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The purpose of this study was to learn about the key attributes that school leaders identified as important in the operation of alternative learning programs in central North Carolina.

I conducted in-depth interviews with four principals and twelve school personnel to gain insight to the operational procedures implemented that promoted a successful school climate for students to learn and grow. School personnel anywhere can use the key attributes that emerged from the study to examine their current school climate and to begin a re-design process that promotes student success.

The data collected in the study shows the common themes that reflect items which school personnel deemed important in the operation of their school. Themes included the importance of building relationships with all stakeholders, being selective in the hiring process to ensure that staff shares the same mindset as the vision for the school, providing a flexible, balanced curriculum to meet the needs of the student, and always putting students' needs first.

The study concludes with lessons for school personnel, district and state policy makers, and recommendation for future studies.

ALTERNATIVE LEARNING PROGRAMS: INVESTIGATION OF
KEY PRACTICES

by

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Approved by

Committee Chair

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To my parents, who encouraged us to give life our all
and to never leave any journey unfinished.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Jay Darrell Thomas, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Schools across America are filled with students who anxiously anticipate someone who will ignore labels with which they have been branded and provide the structure and encouragement for them to be both successful students and contributing citizens in society. For some of these students, the traditional structure of schools does not fit their needs, thus creating a disconnect between their desires to become engaged in the learning process and surviving the demands of the outside world. High schools in North Carolina reported 11,190 dropouts in 2014-2015 (NCDPI Consolidated Report, 2015, p. 14). Many of these students get caught up in the game of life and are forced to make a decision between completing their coursework for graduation or assisting in the financial needs of their families. Others just find it hard to make a connection between the school work that is being assigned to them and the relation of the work to the world in which they live. Regardless of reasons, schools across the nation must take the time to address this issue and reexamine the way they are doing business. Schools must explore more innovative ways to create an atmosphere that is conducive to meeting the vast array of student needs for those who are struggling with the traditional models and make school work for them.

Rosales (2015) reports “roughly 30 percent of students who drop out of school between the ages of 16 and 18 are working in a variety of jobs” in order to meet their

essential needs (p. 1). With schools designed to operate within the traditional framework, work and school oftentimes do not mix well for students. This is why it is important that school leaders implement more non-traditional scheduling opportunities for their students in order to address dropout issues and seek ways to be creative in assuring that all students not only graduate from high school, but they are graduating College and Career Ready. Alternative Learning Programs (ALPs) can become a provider for this platform if the right structures and school personnel are in place. ALP designs vary from district to district, so providing a clear definition of the term is difficult. The Department of Education provides a broad definition for Alternative Learning Programs as “educational activities that fall outside of the traditional K-12 curriculum—frequently serving students who are at risk of school failure” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, p. 1). In North Carolina, ALPs are defined as “services for students at risk of truancy, academic failure, behavior problems, and/or dropping out of school” (Report to the Joint Legislative Education Committee, 2015, p. 123). Regardless of the definitions provided by national or state leaders, it is up to the individual school districts to decide what is best for its students, and each district is given the flexibility to decide how their ALP’s should operate. The purpose of this study is to identify the key attributes identified by school personnel (principals and staff) and how each of these attributes affect the overall success of their students.

While the groundwork for providing an appropriate education for all children being paved by the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (1965), a major shift of focus in the redesigning of our public schools began in 2001 with the introduction of the

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), followed by changes required by the introduction of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) 2015. The intention of NCLB was to improve student accountability for school districts across America with a “special focus on ensuring that states and schools boost the performance of certain groups of students such as English Language Learners, students in special education, and poor and minority children, whose achievement, on average, trails their peers” (Kline, 2016, p. 2). School districts that failed to meet the mandates from NCLB were given a set of options to choose from in order to rectify the issues in their schools. Penalties ranged from removing the principal, providing free tutoring, offering school choice to parents in failing schools, closing schools and re-opening them as charter schools, or implementing other means to correct the educational issues with the school’s performance. In 2010, President Obama ordered an examination of the NCLB Act calling on legislators to draft a better law that focused on assuring that all students were graduating from high school being College and Career Ready. This Act, known as the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), was signed into law on December 10, 2015. While the impact that ESSA has on student success remains to be seen, it does allow more options for states to define what a quality education means for students in their schools and to report their results to all stakeholders.

With the transition from *No Child Left Behind* (2001) to the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015), our nation’s leaders are allowing states more flexibility in their planning, yet still holding them accountable for the assurance that every child is graduating from high school College and Career Ready. While this is challenging

legislation for all schools to comply, it can be even more challenging for the Alternative Learning Programs. These programs serve students who either have been suspended from their home schools due to disciplinary reasons or chose to attend one of these sites after a history of struggling in a traditional school setting. The educational opportunities students receive when they enroll in Alternative Learning Programs vary as well. Some programs prove to be more successful in providing quality educational opportunities to students. This study will reveal the important attributes that each participating site shared from their re-design experiences in hopes of providing insight from which others may learn. These include the importance of building relationships with all stakeholders; being selective in the hiring process to assure that staff share the same mindset as the vision for the school; providing a flexible, balanced curriculum; and always putting students' needs first. While each of these components are important functions in the daily activity of any school to maintain a positive school culture conducive to student learning, they are often magnified at an Alternative Learning Program site.

Problem Statement

Recent national education reports show that, in the United States, approximately 10%—an estimated 3.8 million school aged youth—have dropped out of high school and remain without a diploma or certificate of completion (Smith & Thomson, 2014, p. 111). Graduation rates and student retention are at the forefront of discussions with school leaders nationwide as well as here in North Carolina. Although the dropout rates in the state had shown a decline during recent years, there are still a large number of at-risk students not graduating from high school. It is the responsibility of each school district to

identify these students and research new means of educational design in which the students can be served in order to prevent this trend from continuing. One of the ways that many school districts in North Carolina are combating this problem is the creation or redesign of current Alternative Learning Programs within their school community.

According to the North Carolina Department of Education, the Rationale of the Alternative Learning Program is “to operate in a range of mission and target populations. Some Alternative Learning Programs enroll special populations of students because of academic, attendance, and substance abuse problems” (NCDPI, 2001, p. 1). The mission of the Alternative School Program in North Carolina is “to assist students in becoming self-directed learners and community contributors by providing a safe, supportive, caring learning environment” (NCDPI, 2012, p. 1). This type of learning environment will have a positive impact on the value that at-risk students have regarding their educational journey. For many schools across the state, this shift in environment will require some type of school redesign. The schools participating in this study have implemented new program designs at their respective sites in order to address the vast array of needs for the students in their districts. This study reveals the key attributes at each site and discusses the impact they have on the progression of their students toward graduating College and Career Ready or successfully transitioning back to their home schools.

Purpose of the Study

The primary question driving this research is “What are the key attributes that school personnel utilize in the redesign process of an alternative learning program?” For the purpose of this study, the definition of change is the success rate that students

attending alternative learning programs have shown by improving attendance rates, a reduction in disciplinary referrals, an increase in graduation rates, an improvement in academic performance, and an increase in the number of students who have successfully transitioned back to their home school. With the implementation of the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, each state and local district has been given the opportunity to define and determine the structures of their Alternative Learning Programs in order to address the specific needs in their district. Each program may differ depending on the needs of the students. The schools selected for this study provide a multitude of services in order to address a vast array of student needs. They were chosen because of the strides each of them has made in student progress towards graduating from high school College and Career Ready or successfully transitioning back to the students' home school sites to complete their courses for graduation.

The study will investigate the experiences of four Alternative Learning Programs from the perspectives of their principals and selected school staff. These Alternative Learning Programs serve students who have been excluded from their home schools either for disciplinary reasons or because they do not function well in the traditional high school setting. The goal of the Alternative Learning Programs is to provide students with the academic and behavioral scaffolding needed in order to successfully transition back to their home schools and complete their studies toward graduation or to choose to stay in the ALP and graduate. The four sites chosen for this study are deemed successful due to the procedures they implemented in order to reduce the number of student suspended, increase the number of students who transition successfully back to their home school,

increased attendance rates, increase graduation rates and reduce the number of drop outs. All data gathered from the study were analyzed utilizing Bolman and Deal's (2013) Four Frames model to understand the impact each frame has on the operation of a successful ALP and the common attributes that each school site shared.

This study takes an in-depth look at the roles that principals and teachers played in working with at-risk students to assure that students were not only meeting the criteria discussed earlier but also graduating College and Career Ready. In this study, the data were gathered through interviews, framed within the conceptual framework, analyzed, coded, and reported according to the attributes identified. All stakeholders who are looking for the key attributes that impact student success the at four ALPs can consider the findings from this study as they begin to redesign other alternative programs in their respective districts.

Research Questions

In order to obtain a better understanding of alternative schools that have shown success in the total school program, this study will investigate the following research questions:

Primary Research Question

- What are the key attributes that school personnel utilize in the redesign process of an alternative learning program?

Secondary Research Questions

- What roles do school personnel play in the redesign of an alternative school?

- What do personnel say about the structure of the program and the impact it has on student performance?
- What kinds of human relations are valued in ALPs, and how are they realized?
- What are the micro-political and macro-political contexts ALPs must negotiate, and how do those negotiations affect the school and student performance?
- What cultural characteristics and shifts are embedded in ALPs that contribute to improvements in student performance?

Description of Key Terms and Concepts

The following terms are defined for their relevance to this study.

Student at Risk

A student at risk in this study is defined by using the definition as determined by the state of North Carolina. In North Carolina, State Board Policy 115C-105.48 defines an at-risk student as:

a young person who, because of a wide range of individual, personal, financial, familial, social, behavior or academic circumstances, may experience school failure or other unwanted outcomes unless intervention occurs to reduce the risk factors. (Policies and Procedures for Alternative Learning Programs and Schools Grades K-12, 2014, p. 8)

Students identified in accordance with the above definition often face circumstances beyond their immediate control and need intervention provided by school officials to negate the negative impact it has on student learning. Some of these circumstances include but are not limited to:

- Not meeting state/local/proficiency standards
- Grade retention
- Unidentified or inadequately addressed learning needs
- Alienation from school
- Unchallenging curricula and/or instruction
- Tardiness and/or poor school attendance
- Negative peer influence
- Unmanageable behavior
- Substance and other health risk factors
- Abuse and neglect
- Inadequate parental, family, community and/or school support
- Limited English proficiency (Policies and Procedures for Alternative Learning Programs and Schools Grades K-12, 2014, p. 8).

These are just a few of the intangibles that school personnel face when dealing with struggling students in the classrooms. Oftentimes, many of these students go “unnoticed” due to the student not calling attention to the deficiency or school personnel having their attentions diverted to students who are causing other issues in the classroom. School districts must do a better job of identifying the students that are “falling through the cracks” during the early stages of their high school careers in order to have the opportunity to implement interventions that will prevent the students from becoming a high school dropout statistic.

Alternative Learning Programs

When referring to the Alternative Learning Programs, this study will focus on Alternative Learning Programs as identified by the State of North Carolina Board of Education. These Alternative Learning Programs are defined as:

services for students at risk of truancy, academic failure, behavior problems, and/or out of school. These services should be designed to better meet the needs

of students who have not been successful in the regular public school setting.

Alternative learning programs serve students at any level who:

- are suspended and/or expelled,
- are at risk of participation in juvenile crime,
- have dropped out and desire to return to school,
- have a history of truancy,
- are returning from juvenile justice settings or psychiatric hospitals, or learning styles that are better served in an alternative setting.

Alternative learning programs must provide individualized programs outside of a standard classroom setting in a caring atmosphere in which students learn the skills necessary to redirect their lives. An alternative program must:

- provide the primary instruction for selected at-risk students
- enroll students for a designated period of time, usually a minimum of one academic grading period, offer course credit or grade-level promotion credit in core academic areas and provide transition support to and from/between the school of origin and alternative learning program.

Alternative learning programs may also:

- address behavioral or emotional problems that interfere with adjustment to or benefiting from the regular education classroom,
- provide smaller classes and/or student/teacher ratios,
- provide instruction beyond regular school hours,
- provide flexible scheduling, and/or assist students in meeting graduation requirements other than course credits. (Implementation and Procedures, 2012, p. 1)

“Alternative learning programs for at-risk students typically serve students in an alternative school or alternative program located within the regular school”

(Implementation and Procedures, 2012, p. 1). Each study site operates independently from schools within their respective system and each has their own school codes for identity purposes. Students are served using an agreed upon process by their district with the intentions of students either graduating from high school or transitioning back to their home schools upon completion of their program.

Alternative Schools

An Alternative School in the State of North Carolina is defined in State Board

Policy as:

One option for an Alternative Learning Program. It serves at-risk students and has an organizational designation based on the DPI assignment of an official school code. An alternative school is different from a regular public school and provides choices of routes to completion of school. For the majority of students, the goal is to return to the regular public school. Alternative schools may vary from other schools in such areas as teaching methods, hours, curriculum, or sites, and they are intended to meet particular learning needs. (State Board of Education, 2004, p. 2)

There is a key distinction in this study when addressing Alternative Learning Programs and Alternative Schools. Many Alternative Schools are designed to serve students who have been long term suspended or are involved in legal issues with the authorities and are often viewed as punitive environments. The alternative schools mainly address students that are assigned due to disciplinary reasons. The schools selected to participate in this study are those that have specific Alternative Learning Programs in place to meet the needs of all of their students. The alternative learning programs also includes students who attend the schools by choice rather than being assigned by the district. These programs are designed to meet the social, emotional, and educational needs of the students.

Student Success

In this study, student success is defined as:

- the reduction in the number of student suspensions

- the number of students who successfully transitioned back to their home school programs
- a reduction in disciplinary referrals
- an increase in school attendance
- an increase in graduation rate
- the reduction of dropouts in from the Alternative Learning Program site.

Significance and Contribution of the Study

This study is significant because of its specific focus on the key attributes that school personnel implemented in an attempt to create a culture conducive to student learning that would enhance the turnaround of student performance at the Alternative Learning Programs in their respective districts. Each school placed a major point of emphasis on establishing a positive school culture where kids felt safe to learn. These cultures focused on doing what was best for at-risk students while assuring that all stakeholders know the roles they play in the daily operation of the school and the impact they have on at-risk students. Oftentimes, it is merely the attitude of the adults that influences the student's mindset about education. This research provides a set of key attributes that are associated with the success of students in Alternative Learning Programs within the four schools participating in this study. Examining these attributes will identify the key attributes of each school and inform school leaders and policy makers of the importance of these attributes and the importance of these roles in the redesign of Alternative Learning Programs.

Organization of the Dissertation

This research study is arranged in five chapters. Chapter I sets the stage by providing essential background information to the readers. These include introducing the problem addressed in the research, the purpose for conducting the research study, the research questions that drove the collection and analysis of the data, key terms, and the how the findings will be beneficial to school personnel looking to redesign an Alternative Learning Program (ALP). The chapter concludes with a look at the conceptual framework with explanation of how the total study evolves.

Chapter II provides the reader with a review of related literature that supports the research and provides its relationship to the conceptual framework. The chapter begins by providing the reader with an analysis of the four frames from Bolman and Deal (2013). It continues with information about the dropout rates in North Carolina, a brief history of alternative education in North Carolina, the types of alternative educational opportunities provided to students, issues facing alternative learning programs, legislation required in alternative education, and best practices for student success. Chapter III describes the methodology for the study including the selection of school sites, participants, data collection and analysis.

Chapter IV presents and analyzes the data collected from the study and introduces the categories that emerged within each frame. The categories were then analyzed to find the major themes that came from the research findings. Chapter V discusses interpretations from the data and addresses the research questions. It includes a discussion of the major themes that emerged in the study and recommendations for future

studies. I concluded the work with a personal reflection from my experiences as the leader of an ALP in my district.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Alternative Learning Programs (ALPs) are at the center of many educational discussions as ways to provide both choice and opportunity to students who have not had successful experiences in school. According to Smith and Thomason (2014), “high dropout and low graduation rates, as well as increasing discipline problems and disenfranchisement of students, show that the traditional school setting is not effective for teaching many of the students in today’s society” (p. 111). It is up to school districts to identify and address the needs of their students by introducing innovative approaches to the delivery of instruction for their students. “Operating with some autonomy outside of traditional education, alternative schools and programs have the freedom to try out new educational methods and simultaneously conduct credible research which then can be shared within the educational community” (Cable, Plucker, & Terry, 2009, p. 1). While this sounds like a great plan to reach those with needs, not everyone feels that students can get a quality education at an alternative learning program. Caroleo (2014) questions some of these new innovative methods by adding “some literature argues that the education being offered in alternative education programs is inferior compared to that of traditional education programs, thus creating a risk for those attending” (Caroleo, 2014, p. 39). The inconsistencies of structure at alternative learning program sites have

contributed to the substantial increase in the number of students who were dropping out of school, thus drawing national attention to this growing problem.

Sometimes society appears to blame at-risk students for their failures in the traditional setting. While looking for a way to provide an option for students, Alternative Learning Programs can often succeed where traditional schools have not. Some of the biggest advantages of Alternative Learning Programs are their personalized, diverse programming and teaching that targets the strengths of the student. Silchenko (2005) adds “many nontraditional programs offer unique education experiences and opportunities that often defy conventional structures found in many traditional settings. Some ALP’s provide a safe harbor for students who have been bullied or who have felt neglected or rejected in comprehensive school settings” (p. 1). Whatever the situation, many students have found this opportunity to reinvest in their education and continue along the path to high school graduation or successfully transitioning back to their home schools.

Dropout Rates among Students

It would be very difficult to paint a picture of what a “typical dropout” would look like in our society today. It would also be a difficult task to explain why students are leaving our schools before receiving their high school diplomas. In an attempt to address this issue, researchers from the Center for Social Organization of Schools, in conjunction with a study from Johns Hopkins University, identified four categories representing nearly all the reasons students drop out of school. These reasons include the following:

1. **Life events.** Students who dropout because of something that happens outside of school—they become pregnant, get arrested, or have to work to support members of their family.
2. **Fade outs.** Students who have generally been promoted on time from grade to grade and may even have above grade level skills, but at some point become frustrated or bored and stop seeing a reason for coming to school. Once they reach the legal dropout age they leave, convinced that they can find their way without a high school diploma or that a GED will serve them just as well.
3. **Push outs.** Students who are or who are perceived to be difficult, dangerous, or detrimental to the success of the school and are subtly, or not so subtly, encouraged to withdraw from the school, transfer to another school, or are simply dropped from the rolls, if they fail too many courses or miss too many days of school and are past (or in some cases not even past) the legal dropout age.
4. **Failing to succeed.** Students who fail to succeed in school and attend schools that fail to provide them with the environments and supports they need to succeed. For some, initial failure is the result of poor academic preparation; for others, it is rooted in unmet social-emotional needs. Few students drop out after their initial experience with failure. In fact, most persist for years, only dropping out after they fall so far behind that success seems impossible or they are worn down by repeated failure. In the meantime, they are literally waving their hands saying “help” through poor attendance, acting out, and/or course failure. (Colorado Department of Education, 2016, p. 1)

Whatever the reasoning behind students’ decisions to quit school, society is pressuring school officials across our nation to find ways to combat this problem and provide a quality education to all students regardless of their academic ability. This is a major task considering the number of students who opt to drop out before graduating from high school. It is also very difficult to keep track of the number of students who drop out. North Carolina has law that requires districts to account for their students.

The State of North Carolina General Statute 115C-12(27) requires each school district to complete an annual report identifying the number of students who are dropping out of school each year. The annual dropout rate is calculated by “the number of students in a particular grade span dropping out in one year, divided by a measure of the total

students in that particular grade span” (NCDPI Consolidated Report, 2015, p. 120).

Students can be counted as a dropout more than once if they dropout in multiple years but no student can be counted more than once each school year. A dropout in North Carolina is defined as “any student who leaves school for any reason before graduation or completion of a program of studies without transferring to another elementary or secondary school” (NCDPI Consolidated Report, 2015, p. 120). In North Carolina during the 2014-2015 school year, grades 9-13 reported 11,190 dropouts, an increase of 786 from the 2013-2014 school year (NCDPI Consolidated Report, 2015, p. 121). This resulted in a 7.6% increase from the previous year. Students dropped out most frequently at grade 10 (30.0%), followed by grade 9 (28.1%), grade 11 (24.4%), and grade 12 (14.7%). The high school grade with the largest percentage increase in dropouts from 2013-14 to 2014-15 was the tenth grade at 9.2%. Four 2014-15 dropouts were 13th graders (in Early Colleges) and were included with 12th graders in this analysis (NCDPI Consolidated Report, 2015, p. 122). While analyzing these statistics, it is important to highlight that 39.1% of the dropouts in 2014-2015 were within eight credits of graduation. This is the most alarming statistic as these groups of students are the ones that possibly could be saved if the proper protocol was in place to serve them. The numbers also identify a big problem in grades 9 and 10 where 52.5% of our students are deciding to quit school. Additional research needs to take place in order to identify the issues facing these youths and find ways to keep them in school until graduation.

While the rates are disturbing to educators, it is important for all stakeholders to be inquisitive as to which students are dropping out and the reasons for their decisions.

The number of high school students increased at every grade level during the 2014-2015 school year according to the Consolidated Report. Males led this number accounting for 62% of the total dropout rate (NCDPI Consolidated Report, 2015, p. 124). The top ten reasons reported for students dropping out of the North Carolina Public Schools in 2014-2015 as compared to rates from 2013-2014 are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Reasons Students Drop Out of High School in North Carolina

Reason for Dropping Out	Count	2014-2015	2013-2014
Attendance	4505	40.3%	42.0%
Enrollment in a Community College	1765	15.8%	14.8%
Unknown	991	8.9%	8.0%
Lack of engagement with school and/or peers	875	7.8%	7.1%
Choice of work over school	563	5.0%	4.2%
Moved, school status unknown	494	4.4%	4.1%
Academic Problems	439	3.9%	5.6%
Incarcerated in an Adult Facility	278	2.5%	2.6%
Unstable home environment	202	1.8%	1.9%
Discipline problem	180	1.6%	1.9%

Source: NCDPI Consolidated Report, 2015, p. 124

The promise shown from these numbers is the decrease of 1.7 percentage points in attendance and the decrease of 1.7 percentage points in the number of students having demonstrated academic problems from the 2013-2014 to the 2015-2016. While modest, the most sizeable increases for this time frame were the jump in the number of students

enrolling in a Community College (1.0 percentage point), unknown (0.9 percentage point), choice of school over work (0.8 percentage point), and lack of engagement with school and/or peers (0.7 percentage point). These numbers have prompted school officials to search for ways to address the numbers and prevent so many students from dropping out of school. One of the many options that is available to students today is attendance in an Alternative Learning Program.

