be changed (Quinn et al., 2006). The ALC models, like the ones included in this study, adhere to a philosophy that it is the system itself that must be different, thus creating a program with innovative strategies, curriculums, and beliefs (Henderson et al., 2018; Quinn et al., 2006). Todd and Shirley both indicated that the students that enter their alternative learning centers need something different. Their approach was not to "fix" the student, but to give the student what they needed.

Each student in this study was previously failing academically. Jase and Travis had also experienced some behavioral issues. After their time in the ALCs, each student improved academically, as well as behaviorally where applicable. Travis graduated from high school in June of 2019, after the completion of data collection. In September of 2019, Lauren will transition back to the traditional high school setting as a 10th grader with her same-aged peers and Jase will be a senior on track to graduate in June of 2020. Each participant felt these successes would not have been possible without the ALC setting. It is noteworthy that Travis and Jase chose to stay in the alternative setting even after meeting all qualifications to transition back to the traditional setting. They both noted that the alternative setting was what was best for them to continue to succeed. Each participant was visibly inspired and at times stirred to

emotion by their belief in and appreciation for the alternative settings. These centers had truly changed the trajectory of the students of focus. Where they had felt hopeless before, they were now full of hope and excitement about graduating from high school and pursuing a career.

Lauren, Jase, nor Travis had seen this type of success as an option prior to their time in the ALC.

The sites used in this study were in different school districts, employed different online formats, utilized different structures for learning, and accommodated slightly different learning environments. Yet, the factors identified from data analysis converged to spur each student to success. The prevalent factors of learning center structure and staff support, goals and accountability, trusting relationships, the ability to self-regulate, personalized instruction, and teacher qualities each contributed to student success in the ALCs. The hope of this researcher is that findings of this study will help educators, students, parents, and educational leaders see that there is the potential for success in each student. Learning environments and instructional strategies often need to be adapted to accommodate the needs of students. When students are loved, believed in, and given what they need; change will occur. Educators, do not give up on students. Instead, be an agent of hope for them to spur the greatness that is undoubtedly within.

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APPENDIX A: IRB Approval Letter

February 12, 2019

Heather Amanda Clay IRB Approval 3645.021219: Factors Contributing to the Success of Students in an Alternative Learning Center with an Online Curriculum: A Multiple Case Study

Dear Heather Amanda Clay,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP Administrative Chair of Institutional Research Research Ethics Office

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APPENDIX B: Permission to Conduct the Study

November 16, 2018

Dr.
Superintendent of _____ County Schools

Dear Dr.:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand the factors that contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum. This research is part of the requirement for the researcher's dissertation in pursuit of an Ed. D. in Educational Leadership through Liberty University. The title of my research project is Factors Contributing to the Success of Students in an Alternative Learning Center with an Online Curriculum: A Multiple case Study and the purpose of my research is to determine the environmental factors, social support factors, emotional support factors, academic support factors, and self-regulatory skills that contribute to the success of students in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at _____ in the ____ County Public Schools District, to contact staff members of this school to invite them to participate in my research study, and to access and utilize student behavior and academic records of students whose parents grant permission for their participation in this study. I am also requesting to access and utilize curriculum and goal setting information from the school.

Participants will be asked to participate in an interview session with me and to create a graphic representation of what success means to them. Student behavior and academic records will be used to demonstrate their improvement. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,

Heather Amanda Clay
Liberty University Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX C: Recruitment Letter for Study

February 18, 2019

Dear Sir or Madam,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. I am seeking to better understand the factors that contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum. The purpose of my research is to determine the environmental factors, social support factors, emotional support factors, academic support factors, and self-regulatory skills that contribute to the success of students in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum, and I am writing to invite you and/or your child (if applicable) to participate in my study.

If you are a current or former student of _____ who attended for at least one semester and showed improvement in core class grades and/or behavior, the parent of a child currently or formally enrolled in _____ who attended for at least one semester and showed improvement in core class grades and/or behavior, or a staff member at _____ who worked with one of the student participants and are willing to participate, or are willing to allow your child to participate, you will be asked to complete a demographic/biographical survey, participate in an interview, and provide or create a graphic representation of what success means to you. Academic and behavior records in the form of discipline referrals, progress reports, report cards, and goal-setting forms will also be requested from the alternative learning center for each student participant. It should take approximately two hours for you and/or your child (if applicable) to complete the procedures listed. Your name and/or other identifying information, and that of your child (if applicable), will be requested as part of participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please complete and return the attached screening survey to the alternative learning center administrator. Please provide your contact information on the survey, and I will contact you to schedule an interview.