Accountability mandates keep school personnel focused on the educational progress of students, especially students who were once perceived as in danger of not graduating from high school. Many districts across the nation have responded to this issue by developing Alternative Learning Programs to serve their at-risk populations. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction website, the 111 Alternative Learning Programs and 74 full-time programs have shown some success in increasing graduation rates among students but still have lots of room to grow. Of the seventeen states with more than ten district-run alternative high schools, only two had significant percentages of these schools with graduation rates above 67%: California, where 86% of district-run alternative high schools have a graduation rate above 67%, and North Carolina, where 57% met this criterion (Amos, 2016, p. 2). Some districts that have figured out ways to make the Alternative Learning Programs work. Four of these sites are included in this study.

History of Alternative Education

Even though Thomas Jefferson is often considered as the founding father for education by supporting a vision for public education for all students, Horace Mann

really started transforming education and addressing the needs of all students. Mann introduced the Common School Movement that attempted to “be open to students of all religions” (Cable et al., 2009, p. 1). This movement exposed the concept that not all students learn the same and thus created the need for Alternative Learning Programs. Later, Reimer and Terry (2003) recognized the contributions of John Dewey in alternative programs. They state that Dewey “recognized the importance of individualized and experiential education because all children do not have the same learning styles or skills” (Reimer & Terry, 2003, p. 3). Dewey was credited with “encouraging educators to move away from the ‘school as factory’ approach to a more progressive philosophy of looking at students as individuals” (Reimer & Terry, 2003, p. 3). Regardless of who receives the credit for the start of the movement, these individuals recognized that there was an issue in serving at-risk students and encouraged stakeholders to seek ways to address the needs of these students as individuals.

In the beginning, there were two types of Alternative Learning Programs. The original movement consisted of the Freedom Schools and the Free School Movement, which focused on individual achievement, happiness, and fulfillment. The next, the Open School movement began in the public schools and introduced schools without walls, schools within schools, magnet schools, continuation schools, and multicultural schools. The structural platforms for these schools introduced an environment that was “child centered non-competitive approach and were characterized by parent, student and teacher choice; autonomy in learning and pace; non-competitive evaluation and a child-centered approach” (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 9). Both of these learning platforms set the

groundwork for the Alternative Learning Programs that exist today. Alternative Learning Programs are nothing new; they have been around for years.

Many school districts created these programs for “students typically at risk of educational failure as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school” (Caver et al., 2011, p. 8). The idea that all students could not function in a traditional setting and thus were dropping out of high school began to emerge in the late 1950’s. According to Lange and Sletten (2002), the “mainstream public educational system of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s was highly criticized for being racist and exclusively designed for the success of a few” (p. 3). In the 1960s, Alternative Learning Programs continued to emerge as a reaction to the “bureaucracy and depersonalization of public education” as a private response to public education (McKee & Conner, 2007, p. 44).

In the 1980’s and 1990’s, the focus of Alternative Learning Programs shifted to at-risk students, specifically for students who for a variety of reasons were at risk of dropping out of high school. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) explained that “most students who attend alternative schools were unsuccessful in traditional school programs and exhibited poor grades, truancy, behavior problems, or experienced special circumstances that impeded their learning” (p. 106). Schools experimented with providing vocational training, developing partnerships with businesses and colleges, and creating no-grading course formats as a way to sustain student interest (McKee & Connor, 2007). It was during this time that state level administrations began to examine the policies that govern the Alternative Learning Programs in their state.

Types of Alternative Schools

In today's society, there are many variations to the term Alternative Learning Programs. The U.S. Department of Education describes alternative schools as a public elementary secondary school that:

- Addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school;
- Provides nontraditional education;
- Serves as an adjunct to a regular school; or
- Falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education. (Cable et al., 2009, p. 3)

Many districts across the nation have introduced programs outside of the norm of traditional schooling to address student needs. In a report published by Jobs for the Future in 2009, seven recommendations to promote successful alternative schools were unveiled. They are:

- Broaden eligibility criteria to include students who are not succeeding in traditional school settings in addition to disruptive students.
- Clarify state and district roles and responsibilities in creating and maintaining a strong alternative education system.
- Strengthen accountability for student outcomes.
- Increase innovation.
- Employ a high quality staff.
- Enhance student support services.
- Enrich funding. (Almedia, Certantes, Le, & Steinberg, 2010, p. 2).

This set of criteria addresses some of the major issues that alternative schools in some districts today are struggling to conquer. The public views many of these schools as “punitive” schools where they believe that “trouble breeds trouble.” Some parents do not want their students to attend these programs thus seeking other options to educate their

children. Some feel that traditional public schooling does not address their student needs and have chosen to open charter schools.

Some districts have chosen to challenge the charter school movement by introducing academies serving as schools within a school, middle colleges, and academies. North Carolina is also experiencing a vast increase in the number of students who are being homeschooled and those who are choosing to attend private schools. North Carolina legislation has even introduced the notion of private school vouchers to allow parents the opportunity to remove their students from the public setting and use the voucher to assist in the cost of the private setting. The Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina (2012) reports that many parents are exercising this right to find alternative education for their children. According to their numbers, the breakdown of students in North Carolina at the end of the 2015-2016 school year were as follows:

- Public school Enrollment: 1,459,852 students
- Public charter school enrollment: 81,951 students
- Private school enrollment: 97,721 students
- Home school enrollment: 118,268 students (Pefncadmin, 2012, retrieved from www.pefnc.org/resources-research/what-is-parental-school-choice/).

North Carolina continues to see a rise in the number of charter schools operating in the state as 158 charter schools were in operation during the 2015-2016 school year and that number is set to rise to 171 in 2016-2017. This has caused many a stir for those who are supporters of traditional education in the state. These options create a distinct problem for public school systems to find creative ways to serve students beyond the traditional setting and keep the kids enrolled in the schools within their district. While there are

multitudes of options school districts can implement to meet the needs of students leaving their home schools for charters, an alternative school site can serve as one of these options.

According to Langbert (2015), the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction reported that there were “12,403 placements of 11,598 students in ALP’s during the 2013-2014 school year” (p. 9). Some of the students were placed in ALPs on multiple occasions. Service to students at all grade levels varies across the state. Langbert (2015) reports that “33.5 percent of ALP’s serve middle and high school students, 29.2 percent served only high school students and 13.5 percent served only middle school students” (p. 9). Only one district had an ALP for students three through eight, but it did not serve high school students.

Issues in Alternative Education

Researching alternative programs reveals many issues that may be potential obstacles for districts to address. Among these are adequate funding, proper staffing, flexible curriculum options to meet the diverse needs of their students, transitional opportunities for students to return to their home school setting and the reporting of accountability to all stakeholders. These are only a few of the variety of needs that often prevent alternative programs from being successful. It is up to the individual ALP’s to identify and properly address the pending issues in order to create an environment that is conducive to student learning.

Adequate Funding

Funding is one of the biggest issues that districts face when considering options for alternative programs. Historically, funding streams for alternative programs come from state or federal grants (Eichorn, 2015, p. 5). Ahearn adds “the sources of funding fall in to four areas: federal funds, state funds, local funds, or grant money. Oftentimes, legislative or policy language indicates that alternative schools could receive funds from more than one of these sources” (Ahearn, 2004, p. 3). Eichorn (2015) adds that “while grants can provide valuable resources to a traditional or alternative school, it should be noted that a consistent local funding stream is critical to the success and long term viability of any alternative school or program” (p. 5). There are many costs associated with the operation of alternative programs. The costs range from providing transportation to hiring specialized staff in order to meet the vast needs of students. Class sizes at alternative sites often include very low teacher/student ratios thus requiring the increase in the number of qualified staff necessary to make a program effective. Often, students who choose to attend alternative programs have not had successful academic experiences, so they come to the programs with skills below grade level in one or more subject areas. This achievement gap increases the need for flexible scheduling in order to assure that the student can obtain the necessary credits for graduation on an accelerated path. The accelerated pathway is designed to assist students with a structure in order to assist them with making up multiple credits at a faster rate. This platform utilizes concepts such as credit recovery options as well as the opportunity to take additional classes beyond the usual four per semester.

Students are enrolling in alternative learning programs with a vast array of issues that affect their education. Ahearn (2004) cites,

there are four major types of students who are admitted to, or placed into, alternative programs: those who have been suspended or expelled, those at risk of failure; those who have behavior problems; and those who have been academically unsuccessful and are in need of a non-traditional setting. (p. 3)

Students also bring a vast array of other issues with them to the alternative learning programs. Foley and Lan-Szo (2006) add, “youth are referred to such programs for a variety of reasons including experiencing behavioral difficulties in schools, being suspended or expelled from the school, being a pregnant or parenting teen, experiencing academic failure, or having a disability” (p. 11). Regardless of the situation, students are entitled to receive an appropriate education. Eichorn (2015) adds that “an emphasis should be on the front-end planning with a shared vision supported by the superintendent and school board. Additionally, resources should be aligned based on the performance data of the target student population” (p. 5). States and districts must adhere to the mandates from policy makers to assure that the proper funding is in place for this to happen.

Experienced and Specialized Personnel

When seeking to transform the mindset of alternative school students, schools must equip the classroom with teachers that are willing to make the necessary adjustments needed to create an environment that is conducive to learning while working with at-risk students. When building this environment, Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) stress “two main constructs that establish a successful learning environment are students’

sense of membership in the school community and their perceptions of support from important people within the school” (p. 134). Serving students who have behavioral problems, learning difficulties and/or a history of poor attendance or dropping out calls for high levels of creativity and empathy, balanced with an understanding of how to help students become accountable for their participation in their learning. While these traits do not necessarily cost more, strong alternative programs tend to recruit teachers who have demonstrated success in serving at-risk populations—and employing experienced teachers often translates into higher salaries. Aron (2006) shares that “instructors in successful alternative learning programs choose to be a part of the program, routinely employ positive discipline techniques, and establish rapport with students and peers” (Aron, 2006, p. 12). Aron goes on to add that these teachers “have high expectations of their students, are certified in their academic content area, and are creative in their classroom” (Aron, 2006, p. 12). Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) contribute, “staffs at alternative schools are regularly trained to demonstrated unconditional acceptance—receiving and witnessing frequent and often extreme externalizing behaviors such as anger and aggression from youth without responding likewise” (p. 135). Additional staffing might also be necessary to promote healthy physical, social and emotional development. A good alternative learning program has a culture where students feel safe to learn.

Individualized Curriculum/Flexible Scheduling

Alternative schools should not be “holding zones” for students who are not performing well in the traditional school environment. Ensuring students have access to

rigorous curriculum while allowing that curriculum to be delivered in a non-traditional manner is difficult at best—but of great importance. When discussing meaningful learning, Hemmer, Madsen, and Torres (2013) share, “if there are inconsistencies between meaningful learning experiences for at-risk students and performance-based standards outcomes, this may suggest issues around equity and alternative schools should be evaluated” (Hemmer et al., 2013 p. 1). In order for alternative learning programs to be successful, Smith and Thompson (2014) contribute,

successful alternative programs have an environment that is personal and meaningful for students. They provide special academic courses, curriculum modification, individualized methods of instruction and individual assistance (social and behavioral) to students. (p. 115)

Students in ALPs often must understand the relevance of the work and be able to apply the knowledge gained to life in real world situations. A study by the Rennie Center Education Research and Policy (2014), researchers found that “alternative educational programming—often featuring flexible scheduling, multiple ways to earn credit, differentiated instruction, and personalized learning—offers at-risk students more customized options of receiving a high school diploma” (p. 1). It is important for ALP’s to create individualized plans of study for all students entering into their programs. Policies that measure growth of student learning against state standards and build school accountability on measurement of that growth are highly important in establishing accountability for alternative schools.

Accountability

Another major issue for alternative learning programs is the accountability models in which Alternative Learning Programs report their measures. When discussing the effectiveness of the curriculum at the alternative learning program, Hemmer et al. (2013) state,

little is known about school leaders of alternative schools administering accountability policies. If there are inconsistencies between meaningful learning experience for at-risk students and performance-based standards outcomes, this may suggest issues around equity and alternative schools should be evaluated. (p. 1)

Defining the criteria for accountability has been left up to the state or district.

“Historically, the success of these programs has been measured in terms of improved grades, attendance, and graduation rates; decreases in disruptive and violent behavior; and students having developed an improved sense of self and the choices they make” (Aron, 2006, p. 7). There is a lot of flexibility at the state and local levels as to how alternative learning programs report their data to the state. The Institute of Community Integration (2012) identified the areas that were being monitored closely include “measuring and tracking student enrollment and demographic information along with progress and outcomes” (p. 7). With scrutiny regarding the make-up of student populations of alternative schools, many policymakers called for increased monitoring efforts in order to assure that a quality education is being offered. In the Business Rules and Technical Notes 2014-2015, the State of North Carolina created the Alternative Schools’ Accountability Model (ASAM) as a means to report the accountability of NC

alternative schools in lieu of a state-wide School Performance grade. North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE) policy GCS-C-038 established the eligibility criteria for the options available for school districts to choose to operate within this framework. Once an alternative school is approved to participate in the ASAM model, it must operate under one of the following model options:

1. Option A: The alternative school participates in School Performance Grades as defined by G.S. 115C-83.15,
2. Option B: The alternative school returns data/results back to the students' base schools and receive no designations,
3. Option C: The alternative school participates in the Alternative Schools' Progress Model (ASPM), or
4. Option D: The alternative school proposes its own alternative accountability model for approval by the SBE. (North Carolina Alternative Schools Accountability Model, 2015).

Schools that chose to operate under Option A had their school data collected, analyzed, and reported in the same manner as all "regular" school settings. The findings are reported to the state in the same fashion as schools operating in the traditional setting. Schools that chose to operate under Option B had no accountability results reported for their site. All student data in Option B schools is collected and reported back to their home school site where it is included with the traditional students. Schools that operate under Option C participate in the ASPM. Data are collected under three categories and it is compared with data from the previous year. The three categories are Student

Persistence (20%), School Achievement (20%), and School Growth (60%). Schools in this arena are granted one of three ratings from the state: Progressing, Maintaining, or Declining. The goal of schools in this area is for them to “compare their progress based on the specific program and unique makeup of their schools and to work with one another after identifying similarities in programming and success on the components in the model” (North Carolina Alternative Schools Accountability Model, 2015, p. 3). Schools operating under Option D may be allowed to develop their own accountability model and submit their proposal to the State of North Carolina for approval. The proposal “must include one measure of achievement and one measure of growth” (North Carolina Alternative Schools Accountability Model, 2015, p. 3).

Transition Programs to/from Traditional Settings

Transition back to the home school upon completion of the alternative program is crucial to student success. This is an area where the responsibility is often overlooked and can make or break the success for the student. From my experiences, some schools feel it is up to the homeschool to make it happen for the student while others look to the alternative school for guidance. At any rate, “it is crucial to set up a transitional program for students with disruptive behavior and discipline problems when sending them to a new setting of an alternative school and/or sending them back to a traditional school environment” (Silchenko, 2005, p. 2). This type of support provides the student with the opportunity to make a smooth transition back into the traditional setting yet still having a support piece for guidance.

Alternative Education in North Carolina

The State of North Carolina has spent years educating its students on the importance of receiving a high school diploma. State Superintendent June Atkinson (2013) stated “high school students understand the connection between a diploma and reaching their goals, but there are still far too many students dropping out of schools in our state” (NCDPI, 2013, p. 1). School leaders continue to look for more innovative ways to keep our students interested in their schooling. Assuredly, there is a multiplicity of reasons for students not attending school on a regular basis, but more conversations between school officials and students need to take place earlier in the schooling process to prevent such occurrences from becoming the norm for at-risk students. School districts have to explore more methods of alternative learning opportunities in order to keep students in school and to deliver instruction in a more meaningful environment.

The term “alternative school” has many connotations, and many of them are negative. In the early 1990’s, alternative schools in North Carolina grew at an astonishing rate with the focus being on “problem students” who were causing a disruption in the classroom (Intercultural Development Research Association, 1996, p. 1). By placing these “problem students” in schools with students of the same mindset and not providing the necessary support system to address their issues, many of the negative labels that are associated with alternative learning sites became difficult to overcome. Lawmakers were forced to address this problem and took action in 1999 with the implementation of the Safe Schools and Alternative Learning Programs.

The State of North Carolina has been visionary in its mission to serve all students by providing a set of guidelines to assure that all alternative programs are providing opportunities for students to experience success in a non-traditional setting. According to the Policies and Procedures for Alternative Learning Programs and Schools Grades K-12 (2014), the goal of the state was that

each local board of education shall establish at least one alternative learning program and shall adopt guidelines for assigning student to alternative learning programs. These guidelines shall include (i) a description of the programs and services to be provided, (ii) a process for ensuring that an assignment is appropriate for the student and the student's parents are involved in the decision, and (iii) strategies for providing alternative learning programs, when feasible and appropriate, for students who are subject to long term suspension or expulsion. (Policies and Procedures for Alternative Learning Programs and Schools Grades K-12, 2014, p. 4)

It is the duty of the local districts to assure that all students are being properly represented and placed in alternative learning programs that will best meet their educational needs.

There are two types of Alternative Learning Programs in the North Carolina Public Schools. As described by the Alternative Learning Programs from NCDPI (2003), one is an Alternative Learning Program that is affiliated with a current accredited school within the district. The program may be housed within the school, on the same site, or at another location all together. The Alternative Learning Program is a part of the school's operational procedures and all data becomes a part of that school's history and documentation (NCDPI, Alternative Learning Programs, p. 3). The second type of ALP recognized in the state of North Carolina is an alternative school. The difference between the two programs is the alternative school has a separate, independent official school

number. It differs from traditional public schools as it offers flexibility in the “choices of routes for completion of school” (NCDPI, Alternative Learning Programs, 2003, p. 3).

The goal of the alternative learning program is for students to complete their assigned stay and return to the traditional home school for the completion of their education.

Alternative learning sites may feature flexibility in operating hours, teaching methods, curriculum, and staffing as long as they are meeting the needs of their students. The ALP must also abide by the state requirements and submit a school improvement plan and a school safety plan. For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on the separate alternative school setting.

The local school boards are responsible for approving alternative learning programs for the district. School board policies must be in place that establishes fair and equitable procedures for admitting students in an alternative program. All alternative programs must be included in the districts Safe School Plans. The state of North Carolina established parameters for the operation of such programs in its legislative mandate (G.S.115-C-238.47). It states,

Alternative Learning Programs must:

- Describe the mission and goals of the program.
- Describe the services to be provided by the program.
- Describe the criteria for assignment to the program.
- Describe the process for ensuring that the assignment is appropriate for the student.
- Describe the process for the input and participation of parents in the admittance and Exit/transition process.
- Describe the process for ensuring a rigorous and high quality program.
- Serve students at any grade level.

- Serve students who demonstrate behaviors (i.e. academic, conduct, drop-out, suspension, etc.) that put them at significant risk of school failure.
- Serve students selected by established procedures.
- Provide the primary instruction for students during the enrollment period.
- Offer course and class credit for attendance and grades in each assigned course.
- Assist students in meeting requirement for grade promotion.
- Assist students in meeting the requirements for graduation.
- Participate in the State Accountability and Testing program as prescribed by law.
- Require attendance.
- Employ highly qualified instructors.
- Serve students for a specific and extended period of time i.e., one grading period, quarterly, semester, etc. (Policies and Procedures for Alternative Learning Programs 1-12, 2014, p. 3)

The above parameters are set for establishing alternative programs and the admittance of students to the program. This enables the schools to be operational and establishes the guidelines for accountability. There are numerous reasons for students being assigned to the alternative programs in their respective districts. The top four reasons for the assignments according to the North Carolina Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee (2015) are:

- Placed because of chronic misbehavior—25.8%
- Academic difficulty—20.5%
- Placed instead of long term suspension—18.1%
- Student/Parent choice—12.9% (Report to the Legislative Oversight Committee, 2015, p. 115)

While this group accounts for 77.3% of the reasons students are assigned to an alternative setting, discussions must take place among educators to identify the factors contributing to these students needs and to find ways to address the needs within our schools.

Educators need to converse with students in order to expose the disconnect between student needs and the delivery of instruction in classrooms. Student voice is often one element that is left out of discussions relating to education of our kids. Once these reasons are exposed, plans can be put into place to address the issues and begin the transformation process in our school sites.

One of the biggest tests for the transformation of a school begins with staffing the school and creating a vision of trust and encouragement for the students that are admitted. Hiring the right people to work with at-risk students may be the most important piece of the puzzle that the new school leader faces. The North Carolina General Assembly in State Legislation (115C-47) recommends to all school boards that they “adopt policies that prohibit Superintendent’s from assigning to any alternative learning program any professional public school employee who has received within the last three years a rating on a formal evaluation that is less than above standard” (NCDPI, Alternative Learning Programs, 2003, p. 4). Once the staff is in place and all agreed upon expectations for the school have been identified, it is critical that the buy-in process is set into action and that the expectations are modeled in a consistent manner. This is the first step in adaption of a new school culture.

Best Practices for Student Success

Alternative Learning Programs can be effective in reducing the dropout rates if the right components are in place. Perception by all stakeholders is a major component that must be visible from every aspect of the school life. Smith and Thompson (2014) state “successful alternative schools have an environment that is personal and meaningful

to students” (p. 11). Key practices are necessary to implement for school leaders to incorporate into their daily routines if they wish to be successful. The National Alternative Education Association (2014) has identified fifteen exemplary practices in the Standards of Quality and Program Evaluation Exemplary Practices 2.0 manual. They are:

- Vision and Mission
- Leadership
- Climate and Culture
- Staffing and Professional Development
- Curriculum and Instruction
- Student Assessment
- Transition Planning and Support
- Parent/Guardian Involvement
- Collaboration
- Program Evaluation
- School Counseling
- School Social Work
- Digital and Virtual Learning
- Policies and Procedures
- Nontraditional Education Plan (National Alternative Education Association, 2014, p. 2)

The goal of Exemplary Practices 2.0 is to “ensure quality nontraditional and alternative education programming occurs, is accountable to and for students, parents, and stakeholders, and fulfills the mission of helping students matriculate to the next grade level on their path to graduation” (National Alternative Education Association, 2014, p. 3). These attributes would address the structural, academic and personal components essential to student learning.

The structural component focuses on the leadership of the school and the daily operations. It is vital that schools maintain a low student-teacher ratio where students can

feel they belong. Building relationships with all stakeholders is crucial to being successful in meeting the needs of the students. It is only when a young person feels trust for school personnel that they will begin to discuss their needs. Smith and Thompson (2014) state, “successful alternative programmes have an environment that is personal and meaningful to students. Effective programmes consist of a committed and caring school staff, and students should have a voice in the operations” (p. 115). Research also shows that “successful programs have a clear mission statement concerning the purpose and goals of the program” and that the mission is documented, published and visible to all stakeholders (Smith & Thompson, 2014, p. 116). Alternative Learning Program missions should also ‘have high standards for behavior, attendance and performance with an emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility’ (Smith & Thompson, 2014, p. 116). The mission of a successful Alternative Learning Program is developed with all stakeholders having a voice and the focus should always remain on the student. Rules should be clearly stated and discussed with each student and enforcement must be consistent. Oftentimes, when students know what is expected and that fact that someone cares about their well-being, they will come around and do what is expected of them.

Successful alternative programs continue to provide quality instruction with innovative techniques employed to reach the students. Exemplary 2.0 identifies a successful school as one where “instructional practices and curriculum are rigorous and inclusive, support the needs of second language and disabled students and are individualized to meet the needs of all learners” (National Alternative Education

Association, 2014, p. 8). These learning opportunities must be led by quality staff members who understand the needs of at risk students.

The Innovative Education Initiatives Act (2003) encourages partnerships between high schools and postsecondary institutions to offer accelerated learning programs and target students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. With that as the goal, the Education Cabinet

shall set as a priority cooperative efforts between secondary schools and institutions of higher education so as to reduce the high school dropout rate, increase high school and college graduation rates, decrease the need for remediation in institutions of higher education, and raise certificate, associate, and bachelor degree completion rates. The Cabinet shall identify and support efforts that achieve the following purposes:

- (1) Support cooperative innovative high school programs developed under Part 9 of Article 16 of Chapter 115C of the General Statutes.
- (2) Improve high school completion rates and reduce high school dropout rates.
- (3) Close the achievement gap.
- (4) Create redesigned middle schools or high schools.
- (5) Provide flexible, customized programs of learning for high school students who would benefit from accelerated, higher level coursework or early graduation.
- (6) Establish high quality alternative learning programs.
- (7) Establish a virtual high school.
- (8) Implement other innovative education initiatives designed to advance the State's system of education. (Senate Bill 656, 2003, p.1)

This Bill encourages high schools and community college to create joint partnerships in order to apply for grants that could be used to create “cooperative innovative programs in high schools and community colleges” (Senate Bill 656, 2003, p. 1). Such programs may include the creation of a high school or technical center on a community college campus. In addition to the partnerships between high schools and community colleges required for purposes of obtaining grants, the participation of University of North Carolina constituent

institutions and private colleges and universities in the state is encouraged (N.C. GEN. STAT. § 116C-4).

After examining the foundation of the study (ALPs), I used the four frames from Bolman and Deal (2008, 2013) to help analyze and unpack the findings according to the areas they had the greatest impact. The four frames of Structural, Human Resource, Political, and Symbolic will be the quadrants from which an organization operates and the study will emphasize the importance each plays on the success of the organization. The study will investigate each frame from the school perspective and how adaptations are made to address the total school culture.

Bolman and Deal: Introducing the Four Frames

The conceptual framework of this study utilizes the four frames from Bolman and Deal (2008, 2013): the structural frame, human resource frame, political frame, and symbolic frame. According to Bolman and Deal (2013), a frame is defined as “a coherent set of ideas or beliefs forming a prism or lens that enables you to see and understand more clearly what goes on from day to day” (p. 41). Bolman and Deal state, “learning to apply all four frames deepens one’s appreciation and understanding of an organization” (p. 18). Defoe (2013) states, “the Four Frame Model of Bolman and Deal can help those interested to better understand and approach issues about organizational diagnosis, development and change” (p. 1). Utilizing this multi frame approach allows leaders to move away from settling in on the “the way we do things” approach in search for understanding on how to develop a comprehensive understanding of all the components in the organization. This approach is especially beneficial for school leaders.

When accepting the role of a principal and entering the school for the first time, it is important to begin the process of understanding the existing school culture. This can be done in a magnitude of ways including conversations with key stakeholders, walking the school grounds, assessing the “feel” of the school by evaluating the body language and actions of school personnel, or capturing what is displayed throughout the building as symbols important to the school. Conversations with stakeholders are also beneficial to new leaders. Examining the organization through all four frames will help clarify the leaders understanding of the school. Bolman and Deal (2008, 2013) state,

- each of the frames has its own image of reality. You may be drawn to some and repelled by others. Some perspectives may seem clear and straightforward, while others seem puzzling. However, learning to apply all four deepens your appreciation and understanding of organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 18).
- Frames serve as multiple functions. The books four frames are rooted in both managerial wisdom and social knowledge.
- Structural—focuses on the architecture of organization—the design of units and subunits, rules and roles, goals and policies.
- Human Resource emphasizes understanding people—their strengths and foibles, reason and emotion, desires and fears.
- Political view sees organizations as a competitive arena, struggle for power and advantage
- Symbolic focuses on issues of meaning and faith. It puts ritual, ceremony, story, play and culture at the heart of the organization. (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 21)

Addressing only one of the lenses will limit the ability of the leader to transform the organization. Taking a multi-frame look broadens the perspective from which the leader operates. The framework provides advantages from multiple perspectives and stimulates growth from within the organization. Dunford and Palmer (1995) found that

management courses teaching multiple frames had significant positive effects over both the short and long term. Operating from the multi-frame perspective removes the blinders from leaders and forces them to look at issues from a broader perspective. It opens the conversations of choice from the stakeholders and creates discussions on which solutions would best benefit the whole of the operation as opposed to sticking to an *only way to do this approach*. The multi-frame approach promotes conversation among stakeholders and problem solving becomes a team solution as opposed to a one-person decision. This also contributes in building the team concept within the organization. In order for success to be obtained, each of the four lenses needs to be studied for a deepened sense of understanding.

Structural Frame

The Structural Frame is the heart and soul of any organization in terms of the operational procedures. This includes the goals, structures, roles and relationships. Defoe (2013) explains, “think organization chart here. Responsibilities, division of labor, rules, policies, procedures, systems and hierarchies which coordinate an organizations diverse activities into a unified effort” (p. 2). Bleuher (2015) adds, “this starting point really defines how an organization functions and is viewed along with how it will process through challenges” (p. 2). All of these components make up the foundation for any organization and attention needs to be paid to every aspect mentioned above. This will assure that all stakeholders know their roles and can contribute positively to the cause.

The structural framework is based on two foundations. The first utilizes the work of industrialist Fredrick Taylor. Taylor was considered the “father” of time-and-motion

studies and coined the term “scientific management” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 45). This management style breaks every day work tasks into minute parts and provides the retraining of workers to get the most from each motion and moment spent at work. While the Structural Framework is built upon the Scientific Management model of Taylor (1911) and Urwick and Gulick (1937) whose work focused on specialization, span of control, authority, and delegation of responsibility, the structural framework also utilizes a pattern of well thought out relationships and roles. The structural framework looks beyond the individuals of the organization to examine the social architecture of the work.

The second foundation that supports the structural framework is based on the work of Max Weber, a German economist and sociologist. Weber’s “Monocratic model” was later supported by the work of Blau and Scott (1962); Perrow (1986); Thompson (1967); Lawrence and Lorsch (1967); and Hall (1963), who completed studies that “examined the relationships among the elements of structure, looked closely at why organizations chose one structure over another, and analyzed the effects of structure on morale, productivity, and effectiveness” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 46). Under either lens, it is proven that the “structural form both enhances and constrains what an organization can accomplish” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 46).

As outlined in Bolman and Deal (2008, 2013), the Structural Lens focuses on the rules, roles, goals and policies that drive human behavior. Bolman and Deal (2013) state while working with the Structural Lens, it is imperative that the organization “must have clear, well-understood goals, roles and relationships” that is understood by everyone in the organization (p. 44). The Structural Lens looks beyond individuals and examines the

social aspects of the organization. Bolman and Deal (2008) state, “if structure is overlooked, an organization often misdirects energy and resources” (p. 68). In schools across America, this holds true as billions of dollars are spent on programs to address issues of the organizations when the problem can be more attributed to the social architecture than the people in the organization. Bolman and Deal (2013) discuss the seven assumptions within the Structural Framework:

- Organizations exist to achieve established goals and objectives
- Organizations increase efficiency and enhance performance through specialized and appropriate division of labor
- Suitable forms of coordination and control ensure that diverse efforts of individuals and units mesh
- Organizations work best when rationality prevails over personal agendas and extraneous pressures
- Organizations work best when rationality prevails over personal agendas and extraneous pressures.
- Effective structures fit an organization’s current circumstances (including its goals, technology, workforce and environment.
- Troubles arise and performance suffers from structural deficits, remedied through problem solving and restructuring. (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 45)

There are two issues that are central to structural design: how to allocate the work (differentiation) and how to coordinate diverse efforts once responsibilities have been parceled out (integration). This is the central thought of “who does what, when and how.” In schools, this is paramount if success is to be achieved (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 49). Successful school leaders spend hours allocating personnel to assure that everyone understands his/her roles. There are two ways to do this, according to Bolman and Deal (2013)—vertically and laterally. In a vertical manner, the group follows the

normal chain of command leading from the top down. In a lateral format, the goals are met through meetings, committees, coordinating roles, or network structures.

When transforming a school, the leader must know the staff and what their role is in regards to the collective group. Each individual has a job that is specific to the success of the organization. It is imperative that everyone knows their role; but more importantly, how their role plays into the structural plan of the school. The hope is that this understanding promotes unity among the staff and creates a sense of belonging to the greater cause. Many times, teachers and school personnel get “lost” in their respective roles, and they fail to see the connection between their discipline and the bigger operation of the school. In effective organizations, all stakeholders are clear about their responsibilities and what is expected from them in terms of giving back to the organization. This is an area that the school leader must monitor and promote a supportive school environment. If the leader fails to recognize the work of the teachers, dissension can set in and the culture becomes political in nature where teachers are vying for power. This is where a keen focus on the Human Resource Frame becomes an important frame for leaders to focus.

Human Resource Frame

The Human Resource Lens emphasizes that it is paramount that the right people are placed in the right positions to begin the change process. This lens focuses on the family concept of the organization. It highlights the relationship between people and organizations. Defoe (2013) added, “individuals have needs, feelings, fears, prejudices, skills and development opportunities. This frame enables one to focus on and understand

the fit between the individual and the organization” (p. 2). It is important under this lens that leaders build relationships while understanding the needs for the organization to thrive. Developing personal relationships helps all stakeholders see beyond stereotypes and seek the potential and promise of each student in the school.

The Human Resource frame evolved from the early work of pioneers such as Mary Parker Follett (1918) and Elton Mayo (1933, 1945), who questioned the philosophy “those workers had no rights beyond their paychecks; that their duty was to work hard and follow orders” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 117). The early schools of thought found this mindset to be both unfair to workers and were just bad practices for any organization. The early pioneers argued “that people’s skills, attitudes, energy, and commitment are vital resources that can make or break an enterprise” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 117). The Human Resource Lens reiterates “that organizations need people (for their energy, effort, and talent) and people need organizations (for the many intrinsic and extrinsic rewards they offer)” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 137). When the fit is good, the organization will thrive, but when the fit is not right, both the organization and the people will suffer. This is evident in many schools where the leadership is not aligned with the beliefs and values of the school community. Oftentimes, school leaders are in the game to transform the thought process of the stakeholders to meet a certain vision as identified by the district without stopping to see if the “one size fits all” approach that the district is promoting is what is best for the school in which they lead. The goal of any school leader is to meet the needs of the stakeholders (students, staff, and school community) and this means making adjustments to mandates from above to accommodate the needs

of their constituents. When operating in the human resource frame, Bolman and Deal (2008) urge leaders to keep in mind the core assumptions that this frame is built upon:

- Organizations exist to serve human needs rather than the converse
- People and organizations need each other. Organizations need the ideas, energy, and talent; people need the careers, salaries, and opportunities
- When the fit between individual and systems is poor, one or both suffer. Individuals are exploited or exploit the organization—they both suffer
- A good fit benefits both. Individuals find meaningful and satisfying work and organizations get the talent and energy they need to succeed. (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 117)

The Human Resource Lens provides the following strategies to be successful:

“build and implement an HR strategy, hire the right people, keep them, invest in them, empower them, and promote diversity” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 140). If individuals feel like they belong to the organization they are more likely willing to do whatever it takes to make sure the job is done right and in an effective manner. In schools, this is an area where teacher empowerment is monumental and sharing the leadership and decision-making will strengthen the bond between the leader and the staff. In the end, the students will benefit from all the hard work, planning that takes place on a collaborative level and the workers will feel as if their contributions are valued.

Empowering teachers builds trust among the staff and promotes a sense of ownership among the entire school community. Bleuher (2015) continues, “most people within education are there for an intrinsic desire to help others” (p. 2). When teachers feel as if they are contributing to the success of the school, their energy will help elevate those around them who may not share the same thought process. In reality, some schools still employ those who view their positions as a job and are reluctant to accept change.

Teachers who are deemed leaders can serve as an advocate to help shift the mindset of teachers who need to become contributing forces in the school. Allowing teachers a sense of academic freedom and flexibility in their classrooms will create a sense of a purposeful community. McRel (2004) defines a purposeful community as “one with the collective efficacy and capability to develop and use assets to accomplish purposes and produce outcomes that matter to all community members through agreed-upon processes” (p. 6). Building a purposeful community around teacher leaders who share the vision of the school will help prompt others to begin to acclimate to the change in climate.

Political Frame

In the Political Frame, power and conflict are at the center of all decision making. Decision makers are always conscious of individuals and groups who are harboring their own agendas in order to find their way into power. Bleuher (2015) explains, “it falls upon the organizational leader to know the politics of the environment in which he is working” (p. 2). Bolman and Deal (2008) note five propositions that summarize this perspective:

- Organizations are coalitions of assorted individuals and interest groups
- Coalition members have enduring differences in values, beliefs, information, interests, and perceptions of reality
- Most important decisions involve allocating scarce resources—who gets what
- Scarce resources and enduring differences put conflict at the center of the day-to-day dynamics and make power the most important asset
- Goals and decisions emerge from bargaining and negotiation among competing stakeholders jockeying for their own interests. (p. 194)

It is important for the leader to develop a culture that promotes growth for all stakeholders and one where all stakeholders have a voice. It is natural in any

organization for groups to form based on interests, and oftentimes these interests are not aligned with the philosophy of the organization. Often these groups form when resources within the organization are scarce. It is during these times that political issues arise in the organization.

Power is viewed differently among the different lenses, but in the political view, power is not seen as the end all in the decision-making process. Rather, power is viewed as a way to make things happen. Bolman and Deal cite Foucault (1975) stating, “we have to stop describing power always in negative terms: (as in) it excludes, it represses. In fact, power produces reality” (p. 201). In order to avoid derailment, a successful leader must devise a plan to assure that power is being used as a positive for the organization. A way to do this is to create an agenda for change. The leader must be aware of where the minefields are located within the organization and prepare a plan to avoid any negative setbacks. Pichault (1993), as well as Bolman and Deal (2008), calls this developing a political map. He suggests a four-step plan for creating a political map:

- Determine channels of informal communication.
- Identify principal agents of political influence.
- Analyze possibilities for mobilizing internal and external players.
- Anticipate counter-strategies that others are likely to employ. (Pichault, 1993, p. 216)

Bolman and Deal (2008) state that a simple way to develop a political map for any situation is to create a two-dimensional diagram mapping players (who is in the game), power (how much clout each player is likely to exercise), and interests (what each player wants). With this in mind, it is important for leaders to build a coalition and utilize the

skills of bargaining to counteract the negative adversaries (p. 46). Bolman and Deal state, “that oftentimes, leaders fail to get things done, because they rely too much on reason and place too little emphasis on relationships. By building relationships with the stakeholders, leaders are valued more and in turn get more production from their employees” (p.57). Kotter (1985) suggests that a leader should follow a basic four-step approach while exercising political influence. They are:

- Identify relevant relationships. (Figure out which players you need to influence).
- Assess who might resist, why, and how strongly. (Determine where leadership challenges will be).
- Develop, wherever possible, links with potential opponents to facilitate communication, education, or negotiation. (Hold your enemies close).
- If step three fails, carefully select and implement either subtler or more forceful methods. (Save your big guns until you really need them, but have a Plan B in case Plan A falls short.) (Kotter, 1985, p. 219)

People adhere to policies and expectations better when they feel their leader is credible, competent, and sensible. This approach will result in people giving their best efforts.

Symbolic Frame

Zott and Huy (2007) state, “a symbol is something that stands for or suggests something else; it conveys socially contracted means beyond its intrinsic or obvious functional use” (p. 72). The Symbolic Frame combines ideas from multiple sources and divides them into five areas:

- What is most important is not what happens but what it means.
- Activity and meaning are loosely coupled; events and actions have multiple interpretations as people experience life differently.

- Facing uncertainty and ambiguity, people create symbols to resolve confusion, find direction, and anchor hope and faith.
- Events and processes are often more important for what is expressed than for what is produced. Their emblematic form weaves a tapestry of secular myths, heroes and heroines, rituals, ceremonies, and stories to help people find purpose and passion.
- Culture forms the superglue that bonds an organization, unites people, and helps an enterprise accomplish the desired ends. (Zott & Huy, 2007, p. 253)

The Symbolic Frame views life as figurative rather than linear. Symbols take on many shapes within the organization, many expressed through the culture of the building and the core values and beliefs for which they operate. Bolman and Deal (2008) state, “it centers on complexity and ambiguity and emphasizes the idea that symbols mediate the meaning of work and anchor culture” (p. 277). The culture emulates the values of the organization and helps form an identity for the organization.

Four Lenses Synthesized

By utilizing all four of the framework lenses from Bolman and Deal, the important elements of school culture that school leaders must explore in order for the school to be a successful platform for all students will be examined. The culture of the school drives the expectations for all stakeholders so it is vital that school leaders carefully examine each of the elements prior to their implementation. In a report from the Gates Foundation titled “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts” (2006), two thirds of the students said, “they would have worked harder to graduate if their schools had demanded more of them and provided the necessary academic and personal supports to help them succeed” (p. 2). Educating the whole child goes beyond the academics and focuses on the whole student. Relationships play an

important role in the success of the students but with overcrowding and demands for proficiency, it is often one area that teachers don't have time to develop. The testing age and teacher effectiveness ratings are driving more and more educators to focus on covering the content rather than getting to know the needs of their students and their interests. This struggle of balance between covering the content and focusing on the whole child can lead to student apathy for those that aren't having their needs addressed. When students become disengaged in the learning process, oftentimes they look for other options and thus consider dropping out of school.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used in this study (see Figure 1) used the Four Frames from Bolman and Deal (2013) to investigate the operation of successful Alternative Learning Programs. The study used the four frames—Structural, Human Resource, Political, and Symbolic—to analyze the daily operations of ALPs. After collecting interview data from each of the participants, the frames were then analyzed to determine impacts on changing student learning.

Although each of the frames is used individually for analytical purposes, this study also explains how the schools responded to questions pertaining to each lens and how the findings from the lens affected their school. The Structural Frame highlights the rules, focus, goals and the policies present at each site to assure that all stakeholders were working from the same platform. This is also the frame where school leaders discussed the process of identifying and stressing what is important for the success of the school in terms of the rules and operational guidelines for all stakeholders. In the Human Resource

Frame, the focus for school leadership was to assure that the right people were hired for the position, the employees were placed in the appropriate roles and the appropriate relationships were formed to assure that a positive learning environment was created for all to prosper. The Political Frame addressed the distribution of power and how shared decision making shaped the functioning of the school. It also included getting students out into the community to assist in changing the perception of the school from the community standpoint. Finally, it is vital that successes are celebrated in the Symbolic Frame.