A consent document is attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you meet the study criteria, you will be asked to sign the consent form and return it at the time of the interview.

If you choose to participate, each participant will receive a \$20 gift card to a restaurant.

Sincerely,

Heather Amanda Clay
Liberty University Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX D: Participant Screening Survey

Participant Screening Survey

Factors Contributing to the Success of Students in an Alternative Learning Center with an Online Curriculum: A Multiple Case Study

Heather Amanda Clay

Liberty University

School of Education

Directions: Please complete this survey to ensure you meet the criteria to be included in the research study.

1. Name: _____

2. Contact Information (email address and phone number):

3. Please check one of the following:

_____ I am a current or former student of _____ who attended for at least one semester and made an improvement in core class grades and/or behavior.

_____ I am a parent of a current or former student of _____. My child attended this school for at least one semester and made an improvement in core class grades and/or behavior.

_____ I am a staff member of _____ and have worked with a student(s) who attended the school for at least one semester and made an improvement in core class grades and/or behavior.

APPENDIX E: Parental Consent Form

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

Factors Contributing to the Success of Students in an Alternative Learning Center with an Online Curriculum: A Multiple Case Study

This research study is being conducted by Heather Amanda Clay a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University. Your child was selected as a possible participant because he/she is currently enrolled at _____ or was formally enrolled for at least one semester and has been recommended by the administrator or a teacher. Your child was recommended due to making improvements in their grades and/or behavior while enrolled here. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow him/her to be in the study. Once completed, please return this form to the administrator of the alternative learning center.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to determine the environmental factors, social support factors, emotional support factors, academic support factors, and self-regulatory skills that contribute to the success of students in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum. This study is also part of the requirement for the researcher's dissertation in pursuit of an Ed. D. in Educational Leadership through Liberty University.

What will my child/student be asked to do?

If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, he or she will be asked to do the following things:

1. Your child will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher. This interview will be audio recorded and will take approximately one hour.
2. Your child will be asked to create or provide a graphic representation of what success means to them. They will need to write a brief description of the graphic representation. The graphic representation will be photographed for use in the final research document. This task should take one hour or less.
3. If you agree to allow your child to participate in the study, academic and behavior records will be requested from the school. This may include goal setting forms, progress reports, report cards, state testing scores, and discipline referrals.

What are the risks and benefits of this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Will my child be compensated for participating?

Your child will be compensated for participating in this study. Your child will receive a \$20 gift card to a restaurant for their participation in this study.

How will my child's personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from your child for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about your child, I will remove any information that could identify him or her if applicable, before I share the data.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect his or her current or future relations with Liberty University or the _____ County School System. If you decide to allow your child to participate, he or she is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should I or my child do if I decide to withdraw him or her or if he or she decides to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw your child or if your child chooses to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should your child choose to withdraw, any data collected from or about him or her will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do I contact if my child or I have questions or problems?

The researcher conducting this study is Heather Amanda Clay. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 804-712-6457 or haclay@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Jerry Woodbridge at jlwoodbridge@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record my child as part of his or her participation in this study.

Signature of Minor

Date

Signature of Parent

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX F: Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 2/12/2019 to 2/11/2020 Protocol # 3645.021219

CONSENT FORM

Factors Contributing to the Success of Students in an Alternative Learning Center with an Online Curriculum: A Multiple Case Study
Heather Amanda Clay
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on determining the factors that contribute to student success in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum. You were selected as a possible participant because you are the parent of a student in the alternative learning center who is a participant in this study, you are employed at the alternative learning center and work with a student who is a participant in this study, or you attended the alternative learning center for at least one semester making improvement in core class grades and/or behavior and are 18 years of age or older. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Heather Amanda Clay, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to determine the factors that contribute to the success of students in an alternative learning center with an online curriculum.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. You will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher. This interview will be audio recorded and will take approximately one hour.
2. You will be asked to create or provide a graphic representation of what success means to you. You will need to write a brief description of the graphic representation. The graphic representation will be photographed for use in the final research document. This task should take one hour or less.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include possibly providing information to educational and local leaders that will help improve student success in alternative learning centers.