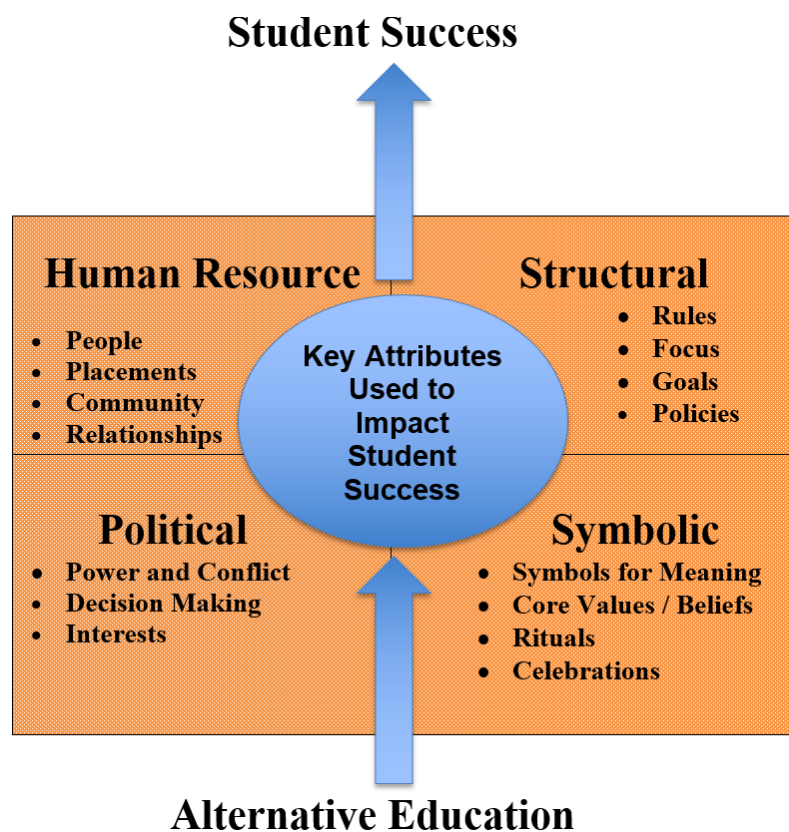


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

Students enter the alternative setting with a variety of needs (educational, social, and emotional), and they historically have shown a struggle academically. Most of these students are dealing with issues far more important to them than their education. Some just do not want to go to the alternative setting due to the stigma associated with these types of programs. In many cases, the school community has a preconceived idea about the school and they fail to see any of the positives. It is up to the leader of the school to implement a plan that will spotlight the happenings in the schools as well as when they celebrate the successes of their students. The study shares the stories of four alternative programs that have implemented a redesign process and what they do daily to assure that their students either graduate from high school or are on the path to graduation at their home schools.

Summary

This study reveals the key attributes that school leaders utilized when attempting to redesign Alternative Learning Programs in our state. The study examined Alternative Learning Programs in the Piedmont region of North Carolina and the mandates that the state places upon districts to address the problem of providing a quality education for all students identified as at-risk. The study will utilize the framework from Bolman and Deal to describe how each of the critical elements fit into the four lenses and how each lens is dependent upon each other to create a successful learning organization.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

In order to identify key attributes school leaders employed in redesigning Alternative Learning Programs in their districts, I chose to use a generic approach to doing qualitative research. Lichtman (2010) states, “the purpose of a generic approach is to use qualitative methodologies to collect and analyze data” (p. 87). Lichtman (2012) adds, “basic or generic qualitative studies have the essential characteristics of qualitative research but do not focus on culture, grounded theory, or intensely study a single unit or bounded system” (p. 115). I interviewed four people from each of the four schools participating in the study about the development of their school and its effects on student success. This research study focused on key attributes four schools had in common that specifically addressed the teaching and learning that takes place in their schools. Each of the four schools focused on creating a culture that was conducive to student learning and developing relationships with the students and all stakeholders.

This generic approach study was grounded in Four Frames model from the work of Bolman and Deal (2008, 2013). A qualitative interview study applies when the same open-ended questions are asked to all of the participants in the study. Each of the interviews was audio-taped and transcribed by an outside source. Upon completion of the interview process for each school, the data were analyzed by placing the information in the diagram illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Data Analysis Flowchart.

Research Setting

This study focused on schools in central North Carolina that have redesigned Alternative Learning Programs to make a positive impact on their students. I examined Alternative Learning Programs in four school districts that are similar in size and socio-economic make-up to provide perspectives on what school leaders are doing to assure students are not only graduating but graduating College and Career Ready instead of opting to drop out of school.

Due to problems such as high dropout rates, high suspension rates and student failure, districts began to explore ways to effectively change the operational procedures of their Alternative Learning Programs to address the needs of students and to assure that these needs are met, both academically and socially. All of the schools that participated in the study had shown success with the redesigning of their school environments with a focus on implementing a culture that promoted student learning within their respective districts. The study revealed the key attributes of the redesign process that were deemed successful and how they led to an organizational change that has affected student turnaround in their respective schools. The study focused on 16 employees in the Alternative Learning Program, including the principal and three staff members from each school site. Each shared experiences and roles in the daily operation of the school sites.

These included a school administrator and three school staff from each study site. The study addresses how this redesign affected student turnaround in the schools. Each of the schools are unique in their own rights but share a common bond that makes them unique in their focus. Table 2 looks at the data over the past three years regarding various elements of the redesign process discussed in the study. While the statistics do not seem to overwhelm the reader, the purpose of the table is to show four areas that have maintained or shown an increase in the success of the students. The four areas of the chart include the 4-year graduation rates, the number of students who met the proficiency rates for testing, the dropout data and the school safety report.

Superior Academy is located in the central region of North Carolina in a rural setting. It is the county's non-traditional high school offering a 21-credit diploma to students who entered high school prior to 2012-2013 and a 22-credit diploma to students who enter after that time. The school serves students from all three of the traditional high schools in the district that either were suspended from their home school or asked to attend by school choice. At the time of the study, the school was serving 57 students. The goal of the school is to provide a project based learning approach where students are active in their learning process.

Table 2

School Participation and Data Reports

Participating School	4 Year Cohort Graduation Rate Percentage	Number Participating Met	Drop Out Data for School	Attendance Rates	School Safety Incidents Reported
Superior Academy	14-15 - 90.4% 15-16 - >95%	14-15 / 60% 15-16 / 100%	14-15 / 11 15-16 / 2	13-14 / 88% 14-15 / 87.9% 15-16 / 89%	12-13 / 2 13-14 / 0 14-15 / 1
Right Academy	14-15 – NA 15-16 - >95%	14-15 / 100% 15-16 / 86.7%	14-15 / 4 15-16 / 2	13-14 / 77% 14-15 / 87.9% 15-16 / 94.8%	12-13 / 2 13-14 / 9 14-15 / 16
Best Academy*	14-15 / 91.9% 15–16 / 83.9%	14-15 – 57.1% 15-16 – 87.1%	14-15 / 5 15-16 / 1	NA	NA
Century Academy**	NA	14-15 / 69% 15-16 / 75%	14-15 / NA 15-16 / NA	13-14 / 89% 14-15 / 91.5% 15-16 / 91%	12-13 / 5 13-14 / 9 14-15 / 4

*Data for this school site was included in the high school in the district they serve

** Data for this school is grades K-8 – included due to new principal added to school site.

Source: Retrieved from www.ncpublicschools.org/research/consolidated

The graduation rate at the school has increased from 86.4 in 2012 to 90.4% in 2014. Graduation rate for 2015-2016 is greater than 95%. Superior Academy has protocols in place to address all disciplinary needs. There have been only three major incidents reported during the past three years. All teachers have been trained to have SAFE classrooms with a focus on PBIS. Also, teachers constantly monitor student behavior/needs each day and contact others including parents or case workers that need to be made aware of situations pertaining to their students. Attendance at Superior Academy hovers around the 89% mark and has been steady at this rate over the past three years. The dropout rate is most impressive as they have seen a decrease from 11 students dropping out in 2014 down to only two during the past school year.

Right Academy is in its fourth year of existence in its current location. The original Alternative School was closed and relocated due to the problems that were taking place on the campus. Crime and disciplinary issues were at an all-time high and students were in control of the school. The district proposed to move the location and rebrand the operation of the school all together. This included hiring a new principal as well as the entire staff; from the Assistant Principal to the custodians.

During the 2015-2016 school year, the school served 240 students. The school structure includes both the regular alternative program as well as the Day Treatment Program for the district. At the end of the 2015-2016 school year, there were 116 students enrolled. This included both students who were assigned to the Alternative Program for disciplinary reasons as well as some choice students. There are 45 staff members employed at the school which includes those working in the Day Treatment

Program. There is an abundance of support staff at the school including two guidance counselors, a transition coordinator, a school social worker, eight behavior specialists, an in-school suspension teacher, a graduation coach and an online facilitator. This school has seen a rise in the attendance rate of its students over the past three years rising from 77% in 2012-2013 up to 87.9% during the 2015-2016 school year. The school does show a rise in student discipline during that 2015-2016 school year but this number is skewed due to the addition of the Day Treatment Program being added to their campus. The actual number of incidents without the Day Treatment data remains consistent with the previous two years. Right Academy reports a graduation rate of greater than 95% for the second year in a row. The operation budget for the 2015-2016 school year was \$7,300 with an additional allotment of \$562 for staff development. This seems to be an odd discrepancy of funding with the amount of support staff and the number of students assigned to the school.

Best Academy is located in a small town in central North Carolina. The school is located in a town that was once thriving with manufacturing businesses but has seen change of demographics since the collapse of the market. The district serves approximately 2,469 students with a graduation rate of 86.9%. Best Academy serves as the only Alternative Learning Program in the district and serves 38 students in grades 9-12. The school has undergone a transition in leadership and educational focus both at the building level as well as the district level during the past few years. Best Alternative School has a staff of five teachers, a teacher assistant, and a counselor. The school admits students who have been suspended from their home school due to disciplinary

reasons as well as attendance issues. It also serves students who are seeking credit recovery towards graduation and in need of a smaller working environment.

Century Academy is located in northwest North Carolina. The school is located in a small town that serves as a gateway for travelers between the mountains and the piedmont regions of North Carolina as well as Charlotte. The school served 56 students during the 2015-2016 school year. Attendance at Century continues to rise from 89% in 2013-2014 to over 91% in 2015-2016. The school has seen a reduction in the number of reported acts of crime or violence over the past two years from 9.09 incidents in 2013-2014 down to 4 in 2015-2016. The attendance rate at Century Academy continues to rise as well maintaining an average rate of 91%.

While not all of the schools share the same successes, each of them has shown an increase in students showing growth in their schools. This growth is evident through an increase in attendance and graduation rates at most sites, an increase in attendance for some, and reductions in disciplinary referrals and suspensions for most. The only school that reported an increase in discipline was the one that added the Day Treatment Program to their site. Regardless of their strengths, all of the schools are on the right path in redesign to be worthy of study. They are achieving their school related goals that each set with their school leadership teams in the areas of a reduction in discipline referrals, an increase in graduation rates, a reduction of dropouts and successful transitions for students wishing to return to their home schools. The research questions for the study will provide a detailed look at what each school focused on and how it impacted the overall school culture at their respective sites.

Research Questions

To obtain a better understanding of alternative schools that have shown success in the total school program, this study will investigate the following research questions:

Primary Research Question

- What are the key attributes that school personnel utilize in the redesign process of an alternative school?

Secondary Research Questions

- What roles do school personnel play in the redesigning of an alternative school?
- What do personnel say about the structure of the program and the impact it has on student performance?
- What kinds of human relations are valued in ALPs, and how are they realized?
- What are the micro-political and macro-political contexts ALPs must negotiate, and how do those negotiations affect the school and student performance?
- What cultural characteristics and shifts are embedded in ALPs that contribute to improvements in student performance?

Selection of Participants

For the purpose of this study, I visited four Alternative Learning programs in the Central region of North Carolina who have had the opportunity to redesign current small alternative sites in their respective school districts. At each site, four employees participated in the study including the principal and three key staff members. The

principals in the study was selected based on their current position as the leader of a school that has undergone a redesign process in the last few years. Three of the four principals in the study are officers with the North Carolina Alternative Education Association and serve as either an officer or a representative for their respective districts. Table 3 introduces the reader to the principals that participated in the study as well as their experiences working in education.

Table 3

Principal Participation and Experiences

School	Principal	Experience
Best Alternative	Mr. Johns	Mr. Johns is new to the school as the leader but is not new to the district. He is a Caucasian male and is currently serving his first full year of the job. He replaced a highly-respected principal who had made some major changes to the operational culture at Best Alternative School and plans to continue the implementation of the goals with his own tweaks. He is a graduate of the school system and returned home to serve the students in his town. His goal was to “come back here and serve the kids in the community and really see if I could make a difference in some of their lives, provide a positive change for them.” He does not want his school to be referred to as the “alternative school” as the mindset of the community is that “this is where they send the bad kids with discipline problems and writes them off.” One of his major focuses is to promote the positive things that happen on the campus and share within the school community.

Table 3

Cont.

School	Principal	Experience
Century Alternative	Mrs. Martin	Mrs. Martin has spent 20 years in education, all with the same school system. She started off as a second-grade teacher and then she decided to go into administration but never actually wanted to become a principal. She obtained a job as a middle school administrator at an at-risk middle school and then decided that she was ready to return to her passion; elementary school. As a twist of fate, she received a job at a high functioning elementary school where achievement was high and she did not feel like she was needed or making a difference so she looked for another challenge. She accepted a principal's job at a K-2 school but it soon merged with a 3-5 school so she got two schools for one with a merger of staff on top. She then accepted a job at the district level but soon realized that she missed the daily interactions with her students. She went to the high school level as director of a freshman academy. From there she took over an assistant principal position at the high school after her grant ended and had the urge to return to the role of principal. She applied for and accepted the job at Central Academy.
Right Academy	Mr. Boyd	Mr. Boyd has been employed with the school system for the past four years. He served the majority of his twenty years' experience in another state. He served as an EC teacher and director before leaving the profession to work in corporate America. He was hired to this school as an Assistant Principal. After serving in this role for two years, the former principal left to take another job in the district and Mr. Boyd was promoted to the lead position in the school. He retained the

Table 3

Cont.

School	Principal	Experience
Right Academy (cont.)	Mr. Boyd	majority of the school staff as well as the operational procedures that were in place.
Success Academy	Mr. Ashley	Mr. Ashley has worked in public education for over twenty years. He has worked in numerous districts but came back to this district to serve the at-risk population. He taught both middle and high school but always wanted to become a principal. Mr. Ashley has served in numerous capacities with three school systems in North Carolina. He taught history before returning to school to get his administration degree.

School professionals consisted of teachers, guidance counselors and teacher assistants. Selection of the staff members chosen to participate in the study was based on conversations with district leaders and from personal connections within the alternative school personnel from across the state. I visited each school site in order to complete all interviews in a comfortable place for the participants. Table 4 will introduce the school personnel that participated in the study as well as their educational experiences. It is interesting to note the number of school personnel that entered education via the business industry background as well as the number of staff assigned to the school site. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure his or her identity and school location were kept private.

Table 4

School Personnel Participation and Experience

School	School Staff	Experience
Best Alternative	Mr. Wright	Teacher; six years of experience, entered alternative education from industry
	Mr. Downs	Teacher; six years of experience, entered alternative education from industry; liberal arts degree; research analyst; Social Studies 7-12
	Ms. Dowdy	Behavior Interventionist; 12 years of experience as a one on one; left to work in mental health, returned and has been at the school for eight years.
Century Alternative	Mr. Devin	Teacher; 6 years' experience overall; two at the alternative school. Teaches math at the school.
	Ms. Tompkins	Teacher; was assigned to the position at the alternative school; currently serves as the Curriculum Coach after teaching EC.
	Mrs. Gates	Teacher; started as a teacher assistant but returned to college to obtain her certification and now is an EC teacher.
Right Academy	Mr. King	He has six years of experience in public education. He served as an EC teacher before coming to Right Academy. He is currently enrolled in the MSA program to obtain his degree in administration.
	Mrs. Lilly	She has been in public education for 22 years serving as a high school CTE teacher. She originally taught at Right Academy before moving into the transition coordinator this year.
	Mrs. Light	She is currently in her eighth year in public education. She has been a core content teacher and has had training in the EC program.

Table 4

Cont.

School	School Staff	Experience
Success Academy	Mrs. Stuart	Studied Psychology and did an internship in an alternative program. Started her career as a volunteer at an alternative program. She eventually becomes employed through a grant opportunity and when the grant ran out, she took a job at a psychiatric hospital teaching history. She received her counseling degree and came to work at Success as a school counselor where she has been for the past 5 years.
	Mrs. Johnson	Taught high school and came to Success as a math teacher. She has been involved in education for the past 15 years.
	Mrs. Lewis	Has both her bachelor's and master's degree. She entered the field of education from the business world. She taught high school in several states and has been in education for the past 11 years.

I conducted in-depth interviews with four principals and three professionals from each school. The two principal interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes and teacher interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Each school site was visited twice in order to get all interviews completed and to have time for verification with those interviewed. I made notations of the visits in a journal that included an initial impression of the school including the friendliness of staff, the overall look of the school grounds, the interaction between students and staff, and what was advertised on bulletin boards and in the school hallways. Interview data collected during the visits was aligned with

responses the school leader to identify the key attributes that emerge as essential elements in the success of the school.

Data Collection

I utilized interviews as a means of collecting data for the findings in this study. All interviews began with a review of the consent form from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro as well as the protocols for data collection. The process for collection was as follows:

1. An open invitation for principals to participate in the study along with the permission from their respective school districts.
2. Principals from four Alternative Learning Program sites were invited along with three teachers from each school. Conscientious efforts were made to assure that the participants represent various race/ethnicity groups, gender, and years of experience.
3. Invitations to participate were sent to all participants followed by face to face interviews lasting up to 120 minutes each for principals (two separate interviews) and up to 45 minutes for each teacher (which was interviewed once).
4. All interviews were audio tape recorded and transcribed by an external source.
5. All transcripts were validated by those participating in the study through member checks with the participants.

Interview questions for the principals and the teachers participating in the study were available at each session. The interview question list varied from direct responses to open

ended questions allowing conversations to develop with each person interviewed. Both principal and teacher interview questions overlapped in content in order to gain deeper insight to the findings. All interviews here held in a conversation style face to face.

Two separate interviews were conducted with each principal. The first interview focused on the questions pertaining to the redesign process at their respective schools as well as the educational background of the principal, their reasoning for choosing to lead an Alternative Learning Program, and their visions of leadership upon accepting the position. Conversations also included a reflective component of the redesign process where principals were asked to identify areas that created issues in the redesign of the schools as well as how the stakeholders of the school overcame these obstacles. The second interview was utilized to validate the transcription of the first interview and to clarify any additional details that the principal may have shared.

Interviews were also conducted with three staff members from each of the selected schools to explore the extent of staff involvement in the redesign process and the impact it had on the total school community. Participants were asked to share their stories on the roles they play in the daily operation of the school. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes.

Participants in the study included four principals and three staff members from each school. One principal was a female Caucasian who was in her second year as the principal of the school. The other three principals in the study were all Caucasian males with experience ranging from a first-year principal, a second-year principal, and one with over twenty years of experience. Of the new principals, each actively sought the

principalship at the Alternative Learning Program and shared a strong desire to work with at-risk kids. This quality trait was shared among all the principals in the study. Three of the four principals had a background as an Exceptional Children's teacher prior to receiving their current position. Table 5 provides the interview questions that were used to guide the conversations with principals participating in the study.

Table 5

Interview Questions for Principals

#	Interview Questions for Principals
1.	Tell me about your school and what makes you so proud to serve as the leader of this school.
2.	Talk about yourself. What is your educational background and why did you choose to lead an alternative school program?
3.	Talk about your students. Who are they and why are they enrolled in the alternative education program?
4.	What is your philosophy of school leadership and how do you model this to your stakeholders?
5.	What does student turnaround mean to you?
6.	How did you identify the priorities of the school and what implementation standards are you utilizing in embedding them into the culture of the school?
7.	Define the culture that you would like exhibited throughout your school and what measures are in place to assure that these qualities are consistent on a daily basis?
8.	How do you promote relationship building between students and staff, staff and school administration, school and community?
9.	How do you maintain a positive school environment for all stakeholders? What do you do for staff, students, and community to assure a positive environment?
10.	Who is the power of your school and how are they selected? Describe the roles that each of them play?

Table 5

Cont.

#	Interview Questions for Principals
11.	Describe the educational focus of the school and how do you keep at-risk students focused in the classroom?
12.	How do you define student achievement in your school?
13.	How do you involve the community in your school?
14.	How do you communicate with the school community in regards to your expectations, community relations, and student turnaround?
15.	Describe how you hold all stakeholders accountable in the learning process. How do you motivate at-risk kids? Incentives?
16.	Is there anything else you would like to share about your school?

Table 6 provides the interview questions used to drive the conversations with school personnel that participated in the study. Staff members chosen for the study came from a variety of positions ranging from a guidance counselor, two teacher assistants, a curriculum facilitator and eight classroom teachers. It is to be noted that ten of the twelve staff members in the study were very positive and very candid in their interview process and brought up issues that each of the schools were facing on a daily basis. Two of the participants had issues with some of the managerial functions of the school and were quick to point out what was wrong rather than dote on what was right. Nine of the twelve staff members chose to be working at the alternative learning program with three being transitioned there due to budget cuts. All of the teachers were open to discuss their experiences and share their true feelings regarding their schools.

Table 6

Interview Questions for Teachers

#	Interview Questions for Teachers
1.	Tell me about yourself.
2.	List 5-10 words to describe you and your school setting.
3.	What types of examples would you provide for any of the aforementioned words?
4.	How do you see yourself as a school?
5.	What does the term “successful student” mean to you – provide a definition.
6.	Describe student learning in your school.
7.	Tell me about your school and the role you play in the daily operation.
8.	How does your staff interact with the stakeholders of the school?
9.	What determines your school culture?
10.	What is the general climate like in your school?
11.	What are the current educational focuses at your school?
12.	Describe the planning at your school. Who is involved and what are their roles?
13.	What do you look for in the hiring process for your school? Who is involved?
14.	Who are the change agents in your school and what are their roles?
15.	Describe the schools interaction with the school community.
16.	How are expectations communicated with the community?
17.	Discuss the major decisions that were made in your school during the past year.
18.	Who was involved, either formally or informally, in the decision-making process and what was their role?
19.	Describe the power in your school.
20.	Identify and describe the core values that your school exhibits on a daily basis.
21.	Describe the history or traditions celebrated in your school.
22.	What other information would you like to share?

Data Collection and Reflection

After receiving all of the necessary approvals for conducting research in the respective districts, I began the task of identifying and contacting the study participants in order to arrange my interview schedules. Some schools took several visits in order to get everyone interviewed as I worked around student contact time with each of the participants. I visited each school site twice to conduct the interview with the selected participants. Principal interviews were 45 – 120 minutes in length and the school staff interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes. Each of the schools were all contained on a separate school site that was not a part of any traditional high school campus. Building styles ranged from a smaller structure containing a principal's office, guidance and conference area, and four classrooms to a structure that had the look and feel of a traditional school with multi classrooms and meeting spaces resembling a traditional school setting. Every school site that participated in the study shared the same "feel" as I entered their buildings and one could tell that there was a positive culture in practice at each site. All of the schools were inviting from the time I arrived on campus. Each of the schools in the study were clean and the people greeting visitors were very positive and welcoming. Each school had bulletin boards that promoted student success ranging from photos of students and staff interacting with one another in classroom setting to student of the month awards. Staff and students acknowledged me as I walked the buildings to meet with my interviews. None of the schools was loud as students were engaged in the school day.

Data Analysis

The data examined in this study included transcribed interviews and electronic copies of documents retrieved from the schools' websites. I intended to use all data collected to compare the key attributes of successful Alternative Learning Programs with research findings from established researchers that was deemed successful in the redesign process. Staff data was analyzed along with the principal's data to measure the impact it had on the school's success. The data that was collected in the study was coded into categories and then the common categories that emerged from the work. All categories were recorded but the focus was on the ones that were shared among all school sites.

All common categories were placed within the workings of the Conceptual Framework from Bolman and Deal (2013). One of the goals of the study was to identify the key attributes that fell under each framework and measure the impact each had on the redesign of an ALP. The purpose of the study was to compile a list of the traits that evolved during the interview process and placed within the framework. Each school site was analyzed individually with quotes from the interviews placed within each category. At the conclusion of all site data being disaggregated, common categories from each of the sites were placed into a new document to find the themes and traits that all four schools shared in common and identified as important components for the operational success of each school. All school documents used in the analysis process was coded and categorized using the same procedures.

During this process, I was also aware of any data points that did not fall within the conceptual framework or could have been considered an outlier as it may have only been

mentioned as an important attribute for one or two schools. These traits were documented and will be used in Chapter V as potential future studies.

Researcher Subjectivity

I need to disclose my experience as a school leader who has lived the redesign an Alternative Learning Program, and I realize this lived experience will have an impact on my personal perspective of school redesign but will not have an impact the study from a personal bias. I analyzed and reported the data identified in the study and formed the foundation of the study from this information alone. I included a section at the end of the study with a personal reflection on my findings and a comparative component from my own experiences. I had a working knowledge of only one of the study sites and knew the personnel in the building but did not know any of the other participants prior to the study. I included schools from four different districts with similar socio-economic and demographical status that share similar school designs and protocols. Thus, the study will be unbiased in this manner and my research was not influenced.

Trustworthiness

Having served in the role of an administrator responsible for the redesigning of an alternative learning site, I relied on the data collected to represent my findings. With the information collected during this study, I looked for the common themes and characteristics of the schools as recommended by current research and compare my findings that were documented and supported by the participants in the study. Upon completion of the interviews, all interviews were transcribed by an outside source and follow-up interviews were held in order to allow the participants the opportunity to

validate their individual data. I coded the information obtained from the interviews, observations, and document analysis to assure that all participants' voices are represented in the findings.

Benefits and Risks of the Study

Although there is a lot of research that has been conducted regarding school redesign, there are not a lot of studies that focus on the impact that the redesign process has had on students being successful in alternative learning programs. This study may benefit school practitioners because the sole purpose of the study is to investigate and report the findings where school redesign processes have been implemented and proven successful for students enrolled in their respective programs. The focus on the school sites targeted student discipline, student attendance, transition opportunities for students to successfully return to their home schools, graduation rates and community involvement.

The major risk of the study would be if school leaders tried to mimic the study in an attempt to build their redesign process around the findings. It would also be a risk if they decided to implement the defined attributes that all school sites found to be important without considering the impact the findings would have on their own site. While schools would want to include many of the findings in their redesign process, it is vital to note that school leaders must understand their target populations and identify and understand the issues within their own frameworks before starting any forward movements toward school redesign. Every district has unique circumstances that would affect the needs of their community.

While every attempt has been made to assure privacy for all of the study participants, there is a slight risk that their identities could be figured out due to the stories and quotes that are included in the study findings. While every attempt possible has been made to protect their identity, some stories are unique to particular school sites. I tried to protect my participants by providing pseudonyms for all study participants and school sites.

Summary

In a time of transition for schools across the country, school leaders are looked to for guidance and continued support for all stakeholders within the system. Schools are dealing with the infusion of new standards at a time when rising expectations for public schools is demanding drastic changes from our schools. Schools are also witnessing an exit of students being served in public schools to either private institutions or homeschooling. America is demanding better educational opportunities for all students and insisting that students leave our schools College and Career Ready while prepared to compete in a global market. School leaders must rise to the challenge but must be creative in their processes as funding for schools is still limited and resources are hard to obtain. It is a time where all stakeholders within the school community must unite and contribute to the reform process. School leaders are facing the tasks of creating positive school environments where student success is an expectation that is instilled in every aspect of the school operation. Relationships must be strong with the entire school community as to create buy-in from all of its constituents. A key component of this relationship is that the leaders must model the values they hope to install in the schools

themselves in order to attract more people to their mission. It is a challenging process but the end results can be proof that with a strong working vision, mission, stakeholder buy-in and an atmosphere of high expectations, the re-designing of schools can be beneficial to all school communities. The schools that participated in this study have created a school community that is supportive of the ALP in their district and they have seen student success with their students.

The schools were selected on recommendations from district leaders and were schools that were sharing their stories on many platforms. Two of the schools were reaching out to compare methods with other schools in the study. I deemed all of the schools in the study as valid examples of ALP's that can be modeled due to their success in working with at-risk students. These schools have seen a decrease in the number of students dropping out of school, an increase in attendance rates, a reduction in the disciplinary referrals, and an increase in graduation rates and noted for their successful student transition programs.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The literature review in this study suggests that school leaders take many factors into consideration prior to redesigning the Alternative Learning Programs in their respective districts. This study examined the redesign of four Alternative Learning Programs in the central region of North Carolina. The purpose of the study is to unveil key attributes the four schools shared that led to their redesign process deemed successful by school leaders in their districts. In this chapter, I will present interview data collected from each of the four school sites and written up using key tenets of the conceptual framework from Bolman and Deal. The research of Bolman and Deal identifies four key frames that “attempt to help managers and leaders find clarity and meaning amid the confusion of organizational life” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 40). Understanding the four frames—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic—school leaders can better clarify the roles that all stakeholders play in daily operations of school sites and have a better working knowledge of what is going on in their schools. Each section focuses on the revealing of traits that were common with each of the sites and what the participants had to say about the impact they had on the school redesign process. I included comments from each of the school sites that related to the categories and themes that emerged from the findings.

Structural Frame

As discussed in the literature review, the Structural Lens emphasizes, “putting people in the right roles and relationships . . . in order to accommodate both collective goals and individual differences” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 45). To assure that schools are operating with effectiveness, the organization must have established goals and objectives where every stakeholder knows his/her duties and has complete buy-in to these goals. A school leader must assure that the right staff is in the right place and that everyone is working for the common cause—the students.

The four schools in this study are organized in accordance to the traditional structure of schools in any district. Each of the schools operates independently at its own school site and has been issued a school code in accordance with North Carolina Public School stature. This means that it is responsible for reporting all data as an independent alternative learning program. Schools range in size from as few as 38 students to the largest school in the study serving over 240 students. The population of all schools is transient as students are transitioning in and out of the enrollment throughout the year. Table 7 provides a condensed explain the framework, the categories that emerged during the study, and the attributes of what was learned from the data collected.

Table 7

Structural Frame Analysis

Conceptual Framework	Categories	Attributes
Structural Frame	Structure of Schools School Intake / Transition Plan Point System Relevance of Work Differentiation and Innovation Equity and School Funding Choice Opportunities	School design must address vast array of student needs Individualized plan of study required Blended learning model of delivering instruction. Equity of resources and school funding including staffing and support staffing. Choice students provide role model for students assigned to the school.

Structure of Schools

Schools participating in the study are all structured to meet the individual needs of all the students. Students come to the school with a variety of needs and many are multiple grade levels behind their peers in the traditional setting. This causes difficulty for some programs as the support required to meet the needs is oftentimes not available. This can lead to employee “burnout” as they try to be innovative in the program design to juggle meeting the social, emotional and academic needs of student assigned to them.

Andre Maillet (2016) identified six practices that are crucial in alternative learning programs. These include

provide active and creative instruction, integrate service learning opportunities into all aspects of the program, accelerate student learning, build time into the schedule to connect with kids; have a plan B (and C) for every student every day and utilize volunteers such as college students and community members. (Maillet, 2016, p. 1)

Each of the schools has different methods to address this problem.

At Right Academy, one of the most important factors discussed during the re-design process for this Alternative Learning Program was to make sure that focus of the school was centered on the students. It was a unique opportunity to build the operational structure of the school around needs of current students with an intentional focus on how to prevent them from dropping out of school. For many of the students enrolled, their impression of the concept of schooling was negative in nature and many did not see why they needed to stay in school. Mr. Boyd addressed the ideas that many of the students as well as their families and how the school hoped to change their current mindsets. He shares

many of the students we get at Right Academy have typically had a negative experience in school. They have trust issues with adults and many times feel no one cares for them. Right Academy provides a small nurturing environment for the students as opposed to the large populations found in traditional settings. We can give individualized attention to students and address their needs from a positive stand point. For the first time in their lives, they have a sense of belonging somewhere and that people truly care about them.

He feels that this has provided a structural support that has changed the way many of the students feel about completing their high school programs. As the leader, he continually

harp on the staff to assure that they listen to the students before making any attempts to correct issues. He wants the students to feel they have a stake in the school and thus some school pride. Mr. Boyd emphasized that all of this change process takes place from the very first day a student arrives on the campus.

Success Academy continues the message of positive impact on kids by engaging them in conversations on a regular basis. Mrs. Susie expressed her relationship with meeting with students and encouraging them to do their best on a daily basis. She is conscious of the fact that kids in the Alternative Learning Program are usually very talented in realizing who is 'real' with them and works to assure that the messages being sent by the staff are genuine. She shares a great point in her interactions with students by adding that during conversations

10% of what's communicated, even in a conversation is verbal, only 10%. Of that, even when it is a verbal experience such as a normal conversation, that means there's 90% of something else being communicated and I believe that that 90% affects us so much more than we give it credit because we can't see, hear, or touch it.

She feels this is very important in dealing with kids because the body language is important. This is what most kid's notices and is usually one of the methods that staff uses to access a student when dealing with them. It is a great leeway to building a relationship on a solid foundation when they know that there are genuine emotions present.

It is imperative that all schools looking at the redesign process consider the student when making major decisions about the structure of the school. Each of the

schools in the study focused on addressing the needs of the students and creating innovative scheduling to show students how they can be successful. The scheduling options included students attending the ALP for a half day and return to their home school for the other half, attending a program at another school site for a half day, utilizing blended learning with online platforms and even adjusting school hours for students. These findings were represented in conversations that each of the schools had with students and parents to change the negative connotations that were associated with the ALP setting.

School Intake and Transition Plan

Once a student is assigned to the Alternative Learning Program, time becomes a major issue in many ways. How long is the stint at the school and what happens when the student is finished? How many days will it take before the student can attend classes? Is transportation provided? These are just a few of the many questions that all of the constituents have when transitioning a student to the alternative setting. Each of the schools in the study has designed processes and procedures for the students to be successful. Some involve the home schools as active partners while others enact the “out of sight, out of mind” process.

How does a student get to Best Academy? This is Mr. John’s second tenure leading this school. He has previously substituted for a principal that was out on leave. During his stay, he discovered that principals in the district would just call the principal and tell them that they had a kid that was having difficulties, such as being extremely disrespectful, insubordinate, or had committed one of the non-negotiables (violations of

district policy) and would just send them to the alternative setting. There was not any type of intake or discussions about a transition plan. He states, “students were just sent over here and that was it.” “The use of alternative schools as exclusionary discipline for students found guilty of committing behavioral infractions raises questions about the effectiveness of the schools in producing improved student outcomes” (Kennedy-Lewis, Soutullo, & Whitaker, 2016, p. 1). There were not any procedures in place to transition students or any plans on how to serve the students. It was up to the alternative school to figure it out, alone. This type of protocol is what leads to many alternative school becoming known as a “punitive setting” and often revolves around handing multiple disciplinary issues throughout the day rather than focusing on plans to get students back on track. Since the change in leadership has taken place, the school now has a transition process in place that involves all stakeholders that are involved in the students’ academic life.

While at the alternative setting, students are given a “point sheet” that records the actions of each day including academics, social and emotional, and disciplinary issues. These sheets are given to students at the beginning of each week and part of the student’s responsibility is to keep the sheet and share with the parents each evening. When an issue arises, notations are made by each adult attending to the issue as to what happened, what was done, and the expectations moving forward. Students earn points by keeping up with the sheet and turning it in each Friday. At most schools, a rewards program is in place for students who have completed the week with a pre-determined number of points. Rewards ranged from shopping in the school store, free time in the gym, participating in

student socials, and field trip opportunities. On the other side of the issue, the point sheets are collected and shared with the home school personnel as a form of documentation that the student has made the necessary adjustments and needs to be considered for a return to their home school site.

All too often, when students return to their home school after their stay at the alternative site, they are not welcomed back. Adults remember the issues the student left with and naturally they have reservations about any “change” the student could have made while they were gone. The school has implemented a plan that allows students to transition back with the assistance of a liaison. The students leave the alternative site with an individual service plan that includes a conversation with the principal of the receiving school, teachers, parents and school support staff regarding the transition period. The transition plan varies from half days at both sites for a specified length of time with meetings to monitor progress along the way. At the end of the transition period, it is decided if the student is ready to make the move to full time at his/her home school. The alternative school still has a staff member to do spot checks on the returning student to assure that the student is maintaining progress. If not, the student is returned to a modified schedule between the two schools to work it out.

Right Academy has an involved process. Right Academy includes not only the student, the home school, the parent/guardian and any related agencies working with the family, but they also include a representative from the Central Office. This has proven huge in the success of the program as it removed the head to head discussions between principals and actually implements a set procedure for student movement. The intake

process is very detailed and all expectations are shared. By having a student at the intake process, Mr. Boyd feels it adds validity to the words that are spoken by the adults. When describing the actual intake process, he says:

when students come through the intake process, we discuss their transition and what is required for them to have a successful transition. We stress they are in charge of their own success. We occasionally include a student who was long-term suspended from their previous school and one that this environment has proven successful for them; we have them to share their experiences with the new student. Oftentimes, after their successful assignment of time is complete, we invite those students to become “choice” students.

He stresses that choice students play a crucial role in the success of the school. A student’s voice often carries a larger weight than adults, especially in this type of environment. This school utilizes the choice student as school leaders and has even utilized choice students as mediators with their peers both in disciplinary issues as well as in an academic arena.

Another issue facing the transitioning student is the fact that many return to their home school with the same schedule they had when they were suspended. When students return to the classroom of the teacher that was responsible for sending them out there is oftentimes the reception of the student is stressed. Mr. Johns’ suggest “putting the student on another schedule where the teachers don’t know him/her because usually what happens is the student and the teacher resume their conflict with one another.” This, he states, “is not going to be successful, I mean, you are tying your hands there, where you are not giving the kid an opportunity to be successful, and my goal is to take every little

step we can to make sure they have the ability to transition in the way that will yield student success.”

The transition plan is a key attribute that schools must implement in order to assure that students are successful. All of the schools in the study have some type of intake plan that involves the student, parent or advocate, and many included outside agencies that were working with the student. One of the important pieces of the intake process was the involvement of the student’s home school. The goal of all of the ALP’s was to offer the student an opportunity to transition back to their home school after serving a determined amount of time at the ALP. The home school representation was viewed by all of the participants as vital because it let the student and their parents know that the home school has not turned their back on the student. Once a student had completed their time at the ALP, it was also stressed that a support component be in place to give the student an opportunity to transition back successfully. It was noted on numerous occasions that the home school staff’s perception of the student had not changed since they left their campus. The student is remembered for his/her actions that caused the suspension as opposed to their success in earning the right to return to the traditional school setting. This support piece looked different at the schools in the study with strategies ranging from providing a mentor at the home school, setting up meetings with the student with ALP personnel visiting the home school, to transitioning back at half day intervals. Whatever the schools chose to implement, it was noted that this component must be in place prior to the student transitioning back to their home school.

Point Systems

Several of the schools in the study utilize a “daily point system” to validate student accountability in their schools. These point sheets serve multiple roles within the school environments. At Right Academy, the principal uses the sheets as a communication piece between the school and the home on a daily basis. He says

we use the sheets to communicate with parents and to share the day’s activities with them. Teachers note daily remarks on the sheets to inform parents of the progress with the students. We also use the sheets as a means to assure that students are meeting the requirements for rewards as well as the right to transition back to their home schools.

He emphasized that many times the home schools are reluctant to transition students back, and this is a way to show the school leaders that the student has attempted to change their mindset of their education. Mr. Boyd shares that the sheets become a key component in student transition as they provide the proof that the students have made the necessary growth to return to their home school.

At Success Academy, they also use a point sheet as a rewards program. Mrs. Stuart adds, “I oversee our token economy. I created our point sheets and I am in charge of all that. I tally points, count out money, and give people their money to use for shopping. I come up with rewards and incentives for things like that.” One of the unique parts of their economy program was the Christmas shopping opportunities that students had to purchase gifts for their families that they otherwise might not be able to do. They too utilize the sheets as a means for communicating with the home school if there becomes an opportunity for their students to transition.

Point sheets were used in a variety of ways at the schools in this study and each school had different reasons for having them. The sheets were designed to track the student's progress while in the ALP and provided daily documentation on the student. This documentation ranged from disciplinary issues to providing words of encouragement for the student. The documents were used as daily communication to parents on how the day went addressing the academics, social and emotional tracks for their student. Another school utilized the point sheets as a means of support for a student to transition back to their home school. The last school used the points as a reward system for celebrations, as a "school bucks" tool, and participation in special activities. The most interesting fact about the point sheets was that the majority of students did not complain about having them signed on a daily basis.

Assuring Relevance of Work for Students: Differentiation and Innovation

Curriculum design is a big topic when researching successful Alternative Learning Programs. For many students enrolled in Alternative Learning Programs, the traditional way of thinking and learning was not effective, as it did not meet the diverse needs of the students. Many Alternative Learning Programs search for innovative ways to meet the needs of students and help keep them in school until graduation. The other issue that Alternative Learning Programs face is the constant rotation of students coming from all levels of instruction and at all places on the curriculum maps. Some type of continuity is necessary to keep the students on pace. The schools involved in this study each took innovative ways to provide differentiation of instruction for the students they serve.

When speaking about curriculum at Best Academy, Mr. John's is always looking for innovative ways to expand current offerings with such a limited staff. He feels that students are not provided enough variety in career exploration when they are assigned to the Alternative Learning Program and he thinks this is one area that needs it the most. He says,

my goal is to create an environment here where we eventually evolve into an alternative program with the addition of more CTE classes. My reasoning for this is these kids are not college-ready kids, not to say that in ten years they won't decide it's time to go to college, but at this moment it may not be the right time. I want to be able to provide them with educational opportunities where they can explore their interests. I also want to try to modify some of these scheduling where we have the ability to allow our students the opportunity to take some CTE classes at the high school for a half day and then come back over here and finish their core classes.

This is how the school is trying to structure the opportunities outside of the classroom and incorporate real world opportunities for the kids. Inside the classrooms, innovation speaks as well.

The staff is trying some new techniques to inspire the kids to enjoy learning. Innovative teaching is found throughout the building where kids are actively leading the learning and teachers are facilitating. Mr. Johns says

I do not mind classrooms that are engaging to the point where kids are up doing things, talking, whatever. I understand that we are at a different crossroads with education where kids have to have real world applications, so they've got to be involved and engaged in the work. You have to be able to think outside of the box, you have to be able to figure out what they enjoy, what they like, and then do things that people have never done before.

This opened the door for teachers to be more innovative with their lesson design. Mr. Downs states “I came here was to work with multiple different curriculums and try to see new ideas, what are some things that I could make work. I have the freedom to do that here.” Mr. Wright elaborated on a project that he saw in the Oakland School District and presented the idea to the principal and the staff. He discussed the project as

we did a reading program we saw out in Oakland where they were doing a lot of work with black males and saw the reading list where the book Malcolm X was listed. We presented it to our superintendent and they liked the idea so they bought the book. Once or twice a week we were reading Malcolm X for a couple of class periods and discussing it with the kids. This is one that our kids can relate.

He went on to say, “our superintendent likes the ways we come up with new ideas and ways to do things for our kids. She is supportive.” Even though the staff has input in the daily operation of the school and curriculum selection, Mr. Downs reiterates, “Mr. Toban has made a lot of the big decisions here, and he really just lets us do our job, and then take over for the things that need to be run. But Mr. Roberts has set some things up.” It is a total collaborative effort on all accounts.

At Success Academy, Mrs. Sara has taken the program to a different level by implementing an advisor program for her students. She supported this initiative by sharing,

I developed an advisor program because I really believe that academics really should serve their broader life. If students don't think that learning is a waste of time, they will usually be more engaged. I know that studies show that schools who have strong social-emotional learning programs also have strong academic learning happening there, so I wanted to see us do something I felt like was cohesive and coherent and meaningful. I developed an advisement program

where students meet with an academic advisor or teacher advisor or faculty advisor once a week. It's only 30 minutes, but it's something. We start out with a morning meeting on Monday just to kind of get everybody on the same page. I'll give them a little bit of review of what's coming up in their advisement and talk to them about that.

It is just a small way of getting students involved in the conversation of the school.

Right Academy has implemented some new ideas as well. At the Right Academy, this included implementing the Blended Learning Model. Mr. Boyd states:

this year, we incorporated the Blended Learning Model as a part of our school structure. In this model, part of the instruction was conducted online as in a flipped classroom and the other half done in the classroom with direct instruction.

This is a big piece of the puzzle for students who are not making the necessary adjustments for the traditional mode of schooling. Mr. King added "it's differentiated learning all across the board. There is a lot of freedom in a smaller setting that allows for some experimentation; including the Blended Learning Model."