Compensation: Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Each participant will receive a \$20 gift card to a restaurant.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 2/12/2019 to 2/11/2020 Protocol # 3645.021219

researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or _____ County School System. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Heather Amanda Clay. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 804-712-6457 or haclay@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Jerry Woodbridge at jlwoodbridge@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

___The researcher has my permission to audio record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX G: Questionnaire for Demographic/Biographical Information (Student)Demographic/Background Student
Questionnaire

1. Please provide your name.

2. Please provide your age.

3. Please choose your ethnicity.

American Indian or Alaska Native
 Asian
 Black or African American
 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 White
 Other

4. Please choose your gender

Male
 Female

5. How long have you been (or were you) in the Alternative Learning Center?

6. Have you graduated from high school?

Yes
 No

7. If you have not graduated, what grade are you currently in?

9th
 10th
 11th
 12th

8. Are you currently enrolled in the Alternative Learning Center?

Yes
 No

9. If you are not currently in the Alternative Learning Center, how long have you been back in the traditional high school setting?

APPENDIX H: Questionnaire for Demographic/Biographical Information (Parent)Demographic/Background Parent
Questionnaire

1. Please provide your name.

2. Please provide your age.

3. Please choose your ethnicity.

American Indian or Alaska Native
 Asian
 Black or African American
 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 White
 Other

4. Please choose your gender

Male
 Female

5. Please choose the highest level of education you have completed.

Less than High School diploma
 High School diploma or equivalent
 Bachelor's Degree
 Master's Degree
 Doctorate

6. How long has your child been (or how long was your child) in the Alternative Learning Center?

7. Has your child graduated from high school?

Yes
 No

8. If your child has not graduated, what grade is he/she currently in?

9th
 10th
 11th
 12th

9. Is your child currently enrolled in the Alternative Learning Center?

Yes
 No

10. If your child is not currently in the Alternative Learning Center, how long has he/she been back in the traditional high school setting?
-

APPENDIX I: Questionnaire for Demographic/Biographical Information (Staff)Demographic/Background Staff
Questionnaire

1. Please provide your name.

2. Please provide your age.

3. Please choose your ethnicity.

American Indian or Alaska Native
 Asian
 Black or African American
 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 White
 Other

4. Please choose your gender

Male
 Female

5. Please choose the highest level of education you have completed.

Less than High School diploma
 High School diploma or equivalent
 Bachelor's Degree
 Master's Degree
 Doctorate

6. How long have you worked in the field of education?

7. How long have you worked at the Alternative Learning Center?

8. What is your position at the Alternative Learning Center?

APPENDIX J: Student Interview Protocol

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions for Student Interviews

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How would you describe your strengths? How would you describe your weaknesses?
3. What led to your placement in the alternative learning center?
4. Tell me about the time you spent in the alternative learning center.
5. Tell me about your teachers in the alternative learning center. Describe your relationship with these teachers.
6. What characteristics or actions of the teachers do you feel helped your learning experience?
7. How was the curriculum and instruction at the alternative learning center different than what you had experienced before?
8. What elements of the curriculum and instruction do you feel helped your learning experience?
9. How was the learning environment in the alternative learning center different than what you had experienced before?
10. What elements of the learning environment in the alternative learning center do you feel helped your learning experience?
11. What was the goal-setting process like in the alternative learning center? How do you feel this helped you?
12. What strategies did you use while placed in the alternative learning center to self-evaluate and self-monitor your academic achievement and/or behavior?

13. How did you seek help with academic information you were unsure of? Who did you seek this help from?
14. How did you review or study information to prepare for quizzes or tests?
15. Describe your relationships and interactions with your peers in the alternative learning center.
16. Describe your parents' views toward education and tell me about their involvement in your education and with the alternative learning center.
17. How did your placement at the alternative learning center change your strengths and weaknesses?
18. How did the alternative learning center help you change your behaviors?
19. How did the alternative learning center help you change your academic achievement?
20. How would you define success for yourself?
21. What other information would you like to share about your time in the alternative learning center or what you feel helped you improve your grades and/or behavior?