It is noted that not all students being served in an ALP share the same needs in terms of what is necessary for them to either graduate from high school or transition back to their home schools. All of the schools in the study implemented various programs that were utilized to meet the vast needs of their students. Student records were analyzed by each school to design a plan for the student to meet the necessary requirements for their plans of study. These programs ranged from a blended learning model utilizing both teacher lead instruction as well as some online learning platforms, cross curriculum lesson designs that involved multiple classes working on a common project, to work place simulated lessons to help prepare the students for life in the real world.

Equity and School Funding

Providing information in this section touches a sore nerve for just about everyone in this study. Funding at the Alternative Learning Program has been a topic of discussion for many years and will probably be one for years to come. In the report *Reinventing Alternative Education*, researchers report,

states should develop funding policies that channel more resources toward off-track students, taking into account that alternative learning programs must not only reengage them but also accelerate their learning and provide intensive academic and social supports to help them succeed. (Almedia et al., 2010, p. 19)

In many schools, the ALP receives secondary materials that are moved from the home schools when they receive new supplies. Many ALPs do not appear inviting and this impacts the immediate culture of the building.

At Right Academy, Mr. Boyd is quick to add his opinions on this subject. He has a solution that he knows will not go over well with some of his colleagues. When speaking about his budget, he says

school funding in our district is not equitable. Right Academy is given a flat rate each year and we have to budget very carefully and even then we come up short on the things we need for our students. I believe each high school should send an amount to my school to help support their students.

He has a point that many don't want to discuss. In his school, he sees an influx of students at the end of the first grading period who are long-term suspended for the rest of the year. The battle he is willing to undertake is that the districts start pro-rating home school budgets to send with the student to the alternative setting if they are to stay there for the rest of the year.

Mrs. Gates also chimed in on the issue. She said that her school is often served with materials that the teachers had to obtain on their own or were “hand me downs” when the transitional schools got new equipment. She adds her impression of district attitude towards students in the ALPs. She feels that many have given up on the kids because

these are not the kids that are going make our grades look good across the district, they're not going make our attendance look good, they're not going make our dropout rate look good. They're still children and you're getting money from the government for them to learn. It takes a lot for our kids to get equal, even when it comes to desks and supplies, we're not given equal. We don't have the reading programs that the classes get and we don't have the online technology the other classrooms get. As for the student, five minutes ago they were sitting in that classroom with all that stuff, and now you send him to me and you're not sending any of the stuff, and then you're telling us we have to do all the same assessments everybody does and we're going be judged as teachers through the same assessments and we're going to be doing all that, but you're not getting me equal ground to do it.

This sentiment was echoed in three of the four schools from the study. Students are leaving the classrooms of traditional schools only to be sent to the ALP where, according to the participants, equal funding is not allocated. The teachers do not receive the same staff development opportunities as their peers in the traditional setting yet they administer the same assessments and state tests. Teachers feel that they do not get the same staff development opportunities as their peers and very seldom get the chance to meet with professional learning communities within their own specialty areas to discuss the latest trends in their fields.

It was noted out of all the areas in the study, this is the one area that created the most spark for the teachers in the study. Principals were reluctant to discuss funding

issues with the exception of one. All of the schools were given an allotted budget as was their peers at the start of the school year based on the number of students enrolled on the tenth day. This does not account for the transient population that the schools absorb throughout the remainder of the school year.

Choice Opportunities for Students

Creating an environment where students feel successful is an ideal situation for all schools. While many alternative learning sites are created for students with disciplinary issues and are often viewed as punitive sites, the finding in a report titled “Reinventing Alternative Schools” (2010) expressed the importance of including choice students. They state “the drawback to such narrow eligibility is that it establishes alternative as a punitive environment, rather than a meaningful method for earning a diploma” (Almedia et al., 2010, p. 7). North Carolina provides districts with a policy manual that addresses procedures for assigning students. One area of the policy states that each school district in the state is responsible for “establishing at least one alternative learning program for students who are at risk of school failure due to academic or behavior needs” (Almedia et al., 2010, p. 10). Nothing states that alternative learning programs only admit students under the disciplinary platform that would in turn isolate the students who have greater needs for intervention.

In this study, kids were very happy in all of the schools during both visits to the campus. It was obvious that learning was taking place and kids felt a sense of belonging in their respective environments. This is the ultimate goal for all Alternative Learning Programs but along with the success, comes the dilemma. For some students, transition

back to their home school, which was once a demand, now is not such a welcomed invitation. For some students, the success and trust they built at the Alternative Learning Program is something they wish to continue. Schools in this study have mixed programs on dealing with students who wish to remain in the ALP in order to complete their education.

At Best Academy, the schools structure now not only includes students who are sent to the school for disciplinary reasons, but also has students of choice. Choice students are those who are close to dropping out but choose to come to the school in hopes of finding a schedule that will work for them so they can graduate. Mr. Johns says

we have some really smart students who have multiple issues from having to work to support their families or have put themselves in positions where the traditional setting does not work for them so we take them in here to get them on a fast track to graduate.

This type of student also plays an important role in the school's culture because oftentimes it provides a positive role model for those students that are struggling to find their place in the school setting.

At Right Academy, Mr. Boyd is insistent on keeping choice students on his campus. Mr. Boyd provides leadership opportunities for his students and for some, it is the first time a school official has asked them to do something productive where they are getting in the spotlight. Mr. Boyd explains the process by sharing,

we have a "choice" option where either existing LTS students are invited to stay due to exemplary behavior or they perform much better in this setting. Parents can also request their student to attend Right Academy. The process includes the home school completing an application the student, the Right Academy Transition

Team reviews the application in order to determine if Right Academy is the appropriate placement for the student, and all stakeholders are notified of the decision.

The Right Academy team does include Central Office Personnel so appeals to the decisions are not necessary. This eliminates a step of the process and speeds up the placement opportunities for the kids. Choice students typically stay until the schools begin to run out of elective options for them. Even then, other local options are explored to see if there is a better fit for the student.

In his district, he is fortunate to have a district that promotes innovative ways to help students succeed. Kids at Right Academy can use the option of remaining at Right for half a day and spend the other half a day at either the Career Center or back at their home schools. Local options can provide relief to the kids if they feel they had a voice in their destination.

Two of the four schools in the study provide choice opportunities for students to request enrollment to complete their coursework. The students requesting enrollment did so with a wide range of issues ranging from having to work to help support their families, peer pressure in the home school, issues with law enforcement and becoming parents themselves. Many of the students were on track with their cohort to graduate within the four-year window. It was noted that very few of these students came with discipline issues.

Data Analysis—Structural Frame

In reviewing the structural lens, the important attribute that stands out among the rest is the fact that the school design must be focused on the student. Table 9 examines

the categories as well as the key attributes that emerged from the discussions regarding the structural frame.

Oftentimes schools implement programs that school staff must use when delivering instruction in their classrooms. This same process is the one that has failed to garner the attention of at-risk students and asking them to use the same format at the ALP is just shifting the issues. ALP's must have the freedom to design the structure of the school that meets the needs of the students they serve. Every student should enter an ALP with a plan of study and a plan for transitioning back to their home school if that is the path they choose. Many times, students who enter the ALP are already working at grade levels below their peers and oftentimes the attitude of the student is one of defeat. Graduation does not seem doable must less important. When students can see the plan ahead of them and know that graduating is a possibility, it changes their mindsets. Students should not be on permanent punishment for mistakes that were made in their past.

In reviewing the structural frame, the key categories that emerged from the study are important for the success of the school. It is vital that the school be designed to meet the needs of the students and be prepared for a variety of needs that must be addressed. The intake/transition plan will be important as these are key communication components for all stakeholders. This is an opportunity for the school staff to learn from the student and his/her parents about the issues that were in play for the referral process as well as a time to share the expectations from the school. The school must provide individualized plans of study and implement creative lesson design for each classroom as well as utilize

some type of blended learning to assist in meeting the learning styles of the students. The incorporation of choice students enhances the school environment by providing role models for the students that are assigned to the school. The point systems will allow multiple communication needs to be met ranging from daily communication between school staff, communication to the home, as well as proof that a student is ready to transition back to their home school at the end of their stay.

Human Resources Frame

When analyzing the Human Resource Framework in regards to the findings of the study, the correlation was easy to decipher. The major functions of the Human Resource Frame according to Bolman and Deal (2013) were: hire the right people, reward them well, empower employees and foster self-managing teams. It was found to be valuable that every person on the staff felt as if they were contributing in a positive manner to the daily operation of the school. Table 8 reveals a selection of categories that emerged from the findings as well as all of the key attributes.

The focus of building relationships included not only the principal and the staff, but the support personnel as well. The schools in the study vary in the number of support positions available to assist with the service to the students. Best Academy has a large amount of student service support and an alternative day program on its campus while some of the others have very little support outside of the allotted staff. Employees at all of the schools work outside of their assigned roles to make the school function effectively for the benefit of the students. This causes the school leaders to really analyze all applicants when they get the opportunity for a new hire. Of all the schools in the study,

there is a very small number of “district assigned” employees, thus creating an environment where the majority of employees chose to work with our target populations.

Table 8

Human Resources Frame

Conceptual Framework	Categories	Attributes
Human Resource	Selection of school staff Hiring Process Building relationships with students. Invest in the stakeholders. Building relationships at the building level among staff. Positive impact on kids	School leaders must hire the right staff members to impact the positive culture of the environment Hiring process must be all inclusive. Relationship building among all stakeholders is critical. School community must have a positive impact on students and provide opportunities for the students to give back to their communities. Involve all stakeholders in the process.

Selection of School Staff

One of the most common themes that arose during this study dealt with the hiring of new staff at each school. In the findings of *Reinventing Alternative Education*, Almedia et al. (2010) cite, “states should seek to improve the quality of alternative

schools by improving the quality of instructional staff and leadership” (p. 15). The report goes on to add that states “should also provide teachers and leaders to join alternative education programs and they should support their ongoing professional development” (p. 15). Personnel at alternative learning sites need ongoing staff development to keep abreast of current trends and innovations in education in order to keep their students actively engaged in their classrooms. Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) add to the importance of hiring competent staff by saying,

teacher support finding highlights the importance of recruiting educational staff who are (a) philosophically committed to positive approaches rather than punitive ones, (b) understand the power of positive adult-student relationships for facilitating academic, emotional, and behavioral growth for students with significant problems in school; and (c) are willing to learn and implement relationally oriented practices with youth. (p. 9)

Teachers must be able to make adjustments to meet the needs of their students at all times. Trained staffs are more likely to do this than those that are assigned to the alternative learning site. Some of the schools were lucky and had complete control over who was employed at their school while others were not so lucky and had staff “appointed or assigned” to work at the site. The difference this can make on the culture of the school is paramount. Many outsiders fail to realize how the impact at the Alternative Learning Program differs from the traditional school but it is huge.

When hiring new staff at Best Academy, Mr. Johns’ says he “is looking for people to hire that will contribute to building a program.” Mr. Johns’ looks for “people that I want to come work here, I want people with heart and compassion for people, not just kids, because this business is a lot more than kids, it’s an entire community.” He

looks for staff members that “will not target my kids and target negative behaviors instead of trying to fix them.” He knows that his students are bringing a lot to the table every day and does not have time for adults contributing to the problems. It goes unspoken that alternative education will provide its own issues with discipline and social pressures, and it is vital that the school staff can focus on diverting the negative and find positives to build on with every student. He

wants staff members that come in here that are compassionate for children, but that also have the patience to be able to teach them the right way and model for them the right way, not just say hey, come on in here, you’re doing wrong I’m going to jump all over you and you then need to leave.

Oftentimes, this is what the students are accustomed to from their home school and enters into the office with an “edge about them.” They automatically go to the defensive mode. Mr. Johns give great leeway to his staff and treats them as the professionals they are. He wants everyone in this building to feel ownership of the campus. “I want people to be empowered and I want to empower the teachers that we have here, now the staff that we have here, to be able to make decisions themselves, and then be able to come to me and say alright, I made that decision.” Mr. Boyd of Right Academy echoed the same sentiment. He added that when hiring staff, we look at demeanor, body language, and overall personality.

We ask situational questions. We look for people who are patient and know these students have many obstacles to overcome. We look for people who are more tolerant of troubled students. We typically look for people who don’t have a lot of school experience so there are no preconceived ideologies of how a school “should” operate. Right Academy is not a typical school.

By avoiding the “tenured” thought process and looking for less experienced hires, Mr. Boyd feels as if though they can mold the instruction in the classroom to the needs of his students. He also feels that the less seasoned the teachers are, the more they are apt to collaborate with those around them and build stronger support systems within the school. Relationships are crucial and pay big dividends when working in Alternative Learning Programs.

Mr. King, a teacher from Right Academy, was ready for the challenge with working in the Alternative Learning Program. He says,

I really wanted the opportunity to work in an alternative environment with high school students as well as special needs students. I knew it was a high risk, high reward job in my view and I was at a point in my career where I was ready to take that risk and it’s obviously been a great reward so far.

Although he has taken on many roles as a teacher leader in his school, he still finds the time to enjoy the students and to get to know them beyond the classroom walls. One of the things in his job that he enjoys the most is the ability to get the staff and the students participating in many activities throughout the year where they compete together as opposed to in separate teams. He serves on the interview committee and says one of the first things he looks for in a potential colleague is “the ability to understand the baggage that the students bring with them every day.” He feels that teaching styles can be adjusted in order to be successful but having the right person to build a relationship with children will bring more to the school culture than a talented teacher that struggles with at risk kids. Teacher turnover is very low in his school with the ones leaving taking jobs out of state as opposed to other schools in the district.

At Best Academy, the principal begins this process when he first hires new personnel to his staff. During the interviewing process, Mr. Johns shares that he will not stray from his non-negotiables. He looks for “potential teachers having a heart for people, having a compassionate heart for kids, and being positive.” He wants his kids to be successful in the classroom but more than anything, he wants adults that can develop relationship with children in a classroom. He is a firm believer that “once a relationship is developed, we can teach a kid anything.” He also adds “I look for people that want to come to work here. This business is a lot more than kids. It is relationships with parents, the community, and business entities that want to partner to assist kids.” He goes on to add that “he will not hire someone that is here to target negative behavior instead of trying to fix them.” This is apparent as one walks through the halls of Best Academy as everyone always seems to have a positive disposition about them.

The hiring process is one of the most crucial elements in the successful operation of any ALP. Thomson (2014) addresses personnel in her study stating the importance that staff

are committed and highly skilled. They are well trained and engage in ongoing professional development. They have a positive orientation to behavior and to participatory processes, are concerned that young people feel safe and secure and are well versed in wholistic learning and teaching. (p. 3)

Having the right staff in place is a major determining factor in the success of the school. However, in some cases, school districts have assigned teachers and staff to work in the alternative learning program as a means to “assist them in choosing another career path” so to speak. With the negative connotations already associated with the term

“alternative,” this just added to the perception of the school. It often translated into a “punitive environment” for both students and staff. This practice has to be avoided in order to assure a positive learning environment is sustained for students to thrive.

The schools in this study were on top of the hiring process by looking to preset offers to highly qualified personnel that had a passion for working in the non-traditional setting. Only one school in the study had a staff member “assigned” to the site and this ironically was the one staff member that had some negative energy to share during the interview process. Other staff members shared their passion for working with at-risk students and chose to pursue a career with these students. It was interesting with the number of teachers who came to the ALP with industry background as they were vital in sharing real world experiences with the students. All of the participants reiterated the point of establishing relationships not only with the students, but the entire school community as a key attribute for the overall success of the program.

Building Relationships with Students

Students often arrive at the ALP with a negative impression that is often associated as a punitive situation. Everyone in the study reiterated how vital it is to counter these thoughts on the very first visit by showing the students that they are genuinely invested in them. At Best Alternative, Mrs. Dowdy loves her time with the kids. She insists that it is all about the relationships. She says,

relationship, relationship, relationship. It is all about the kids. You have to let them know that you have a genuine care for them before anything good can happen. Kids have to see that you have a genuine interest in their well-being before you can teach them anything. I just try to build positive relationships and that way they’ll take the time to listen to me when I’m saying something to them.

I also use positive affirmations when listening to them. And oh, you have to listen to them. I want to make them aware of their behavior, their owning up to the responsibility that accompanies the behaviors, and teaching them how to use the 'I statements' as opposed to the 'you.'

She stresses the importance of listening to the students in order to gain their interest in listening to adults afterwards. She reiterates that all too often, adults "demand to have the first words and this creates a competitive atmosphere for an agitated child." She stresses listening to the child first before adding a personal opinion will allow the child to listen in return.

Mr. Downs agrees with the importance of building relationships. He adds that "in the past, students have not had great connections with their teachers and this is part of what has caused them to derail from their interest in school." He spends a lot of time on teaching socialization, the ability for students to learn to work together and share responsibilities for projects in his classroom. He thinks by building socialization skills; students will be able to apply it to other aspects of their lives. Mr. Wright likes to work with cross-disciplinary units that create opportunities for students to work together with kids from another classroom. He also reinforces the importance of mentoring for the young adults. He spends a lot of his time in conversations with his students. He says,

I'm not a father outside of here, but trying to be an older adult for these kids to talk to, because they don't have a positive male role model—they might have someone in their neighborhood, but they're telling them the wrong thing and they don't have a positive adult influence, especially males.

Providing the proper socialization skills along with life conversations goes a long way in the hallways of Best Academy and their students seem to be making the adjustment really well.

The same sentiments of relationships are echoed at Central Academy as well. Mrs. Gates, who has been employed at the school as both a teacher and an assistant, views her relationship with students as a very important aspect of her job. She views all of her students as special and has this to say about her time with them. She says

I see this job as my blessing. I get to be with these kids and they're the kids that people don't recognize as being amazing. Even though they are the hardest and they will treat you the worst and they will make you feel like you did not get anything accomplished in your life, they're survivors. They are surviving something I will never know what it's like to survive. They are brave and the spirit they have to have every morning to get up and survive their life is simply amazing. I tell everybody that doesn't believe in them that they're created by somebody. They were made by somebody and their actions are a reflection of where they lived and how they were raised. Not all of our kids grew up in terrible places but for the majority of our kids, they were made to be this because they had to survive whatever they're surviving. I tell people all the time, I stop being amazed of how horrible society can treat children and the unspeakable things that they can do to them and to see that walk to the door, if there's nothing else I can do with my life but give them something six hours a day that they can actually accomplish and feel proud of and do, then that's what I'm here for.

She goes on to add that "not all of our kids are going to be scholars but it is my job to make sure they trust me and know that I am going to hold them accountable. I also want them to know that I believe in them and will help them along their journey." The trust, according to Mrs. Gates, is the first step to breaking down the barriers to reaching the mind of the child and where schooling can begin.

At Right Academy, the staff elaborates on the importance of relationship building and the role it played in the determination of whether students would buy in to the program at their school. Relationship building goes beyond the student but also includes the staff and community stakeholders. Mr. Boyd attributes the success that Right Academy has achieved has been due to their ability to make connections with all stakeholders. He says,

When students feel you are genuinely interested in getting to know them and genuinely want to see them succeed, they will most often rise to the expectation. In building these relationships, we build trust with the students. It takes some longer than others to trust adults, but when they do, it is then you really see growth.

He reminds us that when many students arrive to the campus for the first time, they are expecting a punitive environment like the reputation of an Alternative Learning Program often is associated. During the Intake Process, students, parents, and oftentimes community support personnel are surprised at the warm reception they are given and the expectations for learning that are shared at this time.

This one area turned out to be a major focus of all participants in the study. Relationships at all levels were discussed in every interview. The importance of the “first impression” with both students and their parents was discussed as staff seemed to know that the attitude towards the school was usually negative upon arrival and the importance to establish the positive relationship from the beginning was huge. Many of the staff felt that the students came “feeling defeated” and did not think that school was the best place for them but they all were excited to share stories about successful students who

blossomed at the school after they felt they were important and could contribute.

Empowering students gave students confidence and this was accomplished by building the relationships with the students. Some of the schools had special activities such as Fun Fridays or student/staff basketball games where the students were able to see the staff members from a different lens and they shared fun moments with one another outside of the classroom. The staff members added that these activities transitioned back into the classrooms and they saw a different student with less resistance to learning as a result.

Building Relationships at the Building Level among Staff

One of the key components for the success of an Alternative Learning Program is the staff ability to work together as a cohesive unit. This is a hard job that takes special people and togetherness as a staff is a necessity in order to maintain a positive culture in the building. Having the wrong people on staff can make the moral toxic and energy needed to be successful with kids is often wasted on mending adult issues. Most of the schools in the study only spoke of how much fun they had with one another on a daily basis. They stressed the importance to laugh often and hug a lot. The job at the alternative school is demanding and school staffs need the strength of one another in order to avoid burnout. Celebration of small victories goes a long way.

Mr. King enjoys his time at Right Academy and feels that the staff there has bonded into a special extended family. He has found

Relationship building equals success. I say that because of the teacher relationship with students where you come to love these kids and know where they're coming from, but at the same time I've grown some of the closest friends that I've ever had in this job with the people I work with as well. We are close; I've played on sports teams, I've had a lot of different jobs but this is the closest thing to a true

team, a real cohesive team, that I've ever been a part of and it has all to do with the culture of the school.

His principal, Mr. Boyd echoed his sentiments as well. He tries to start every staff meeting with "acknowledgements of success" where he spotlights some good things that have happened over the course of the week. He reflects on the beginnings of the rebranding process where the staff came together from all parts of the country and at all stages of their careers in education. There was an immediate bond as they knew they were "getting ready to do something special" in the district. This was evident as the school won the most spirited award at the back to school convocation and they had only known one another for three days. The bond continued to grow as they incorporated students into the mix and celebrated each Friday with students who had made their points by playing teacher/student ball games and having socials.

Building a school community takes time and it all starts with the staff working in the building. Three of the four schools did many activities outside of the school day including going to movies, participating in recreation league teams, going out to eat and participating in community programs such as the Crop Walk or Relay for Life events. They shared that getting to know not only their colleagues but their families build a sense of belongings to where they understood each other and their needs. They knew who was having a rough time and how to provide support for their colleagues. One of the participants in the study shared that her school did not do fun things with one another as they all had a stressful job and they did not want to spend time with one another outside of the school day due to the fact that they worked so closely during their time at the

school. She said that they “really did not like one another at that level” but it did not interfere with their actions in the workplace. Developing a sense of community among the school staff was important for the majority of the participants and they all felt that it made the school stronger by the bond that they shared with one another.

Positive Impact on Kids

One of the hardest things students face in their schooling is when they are suspended for a multitude of reasons. Kids bring all types of baggage to school each day and often, as adults, we make decisions pertaining to the well-being of the kid yet we do not fully realize what a kid is going through outside of the school. These hidden issues are the basis for many of the actions the students face daily. Many kids just do not know how to cope. Unfortunately, this can lead to altercations with school staff as well as other students and thus resulting in the kid being suspended from their home school. The Alternative Learning Program is the next level for these kids. Staff at the Alternative Learning Program only has one chance to make that positive first impression on the students and it is vital to form the bonds needed in order for the kid to feel safe. Kids arrive with a pre-set attitude about school and school officials and the opportunity to make a positive first impression goes a long way in starting a relationship that can lead to a student being successful.

One of the first priorities for the entire staff at Best Academy was to create an immediate positive impact on all of their students. Many students arrived at their school “already beaten down in academia” so the staff wanted to make an immediate impact on them when they arrived. The mission is to show the kids that they care. Mr. John’s states

I think that if we can get everybody on the same page, keep everybody positive, and truly show the kids here that we care then they have the ability to want to work and want to do for you. So I think really just having a heart for people, having a compassionate heart for kids, and then being positive, our students have the opportunity to be successful in the classroom.

This is a daily challenge that the staff at Best Academy is willing to undertake. Mrs.

Dowdy adds when meeting students for the first time, she approaches them with calmness. She says,

when students come here, they have a label on them from the home school. I have a relationship with them; they don't disrespect me and I don't disrespect them either. That's why I have a rapport with them—I treat them the way I want to be treated and also, I'm a parent, I get it.

Mr. Davis adds, “a lot of the kids act like they don't want to be here at first but when it is time to transition back to their home schools, they try to sabotage the plan so they can stay. They feel safe around our staff.” That is how you know that you made a positive impact on the students as they are afraid if they return to their home schools, they will end up not being accepted like the others or the fear of being labeled as the ‘alternative kid with problems’ and treated as such without the homeschool teachers seeing if they made a change. Mr. Davis added that this is one of the frustrating things about working in an alternative school.

Mr. Wright echoed the sentiments of making a positive impact on the students when he stated,

we get one attempt to make a first impression on a student; that is when he walks in the door. Students are not unlike adults in they sense their belonging in a situation immediately and they react according to their reception. I try to make

sure the students are met with respect and let them know through body language that we are glad they are with us.

Students can and will make a change in their demeanor if they know they are not placed in another punitive setting and where they are expected to act differently. The teachers at Best Academy all reiterated that any student can be adaptive to a situation if they are welcomed in a proper manner. They feel that many students act the way they feel that they “expected to act” while others are acting “the way their home environment has forced them to act,” thus causing them to be held to accountable to behavior models that they do not understand and ones that have not been modeled for them. Many teachers and administrators are holding students to expectations that they have not experienced in their lifetimes and it often frustrating to them when they are being punished and not know the reason why.

Like Right Academy, Success Academy incorporates mentor programs to assist in their relationship building with students. Mrs. Reed has worked to implement the workings of a Mentor Program in her school. This same philosophy is shared by the Right Academy and is a vital piece of the student day. Mrs. Reed’s premises for the program at Success Academy is

We do our character themes for the month and out of each one of those there’ll be some kind of a group brainstorm. Today they talked about what respect means to them. I had them start out with what I feel like is a really great video and it’s called why people’s opinions of you aren’t real, why other people’s opinions of you aren’t real. I used to tell my students if you’re not blowing your mind at least twice a day you’re not really living, you know, you should seek out things that blow your mind. It’s one of those kinds of videos that, you know, things that make you go, hmm. We start on an aspect of self-respect, tying it to respect and then as a conversation, well you know, what does respect mean to you? And so I

have students do some kind of reflective piece about each one of the character aspects that we look into, and they did it on a leaf today. I passed out leaves and they could write something about what respect means to them personally inside the leaf and decorate the leaf, and then we'll use those to decorate the community board, so there's always some kind of connective piece to the student's lives.

This type of program is designed to get the students to think about how their feelings interpret actions of others in hopes that it will sway the way they treat others. The leaves on the community bulletin boards are popular with the students as they look to see who has written about those around them and what they like most about them.

Students often come to the alternative learning programs with so much pent up frustration with their learning that oftentimes lead to destructive behaviors in the classroom. This is why many of the students were assigned to the alternative learning site. All of the schools in the study stressed the importance of getting to know the child before addressing the needs. Sometimes one has to know the heart before they can adjust what is in the students' mind. Study supports that many kids in an alternative learning program are behind academically and some cannot see how graduation is even a possibility for them. Having a positive impact on kids can help ease this tension and let the students know that someone is there for them so they do not have to make this journey alone. Establishing a relationship with students can lead to a turnaround in student attitude thus enabling the student to care about their future and understand the importance of a high school diploma.

Summarizing the Human Resource Frame begins with having the right people in the right place who share a common desire to work with at-risk students. Hiring the right staff is the framework for building a strong school community and provides the platform

for the other components to be built. Once the staff is in place and they understand the expectations of the school, working with the students will become a lot easier. Finding ways to reach students and to form a bond is a crucial element to the overall success of the program. This was done in many ways with the schools in the study with some implementing a mentor program, others providing clubs and times for students and staff to share time away from academics, to providing opportunities for students to work in the community doing positive deeds. One school arranged an opportunity for their male students to work in the local food bank during the holidays packing boxes for the needy and then taking the males to lunch at a local restaurant where they were met by the police chiefs and the mayors of the local municipalities in their district. This provided an opportunity for positive interactions and for all of the stakeholders to get to know one another on a different level. Instances such as these are great ways to let students know that people still believe in them and they can be positive contributors to their school community. Table 10 will condense the findings from the study as they relate to the Human Resource Frame.

Political Frame

The political frame provides the opportunity for the alternative learning program to establish their relationship with all of the stakeholders in the community. Table 9 introduces the reader to the types of communication identified as important as well as the key attributes that school leaders need to consider when looking at this lens.

Table 9

Political Frame

Conceptual Framework	Categories	Attributes
Political Frame	<p>Communication with the home school.</p> <p>Community perception of the school.</p> <p>Volunteering opportunities in the school community for the students and staff.</p>	<p>Home schools must have representative at both the intake and the transition process.</p> <p>Home schools should visit the ALP to check on the progress of their students and give them encouragement.</p> <p>District personnel should visit the ALP for support.</p> <p>Positive interactions in the community can assist in changing the community perception of the school.</p> <p>Students need the opportunity to volunteer in the community.</p>

Oftentimes, the school community has a negative perception of the program based solely on what the programs stood for in earlier times. Many times, the community members that are not affiliated with the schools base their assumptions on how things were when they were students and times and schooling techniques have changed drastically. The same rule can be found with members of the home schools as well. If they have not had the opportunity to visit the alternative learning program and see the

program in action, many of them base their assumptions on past experiences. All of the schools in this study made the relationship with the school community a priority when attempting to change the perception of their sites. There were three major categories that emerged from the study: communication with the home schools, addressing the community perception of their schools, and opportunities to volunteer in the school community.

Communication with the Home School

A major issue that is common throughout all of the schools in this study is the relationship with the student's home school. In many cases, once the student has been suspended and sent to the Alternative Learning Program, the home school sites often adopt an "out of sight, out of mind" approach. The schools in this study have worked hard to build a relationship with the home school and tried hard to make them understand that the student is still theirs and that they will return after their time at the alternative school is over. For some students, the return is not welcomed and a common theme among the Alternative Learning Programs is the necessity to educate the home school about "student change." This term is intended to help assure home school teachers and administrators that the student has completed an assignment to the ALP and should be welcomed back with higher expectations. All too often, the student is treated with the same attitude they had when they were suspended, thus putting the kid back in the exact same environment that triggered the behavior in the first place.

Once a student is sent to the alternative setting at Best Academy, many home school personnel look at them as a student that has transferred. Many fail to think that

the student is more than likely going to transition back to the school within a reasonable timeframe. Communication between the alternative school and the home school is crucial to student transition success. At Best Academy, Mr. Johns has implemented a good program to promote positive student turnaround utilizing student data when it comes to academics and discipline. He explains the program by saying

I keep personal data on these kids including attendance data, academic data, and I'm keeping the data about how many points they received each week. It goes back to another thing I was saying earlier, home school principals sometimes don't ever see what goes on in alternative schools, and it's my desire to make sure that either on a weekly basis or a biweekly basis that they get an update on our kids, because they are their kids too, and they need to know at the end of the day how they're doing and where they stand. I've created that spreadsheet and I send that out every week, and then we have bi-weekly grades to where it goes back to the home school and then the teachers. By doing this, all stakeholders at the home school are able to see the development of the student at the alternative setting.

Mr. Johns knows that he must be an advocate for kids transitioning back to the home school. He feels as if he has some validity with the lead administrators as he was an assistant principal in the district prior to accepting this role. He knows what it takes for a student to be referred and how many adults react once a kid returns. The transition plan is vital to the student's successful adaptation back into the mainstream.

Mrs. Dowdy is also responsible for keeping relationships up to date and implementing the transition of kids back to the home school. She says her role at Best Academy is "to check on students that transition back to the home school to see how things are going for them; mainly as a liaison for them."

At Best, I mainly do character education things in the mornings with our students getting ready to transition and then spend the afternoons back at the home school checking up on our students. I serve as the liaison for the home school teachers and share what worked and what did not work for the kid during their time at the alternative school.

She feels as if her being visible and available for the home school teachers to confer with has made a major difference in some students transitioning back successfully. She says

I speak regularly with the kids individually as well as their teachers. I know when a student comes in from the Best Academy, they already have a past and a stigma associated with them and it is my job to assure teachers that students have changed. You know, it is just as important that the home school staff makes some changes in attitude toward an alternative kid as well if they are going to be successful in dealing with them.

That seems to be an issue with kids transitioning back. All too often students are just sent back to the same schedule that they had prior to their leaving and back with the same teachers that they had issues with in the first place. The staff at Best advises it best that student be given a modified schedule to potentially avoid these pitfalls and the transition plan be carefully implemented to assure all parties are starting back with a new mindset.

Mr. Dowdy also expanded on a continuing problem with students being sent to the alternative setting. Alternative school teachers are often left on an island all alone without anyone to collaborate with. Since most alternative schools are small in number, the staff is as well. Mr. Dowdy wishes that the alternative school staff was invited to staff development at the home school site when curriculum was being discussed. He would also like to see alternative school teachers be given the opportunity to work in professional learning communities with academic teachers at the home site. He shared a story of a student who came to the alternative setting

without any correspondence from the teachers at the home school. I have no idea what they have covered in their classes or any information about the student in terms of academic performance. All I get is what they did to get suspended.

This is an area that he would like to see addressed at the district site and shared across all levels. “Communication is the key to being successful,” he adds and “without us having these conversations prior to a student being admitted, we are in the dark.”

When a student is suspended from the home school for whatever reason, some of the school personnel adopt an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality towards the student. The home schools usually have another student waiting in line to take the place of the one just suspended so they really do not make the time to follow up on the suspended students. Teachers and home school staff are reluctant to see a suspended student return from the ALP and some expect the same actions to repeat themselves from the student. Schools in this study used their point sheet systems that had been created to provide documentation to the home school as to how the student has transitioned since being suspended. All of the schools found it important that the home schools have representation at both the intake and the transition meetings so they are aware of what strategies had been implemented to assist the student and to provide a plan for the student and his/her parents on how the transitions would impact the student. Some of the school even invited home school personnel to visit their sites so students could “follow up” on the progress of the students and to provide encouragement to the student. It was noted that very few of the home schools accepted this offer and that this is an area that needs further work by all the schools in the study. The same sentiment was shared for district personnel to visit as well.

Community Perception of School

If you were to ask what folks thought an Alternative Learning Program was within the community, the answers would most likely not be positive. The old stigma of Alternative Learning was associated with the kids who did not want to learn and only came to school to cause trouble. Today, the term Alternative Learning Program takes on a whole new meaning. Traditional schooling does not meet the needs of many of our students from scheduling to class choices to the time of day. Many districts nationwide are expanding their school days and providing many new options for the students in their districts. Some of these options include the redesign of alternative schools. It is up to the school to get the students involved in the community and to change the way the community views the school as well as the kids.

Mr. Johns finds it important to send out a positive message to the community regarding actions at Best Academy. Since the majority of the community has a negative perception of the alternative setting, Mr. Johns makes it a priority to find ways to get his kids interacting with the school community. He invited a Congressman to come to the school to speak and the students were very receptive. The school also has a newsletter where they showcase the good things that are going on around the campus. Mr. Johns says he

really wanted to target this year to let people know the good things that are going on here. We have kids that are doing good things, and if you'll look at our website, we had some kids go down here to Cooperative Community Ministries and help out there, and that's the picture on our website, because I want people to know that these are not bad kids. Our kids; they are doing good things to help, they got good hearts, so I mean, and that's a big thing to advertise.

Mrs. Wright also stressed that the school is in the process of taking the students out into the community to let the community see firsthand that the kids are not bad kids. She adds

the alternative setting is not a bad place. It just has a bad stigma that being associated with it. We just have to get our kids out in the community and give back so the stigma can begin to erode.

These minimal opportunities will afford the students the chance to make a difference in their school community. So far, they seem to be accepting the challenge.

At Right Academy, Mr. Boyd continues to battle the stigma that was associated with the previous alternative school in the district. He says, "This is an area where we are constantly working to improve the perception. The community remembers the previous unsuccessful alternative school and often associate Right Academy with those perceptions." He is working hard to change that perception.

Success Academy's Ms. Griggs had one of the most honest answers of all participants. She stated that in her school community, people viewed their students as "a bunch of rabble-rousers, truants, deviants; the behavior kids who got kicked out of school." She said "that's how they see us" until they come to visit and then they say "oh, I had no idea you were doing this." She also shared the one thing they do for the community is at Christmastime when they do a float in the parade to promote their students and the school. Success Academy was first established for behavior students, but in the past few years the school has implemented an interview process for incoming students and this has helped change the perception. Parents are starting to share the good news within the school community as to why they 'chose' for their children to attend this

school. All of the schools in the study had active community participation components built into their school designs.

Volunteering in the Community

Three of the four schools interviewed in this study placed an emphasis on getting their students out into the community for community service projects. At Success Academy, the school staff sponsors and participates in a Community Awareness Program each year. They have professionals to provide services to show kids “what to do as opposed to preaching what they should not be doing” such as dental hygienists, behavioral specialists, and the health department. They also strive to become an active part of their community. At Right Academy, the school participates in many community fundraisers such as fun runs, coin collections, and working at the local shelters. Best Academy has worked in the downtown areas. Their principal has named this “Feel Good Fridays” where the school

participates in volunteer community service days. We’re going to do them a couple of times a month to where we can go out and we can help the community by picking up some trash, working in the local parks, going in and doing some things. We plan to do things like that, but that’s not where it ends. Where it ends is when they come back here or we go down here to the pizza parlor, sit down and we have a pizza together, we eat.

Mr. Johns views this as not only a treat for the students for their volunteering for the community, but more importantly a time for the adults to give the students a moment to reflect on their work and to measure how they feel about giving back.

All of the schools participated in fund raising campaigns for many causes ranging from food drives to beautification projects in the community. One school has an annual

walk as a school staff in the Relay for Life in their district and raises money for the organization. Some of the school held food drives for the needy at Christmas. One of the best stories shared was the school that cleaned up an historic African American cemetery that had been neglected for years. One school had students volunteering in the local library shelving books and making a difference for the community. Another great example was the Christmas float one school uses to expose their kids to the community in the positive light. Regardless of the endeavor, all schools in the study stressed the importance of getting the students out of the building and into the community contributing in a positive manner. One principal shared that it was not only to get an opportunity for the students being seen doing positive deeds, but it was also utilized to instill in the students that it was their civic duty to give back to the community that has given to them. In Table 11, I will share the major categories of the Political Frame as well as the emerging thoughts that came from the findings.

Symbolic Frame

The Symbolic frame is designed to expose the important facets of celebrating student success and accomplishments. Table 10 spotlights the key categories and attributes that emerged from the study. Bolman and Deal (2013) say, “from a symbolic perspective, organizations are judged on as much on appearance as on outcomes” (p. 300). While this is not necessarily the whole picture when referring to an ALP, school appearance is often the first real impression one gets outside of the community rumors regarding the school. Many ALP’s are housed in less than adequate spaces and utilize “hand me down” materials that the traditional schools no longer need. This is not the

case of the schools involved in this study. All of the facilities were very clean and inviting and the “feel” of the buildings were very welcoming to visitors. Once a patron gets past the initial visit, it is vital that the schools back up their appearances with their actions.

Table 10

Symbolic Frame

Conceptual Framework	Categories	Attributes
Symbolic Frame	Defining the school culture. Celebrating student success Understanding the school community	A positive school culture can be attained if all stakeholders have buy-in to the process. Students must be celebrated for their success. Relationships with school community can help mend the breakdown of mindset between the ALP and community. Provide opportunities for ALP students to interact with dignitaries from the district.

Defining School Culture

First impressions are lasting impressions and many times one does not get a second chance to make that first impression. When operating within the framework of

Alternative Learning Programs, creating and maintaining a positive school culture takes work. Outside perception is oftentimes skewed due to the traditional interpretation of the term “alternative school.” Many immediately stereotype not only the students as troublemakers, but often school personnel are viewed as those that “are not up to par” to work in a traditional setting. Many school districts, including some in this study, moved school personnel to the alternative setting in hopes of getting rid of them. Schools involved in this study have overcome the stereotype but have put many hours in to assure that all stakeholders are conveying the same message to students and parents alike.

Once arriving to the front door of Best Academy, one would seem to wonder what is happening inside of the building. The general perception from the outside is that the school is very small. The staff has taken the time to landscape the outside to make it more welcoming. Once inside, the feel is overwhelming. It is not loud and active, rather very inviting where kids are working to make up missed opportunities in their schooling. Maintaining the type of environment where learning is taking place can oftentimes be challenging at an alternative school and Best Academy has done a great job of creating a culture conducive to learning. The staff knows that each day brings a new opportunity to work with at-risk kids and although they never know how the day may start, they know it is imperative that they show genuine concern for the students from the moment they arrive to campus.

Mr. Johns acknowledges that students in an alternative learning program usually brings “street smarts” with them and are very keen on identifying who is being “fake” with them. Alternative learning program students respond well to positive interactions

and oftentimes just want someone to listen to them and to be honest with them. Mr. Johns feels that it is vital that this type of culture starts with him modeling this for students and staff every day. He models this behavior each day by always trying to be positive while at work. He feels that this “enhances the student’s mood so that we can work through the day and get things done that needs to be done.”

Mr. Johns also says “I use the word ‘positive’ a lot of times in staff meetings. If you are positive, then you have the ability to develop something successful.” It is also a good practice to be willing to “drop back and punt” when things are not going right. Mr. Johns’s practice is when things are not progressing as intended, he will do whatever needs to be done to make the situation right and promote a positive atmosphere. The bottom line--Mr. Johns’ wants to show the kids “that we really care because if they are not getting that at home, they’re not getting that in their everyday life, it is vital that they get that at school.” He feels that if students “get to the point where when they feel this guy genuinely cares about me, this lady legitimately cares about me, then they have the ability to want to work and want to make you proud.”

The dedication to creating a positive school culture was not lost on the staff at Best Academy either. The staff knows that the home environment plays an important role on how students act in the school. Students are not always able to remove the negative atmosphere from their lives and oftentimes this behavior carries over in the classroom. Teachers at Best Academy pay close attention to their student’s body language and work to provide positive interventions when needed. When dealing with upset students, Mr. Downs adds,

I think a lot of times you get violence and disputes and when you bring that hostility toward the student from the teacher perspective, and all the teachers are very peaceful and pleasant and positive, and we may not always get that back from the students, but it does create a calm environment that feels very safe.

Students usually calm down after the initial confrontation when they realize that the staff is not going to battle back. Mrs. Dowdy utilizes skills from her previous job as an intensive in-home therapist when dealing with students who are hyped. She likes to “empower the students, taking things from the cognitive-behavior theory, to try and get them to change their thought process.” She knows the importance of listening to students and over time, this has helped with many of her students’ lives.

The staff at Best Academy has also created a school culture where either graduation or a positive transition back to their home school is obtainable for every student. The school works with all students to create a graduation plan where students can see what they must do in order to graduate. They found that this is the first time for many of their kids that adults had even mentioned graduation to them as a possible outcome. Mr. Wright shared that each kid “doesn’t always know what their situation is. They sit down and show the kids the amount of credits that has already been earned and how many needed to graduate. They then devise a plan for the kid to make that dream a reality.” For many, this can get kind of tense. Oftentimes, a student who is older and has a minimal amount of credits feels overwhelmed and wants to give up. This is a time where the staff unites with the student to show them that it will be a team effort. For students not opting to finish at Best Academy, the plan carries over to their home school and they are transitioned with the plan in place.

At Right Academy, Mr. Boyd is proud of where his school has come. He says his school culture and be assessed by simply walking into the building on any student day. The culture that is embedded in the structure is a true indicator of how things operate. Many are often surprised when they enter this Alternative Learning Program to find that things are quiet and that learning is actually taking place. This site prides itself on the culture that has been established and Mr. Boyd attributes much of their success in this area to the students. He says,

our school culture is defined by our students. We begin each school year with our “choice” students. These students consist of those that have applied to be at Right Academy. They pretty much set the tone of the school and they have a sense of ownership in its success. As students filter in from having made bad choices at the homeschool, our “choice” students show them through their actions how students should present themselves at Right Academy.