APPENDIX K: Parent Interview Protocol**Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions for Parent Interviews**

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Describe your view of education and what you believe your role is in the education of your child.
3. How would you describe the strengths of your child? How would you describe the weaknesses of your child?
4. What led to your child's placement in the alternative learning center?
5. Tell me about the time your child spent in the alternative learning center.
6. Tell me about the teachers in the alternative learning center.
7. Describe your relationship and interactions with the teachers of the alternative learning center.
8. What about the teachers do you feel helped your child's learning experience?
9. How do you feel the curriculum and instruction at the alternative learning center were different than that of the traditional school setting?
10. What elements of the curriculum and instruction do you feel helped your child's learning experience?
11. How was the learning environment in the alternative learning center different than that of the traditional school setting?
12. What elements of the learning environment in the alternative learning center do you feel helped your child's learning experience?
13. How did your child seek help with academic information they were unsure of? Who did they seek this help from?

14. How did your child review or study information to prepare for quizzes or tests?
15. Describe your child's organizational and goal setting skills. Do you feel these changed at all while they were placed in the alternative learning center?
16. Describe your child's interactions with their peers in the alternative learning center.
17. Describe your involvement in your child's education and with the alternative learning center.
18. In what ways did the staff of the alternative learning center reach out to parents, try to involve parents, or make parents feel welcomed?
19. How did your child's placement at the alternative learning center change their strengths and weaknesses?
20. How did the alternative learning center help your child change their behaviors?
21. How did the alternative learning center help your child change their academic achievement?
22. How would you define success for your child?
23. What other information would you like to share about your child's time in the alternative learning center or what you feel helped your child improve their grades and/or behavior?

APPENDIX L: Staff Interview Protocol

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions for Alternative Learning Center Staff

Interviews

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How would you describe your strengths as a teacher? How would you describe your weaknesses as a teacher?
3. What led to the student's placement in the alternative learning center?
4. Tell me about the time you spent working with this student in the alternative learning center.
5. How would you describe the strengths of this student? How would you describe the weaknesses of this student?
6. Describe the curriculum and instruction at the alternative learning center.
7. What elements of the curriculum and instruction do you feel helped improve this student's academics and behavior?
8. Describe the learning environment of the alternative learning center.
9. What elements of this environment do you feel help students improve their academics and behavior?
10. What was the goal-setting process like in the alternative learning center? How do you feel this helps students?
11. What strategies do students use while placed in the alternative learning center to self-evaluate and self-monitor their academic achievement and/or behavior?
12. How did the student seek help with academic information they were unsure of? Who did they seek this help from?

13. Describe the involvement of the student's parents with the alternative learning center.
14. Describe how the alternative learning center tries to engage parents in the learning process and in the school setting.
15. Describe the student's relationships and interactions with their peers.
16. How does the center decide the student is ready to transition back to the traditional classroom setting?
17. Are there certain traits the student has that you feel aided in their academic and behavioral improvement? If so, what are they?
18. Do you feel placement in the alternative learning center changed the strengths and weaknesses of the student? If so, how?
19. How would you define success for this student?
20. What other information would you like to share about the alternative learning center or what you feel helped the student improve their grades and/or behavior?

APPENDIX M: Graphic Representation Directions

Directions for Graphic Representation

Create or provide a graphic representation of what it means to succeed. The graphic representation may include a cartoon, drawing, meme, painting, or photograph. This graphic representation may be created by you or found in a magazine, newspaper, or website. If you find the graphic in one of these locations, please provide a copy or printout of the graphic. Once you have your graphic representation, please write a short narrative to describe the graphic and why it represents what it means to succeed.

You have as much time as you need to complete this task. When you are done, please place the graphic and the description in the provided folder. Return the folder to me before you leave.

Please see the following examples of graphic representations of what happiness means. These non-related examples may provide you with ideas of the types of graphics you may create or find.



Photograph



Painting



Meme



Cartoon

APPENDIX N: Permission to Publish Figure

Permission to Publish Figure-Phases and subprocesses of self-regulation

permissions (US) <permissions@sagepub.com>
Mon 10/7/2019 10:31 AM

- Clay, Heather Amanda A

☐

[EXTERNAL EMAIL: Do not click any links or open attachments unless you know the sender and trust the content.]

Dear Heather A. Clay,

Thank you for your request via Rightslink/Copyright.com ticket 501514644 to use Figure 1 from the *American Educational Research Journal* article 'Investigating Self-Regulation and Motivation: Historical Background, Methodological Developments, and Future Prospects' within your forthcoming thesis. I am pleased to report we can grant your request without a fee.

Please accept this email as permission for your request. Permission is granted for the life of the edition on a non-exclusive basis, in the English language, throughout the world in all formats provided full citation is made to the original SAGE publication. Permission does not include any third-party material found within the work.

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