He adds that this transition piece is instrumental as students come in they hear the expectations from the adults but it is crucial that they see the expectations modeled by current students. For many, this includes friends that had arrived earlier than themselves and to see a change in them makes a huge difference. One interesting thing this school does is incorporates a student at the intake process for new students to share their experiences and talk about the success they are having at the school.

Success Academy is committed to serving each student to the fullest extent by creating an environment where students feel a sense of belonging and the desire to do great things. The staff at the school describes the atmosphere as “pretty positive for students.” Mr. Griggs, a teacher, says,

I think the students are having a positive experience, and I generally am in the hallway during every class change, so I feel pretty connected to kids and stop and talk to kids. I feel like I have a good sense of what's going on. I think they all know each other so that definitely helps. One of the things we always get back from kids is that they feel comfortable; they feel like they may have gone through all of their school experience not feeling like they could ask for help if they need it, but here they can. There's just less of that frenzy, it's communicated, so I think they feel a little more peaceful and everybody knows everybody's names.

This culture is embedded in the school as one walks into the front door they feel the sense of calmness and students are working in the classrooms. People are very friendly and there are a lot of interactions between the students and the staff.

First impressions are lasting impressions and this is critical on how outsiders feel when they first encounter an alternative learning program. As stated on numerous occasions in these findings, people tend to have a negative impression of ALP's and their mindset is one as to where trouble breeds. All of the schools in this study made it a point to assure that their school culture was not toxic and that everyone felt as if they truly belonged to the organization. The schools empowered students who had made progress and used them as role models for others to follow. The schools gave students opportunities to participate in activities that would provide interaction with school personnel outside of the classroom. Schools made visitors feel welcomed upon arrival and even allowed students to provide tours of their schools without adult supervision. These are just a few of the ways the culture was addressed in the study but it was a top priority for all of the schools. Aesthetics of the school building and grounds were also mentioned numerous times as some felt "the eye controls the mind" and if the school did not look inviting, it was perceived as it was not.

Celebrating Student Successes

As in any school setting, celebrating student success at Best Academy is always a highlight. Schools hold assemblies to recognize students for various accomplishments, both for academics as well as athletics. Many have asked, “What do you celebrate in an alternative setting?” This type of celebration takes on many faces and includes many accomplishments. Some are small to the mass but are major steps in the right direction for staff at an alternative school.

An example at Best Academy was when Mr. Johns invited a Congressman to come and address his students. He said “I emailed the stakeholders in the school and told them he was coming, and doing email correspondence works.” Best Academy also incorporates a bi-semester newsletter to highlight the good things that are happening at the school. The school board has implemented a new policy that included the Academy where good news is shared at all school board meetings. Although this has been happening for the other schools, this is the first time that the Academy students were featured.

Right Academy celebrates student success every chance that they can. They have implemented a daily point system for students and celebrations every 9 weeks for those students who have moved to the next level. During the past school year, the school also started having a graduation reception for of their students that completed requirements for graduation. This ceremony takes place and involves many local authorities who serve as speakers. All students attending Right Academy and has met graduation requirements participate and receive their diplomas from their home school so this event at Right is

special for the kids. Ms. Light is the one staff member that likes to promote fun among all the things she does at Right Academy. Her favorite way to celebrate success is with the student/staff basketball game. This game follows weeks of Fun Fridays where students who earn their weekly points can go to the gym with the teachers and participate in many events for 30 minutes prior to lunch. The culmination is the game itself. The local police department serves as game officials which is a great way to build trust with at-risk kids. She speaks candidly about the perception of the game by saying some people would probably think off the top of their heads that a student staff basketball game at an alternative school would be the most dangerous thing.

It'd be like The Longest Yard or something, but to me I've never, ever experienced something that was more fulfilling than this game because you see these kids root for each other, you see the teachers are rooting for the kids. It's an opportunity where everybody can kind of let their guard down and it's just a fun experience for everyone. The kids get a good kick out of it and really handle it well.

She feels that this is a way that the school community can come together and promote positive interactions among all stakeholders. It is also something that the students look forward to each year.

Success Academy is very active in celebrations for their students. The highlight celebration for the students is graduation. They are one of the only schools in the study where students actually graduate from the Alternative Learning Program. Mrs. Susie beamed when discussing graduation as it shows how far the school has come in the community's eyes with the amount of involvement from the families and friends of the graduates. She says,

they have graduation ceremony and it's always very well attended and lovely. We have the one ceremony at one of the larger high schools that have big auditoriums and we have less than 50 graduates but that whole auditorium will be packed with people. It is always a big deal, so that's lovey and I think we get people from the board there; the superintendent comes, so we always have a lot of people there. It is a special time for the kids and their families.

She also feels that this adds to their success by other at risk students witnessing their friends walk across the stage and receive a diploma and hopes it makes them want to do the same. She added that this is one time during the year that she feels the unified pride in the whole school community.

Providing students with the opportunity to receive positive reinforcements after successfully completing a task is one sign of approval that many at-risk students are not accustomed. Everyone loves to receive praise for a good job and it is even more important to provide this for at-risk students. Some of the students come to the schools without a positive support system in their homes and it is hard for them to understand why someone would really care about them. Schools in this study had some really strong programs in place to reward students for a job well done. The graduation ceremony where many of the students were taught the proper protocol for a formal ceremony is a key example of life lessons that are shared. Students graduated from this ALP just like their peers did at the traditional school and it was also at the same site as the traditional school. District office personnel participated and the whole school community celebrated the graduation of their students. The student/staff basketball game at another site that was officiated by local law enforcement was an interesting way to showcase the positive relationships that can be formed by all and reward students for their success at the same

time. For some, this was the only positive interaction some kids had with adults and law enforcement.

Understanding the School Community

At Right Academy, the staff has worked hard to strengthen and educate the community about the things happening on their campus. The school participated in many community fundraisers such as the TATA Trot for Breast Cancer Awareness, the Rugged Maniac run for the American Cancer Society, and coin drives to provide gifts for the needy at Christmas. These are just a few of the causes that the school has implemented to showcase their students. Another event that Right Academy just completed was a public awareness with the local policing agencies in order to raise awareness in the community involving the youth served by the district. The school has a major focus on getting their students out and about as often as possible in order to let the community see firsthand the good things that are happening.

Many alternative students come from poverty and never really had a positive role model to establish clear expectations for them, but at Best Academy norms are a little different. Mr. Johns says, “you’re looking at kids who don’t know norms, they don’t share the same norms that we do, or the typical school norms.” This gives them a disadvantage as they are expected to behave in a certain manner that they are not accustomed to, one that is very different from the way they live their daily lives. A good example of this was when he was invited to attend a bar-b-que on the “east end” where many of his students came. It was a predominately African-American neighborhood. Upon his arrival, he sensed that “everybody screaming yet seemed to be having a good

time.” He said “I am sitting here thinking everybody is screaming and using lots of gestures but later realized that they are screaming in order to have a conversation. Everybody was loud.” The realization came to him that when a teacher has a student in the classroom from this type of environment, just because they are loud, they are not being disrespectful. This is their life. Oftentimes, teachers see this as being disrespectful and we are punishing kids for doing what comes natural for them in their home environment. He says “it is vital that we know these cultural norms or we don’t have a shot at being successful in educating these students.”

Another way that Best Alternative School reaches into the school community is via the Feel Good Friday activities. Mr. Johns says,

Feel Good Fridays are going to be our volunteer community service days, and we’re going to do them a couple of times a month to where we can go out and we can help the community by picking up some trash, working in the local parks, going in and doing some things. There is an older African American graveyard that’s really messy and it’s grown up, and we’re going to go and try to clean it up, do things like that, but that’s not where it ends. Where it ends is when they come back here or we go down here to Elizabeth’s Pizza, sit down and we have a pizza together, we eat.

Mr. Johns views this as not only a treat for the students for their volunteering for the community, but more importantly a time for the adults to give the students a moment to reflect on their work and to measure how they feel about giving back.

Also at Best Academy, parents have access through email to the WhyLiveSchool program to keep tabs on what is happening at the school. Mr. Johns also invites them in to see firsthand what is happening in their kid’s school.

Summary

In reviewing the four frames from the conceptual framework, it is important to understand that each of them provides a different platform for ALP's in the district to make a positive impact on student success. The goal of the *Every Student Succeeds* (2015) is to assure that all students are graduating from high school College and Career Ready. When school districts are looking for ways to re-design their Alternative Learning Program in their district, they must take into consideration all aspects that were described in the findings from the study. ALP's are not a one size fits all program and school leaders must understand that all students do not come with the same needs. Each of the frames analyzed in the study operates independently and as stated in the findings, a district cannot focus on just one or two of them to be successful. There has to be an understanding of how the four frames intertwine to form a strong organizational bond. Each unveiled in the study provided grounded work from school employees as well as the reasoning why they felt that the attribute was important. Many of the students in the program come with a "defeated attitude" and the schools in this study has won over many of these kids and returned them to their home schools with a different mindset or sent them out into the world as high school graduates. They all have something successful to share regarding their students. They love what they do each day for students.

There were many great conversation pieces discovered in the study but a few stood out that every participating school deemed necessary for the success of the program. These included a major focus on relationship building. I know that all educational research stressed the importance of relationship building but I am not

convinced that readers value the extent of it. For ALP's, relationship building expands beyond the student staff roles to one that involved all stakeholders: student's, staff, home schools, community agencies, and district leaders. The involvement of all stakeholders in intake/transition meetings was expressed in the study on multiple occasions. School funding will always be an issue but with ALPs, funding was presented at a different level as all of the schools felt they were being short-changed by their districts in terms of equality. These are three major issues that will be present further in Chapter V of this study as themes that emerged.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Providing a quality education for all students in our schools today is a legislative mandate that schools must comply with in order to continue to receive funding. Students who are not faring well in the traditional school setting or who are dealing with issues far beyond the scope of the classroom doors must still be provided the same opportunity as those who prosper in their studies. How can we work to assure that this challenge is being met? This chapter is dedicated to the findings from my study and to sharing the information obtained from the participants from each school site. The following sections will focus on what was learned during the research process and the impact that each attribute discovered had on student success in alternative learning programs. Student success was the driving force of the study and was measured by the number of suspensions, the number of students who successfully transitioned back to their home school programs, a reduction in disciplinary referrals, increase in school attendance, graduation rate, and the reduction of dropouts from the Alternative Learning Program site. This information was shared in Chapter 3 with the school breakdown relating to these issues.

The number of students not graduating from high school College and Career Ready continues to rise across the nation. As stated in the study, in North Carolina alone, “during the 2014-2015, 11,190 students chose to end their educational opportunities and

seek other ways of life” (NCDPI Consolidated Report, 2015, p. 121). This was an increase of 786 students from the previous school year. There were a multitude of reasons that students dropped out of high school. Among them are: “attendance issues, enrollment in a community college (GED or High School Equivalency Exam), unknown (usually indicating that students could not be found for accountability purposes), choice of working over going to school, and academic problems. These are only a few of the reasons listed previously in the study” (NCDPI Consolidated Report, 2015, p. 124). In an attempt to keep this number from continuously rising, school districts across the nation are turning to alternative means to meet the needs of their students. In many districts, this is done in an Alternative Learning Program.

There are numerous kinds of Alternative Learning Programs in each school district. These programs can range from alternative school sites, alternative learning programs located on another school campus, early colleges, middle colleges, and night programs. The schools selected to participate in this study serve students at their own building sites. They are not part of another school campus and all have school codes assigned by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. This makes them responsible for reporting all student progress data to the state as opposed to being included in the student’s home school data.

I studied four Alternative Learning Programs serving students in four counties in North Carolina. The range of students served by these schools ranged on an average from 35 to 240. The actual number of students being served at the ALPs isn’t constant throughout the school year due to students transitioning back to their home schools and

new students being assigned due to disciplinary reasons. Some students successfully complete their time in the ALP and transition back to their home schools while others can choose to stay and graduate from the program. In this study two schools were located in an urban area and two were located in rural locations. Participants represented Caucasian and African-American as well as both genders. All of the principals selected in this study were Caucasian with three being males and one female. Two of the principals were in their first year serving as the leaders of their school while the other two principals were veteran leaders in their district. All of the principals chose to lead the Alternative Learning Program in their districts as none was placed in the role. This is important to the study as the school leaders knew that they wanted to lead the redesign process in their districts and were willing to make the necessary adjustments that would allow the schools to move forward in their mission. In three of the four schools, the previous leaders were appointed to the position by their districts and each had a toxic culture prior to the current principals.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will share what I learned from the study and the findings from the research along with my understandings and interpretations. I will also provide answers to my research questions, introduce the major themes that emerged from the study, and provide recommendations for further research.

Research Questions

Research Question #1: Personnel Roles in School Redesign

One of the first categories that emerged from this study was that the majority of the participants in the study chose to work in the alternative setting. All four of the

principals applied for and were granted the opportunity to lead the ALP in their district and two of the four continued building on the framework that their predecessors left for them. All but two of the staff members were excited to come to work each day, and many spoke highly of their colleagues in their conversations. The two that were “placed in the alternative setting” were the only ones in the study that left a negative vibe. The state of North Carolina has addressed this issue and introduced legislation to keep incompetent teachers from working in the alternative setting. The North Carolina General Assembly State Legislation (115C-47) recommends to all school boards that they “adopt policies that prohibit Superintendent’s from assigning to any alternative learning program any professional public school employee who has received within the last three years a rating on a formal evaluation that is less than above standard” (NCDPI, Alternative Learning Programs, 2005, p. 4). It is not clear as to whether this has been adjusted to meet the framework of the new evaluation system. The problem with 115C-47 is the terminology. It “recommends” to the board but leaves the entire decision making up to the local district. Every principal in the study alluded to the fact that they have had teachers redirected due to their unwillingness to adapt to the needs of the students. Two of the districts were notorious for placing teachers that they were “attempting to get rid of” in the alternative setting in hopes that they would just resign. This type of placement contributes to a culture becoming toxic. Principals shared that when the opportunity to redesign their respective schools arose, hiring was a top priority.

One of the first things a school leader must address for the redesigning of a school begins with staffing and creating a vision of trust and encouragement for the students that

are admitted. Smith and Thompson (2014), state “successful alternative programs have an environment that is personal and meaningful to students. Effective programs consist of a committed and caring school staff, and students should have a voice in the operations” (p. 115). Hiring the right people to work with at-risk students may be the most important piece of the puzzle that the new school leader faces. Teachers and/or other staff who choose to work with the at-risk population frequently demonstrate a willingness to make the necessary adjustments needed to serve the students. Silchenko (2005) says, “teaching students with behavioral problems, learning difficulties and/or a history of poor attendance or dropping out calls for high levels of creativity and empathy, balanced with an understanding of how to help students become accountable for +their participation in their learning” (p. 1). While these traits do not necessarily cost more, strong alternative programs tend to recruit teachers who have demonstrated success in serving at-risk populations—and employing experienced teachers means higher salaries. Some school districts may require additional staffing in order to promote healthy physical, social and emotional development platform for their students.

The Human Resource Lens provides the following strategies that school leaders should adhere to in order to be successful: hire the right people, keep them, invest in them, empower them, and promote diversity. Personnel from each of the four school sites shared this philosophy during the interview process. One of the main points of emphasis was whether the applicant had the desire to work with at-risk students. Empowering teachers builds trust among the staff and promotes a sense of ownership among the entire school community. When teachers feel as if they are contributing to the

success of the school, their energy will help elevate those around them who may not share the same thought process. McRel (2004) states allowing teachers a sense of academic freedom and flexibility in their classrooms will create a sense of a purposeful community. This type of environment promotes lessons being designed to address the needs of the students being served and also validates why the learning needs to take place.

Research Question #2: Structure and its Impact on Student Learning

The structure of the school design often dictates how the power of the school is being shared and how decision making is impacting the learning of the students. Bolman and Deal (2013) state, “it is proven that the structural form both enhances and constrains what an organization can accomplish” (p. 46). They share, “if structure is overlooked, an organization often misdirects energy and resources” (p. 68). From his experiences, Bleuher (2015) shares,

when examining school organization and structure, this is the one that presents issues related to the fact that some aspects of defined roles and hierarchy are not clearly defined. Part of this is due to the fact that I was part of small organizations where people in power, like myself, wore various hats of responsibility, which means that sometimes there is not clarity with regards to responsibility. (Bleuher, 2015, p. 2)

It is imperative that everyone knows his/her role but more importantly how his/her role plays into the structural plan of the school. Assuring that students who come to the school with a variety of needs are receiving quality education takes teamwork and everyone must be in accord to make this happen. In analyzing the data from this study, there were several key attributes unveiled but three stand out due to the impact they have

on student learning. They are (a) developing a structure that is designed to meet the varying needs of incoming students, (b) implementing a school intake/transition plan that assures understanding for all stakeholders, and (c) allowing choice students to attend the school in order to balance the student population. Creating the appropriate environment is a major task for any school leader.

When looking to redesign the alternative learning process, the foundation of the structure is key. Many key elements must be in the thought process when redesigning in order to provide a positive, nurturing climate from day one. Students must feel a part of the structure in order to be successful. Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) revealed the “two major constructs that establish a successful learning environment is students’ sense of membership in the school community and their perceptions of support from important people within the school” (p. 2). The structure must be student centered and processes implemented that will impact a change of mindset for students who are already struggling to find their place within the organization. One of the most important elements of structure that is essential is designing processes that will change the mindset of all stakeholders from a program that has been considered “punitive” to one that welcomes everyone. Students must feel like they belong to the school community and that the adults in the program care about them and their well-being.

It was shared among all four schools in the study that the initial thoughts of most of the students and their parents were negative in tone towards the alternative learning program. In many cases, ALPs are considered “punitive” in nature, and most outsiders do not think that quality learning can take place in this type of environment. Students

who have been assigned to the ALP often feel that they have no voice in any matter pertaining to their education. Building relationships with the students is a top priority when examining the redesign process. Maillet (2016) expressed the importance of building time into the schedule to connect with kids. In his study, he cited “building a connection with students and families proved to be successful and allowed the program to gain support as it developed” (p. 3). One of the lessons that emerged from three of the four schools in the study was providing time for the staff to listen to the student. Three of the schools in the study have a structure embedded into their school design that allocates time for teachers to listen to their students before proceeding with any disciplinary issues. Mr. Boyd shared that “many of the students we get at Right Academy have typically had a negative experience in school. They have trust issues with adults and many times feel no one cares for them.” As a result, he requires his staff to learn to “listen to the kid” before making any attempt to address an issue. These sessions are usually at the very beginning of the day where students report to mentors for announcements. Mrs. Susie shared that the students in the Alternative Learning Program are usually very talented in realizing who is ‘real’ with them and works to assure that the messages being sent by the staff are genuine.”

Once the students felt that they were “wanted” and knew that they were going to get the opportunity to learn, it was important at all schools to assess the students to find out what their needs were. Another structure that was implemented in all schools was creating an individualized plan of study to show students where they were currently on the graduation continuum and together devise a plan that would lead them to graduation.

One principal in the study shared a story of a student not even realizing how close he was to graduating because no adult ever took the time to converse with him beyond continuously suspending him from school. He said once the student saw graduation as a reality, this whole demeanor changed. The student actually became a voice for the school as he told his peers that they really cared about students in the school and wanted to help. Once the plan is in place for a student, the next step in the structural process was finding the appropriate platform to deliver the instruction.

Three of the schools in the study utilize a blended learning model for delivering the content to the students. Students coming to the alternative program are usually behind in grade level abilities and thus the achievement gap has to be addressed. The learning has to be targeted and effective practices in place to assure that students are making the necessary gains to close the gap. There are a variety of means to address this issue including the blended learning model. Combining online learning platforms with teacher led classrooms is an effective way to address these needs. All four schools noted the importance of not just putting the student in online classes, as in many cases these were the students who did not have the structure in their lives to stay focused in individualized lessons. Right Academy has a great program where if they do place a student in online classes, they assign them to a classroom where a teacher is available to answer any questions that the student may have. Students in the ALP usually need adult supervision and structure in place for them to succeed in doing any type of online learning. This is why the blended model worked for Right Academy. Success Academy took one additional step with their students as they were lucky enough to have a 1 to 1

program where students were allowed to check out Chromebooks, and for their homework assignments they were asked to view the lecture for their classes the next day. Once in the classroom, the teachers had small group stations set up to address the learning from the previous night. This worked well for these students.

Regardless of the structures in place, it was difficult for some schools to get creative as they had to be creative with their resources. Best Academy had the biggest issues with a lack of options for the students to take at their school. Mr. John's shared "my goal is to create an environment here where we eventually evolve into an alternative program with the addition of more CTE classes as well as some vocational training." The one major complaint that came from all of the school sites was the lack of hands-on classes that were available to their students. Many of the CTE classes are the ones that appeal to the students in the ALP.

Another area that prevailed from the structural frame was the ability to allow choice students to attend the ALP programs. Findings from the Reinventing Alternative Education report, "states should broaden eligibility guidelines, going beyond a focus on troublesome or otherwise disruptive youth to include any student how is not thriving in a traditional high school setting" (Almedia et al., 2010, p. 7). The report goes on to add that "the intent should be to bring alternative education into the mainstream as a legitimate pathway toward obtaining high school and postsecondary credentials" (Almedia et al., 2010, p. 7). Admitting students who do not fit well in a traditional setting will both increase the student's opportunity to graduate as well as provide potential role models for students who were struggling to fit in at their home schools due

to disciplinary issues. All of the schools in the study stressed the importance of having these students in their populations and how valuable they were to the overall culture of the school. Choice students were a way to provide role models for students assigned to the school. Choice students are also those who are close to dropping out but choose to come to the school in hopes of finding a non-traditional schedule that will work for them so they can graduate. Mr. Johns says “we have some really smart students who have multiple issues from having to work to support their families or have put themselves in positions where the traditional setting does not work for them.” By providing flexible scheduling and some additional options such as the ALP, students who cannot attend traditional schools full time now have an opportunity to finish without trying to figure out how to balance the demands of their personal lives with their schooling. For those that do decide to participate in the ALP in their district, it is important that a strong support plan be in place to assist them.

This assistance begins with the intake/transition plan for alternative learning programs. All of the schools in the study stressed the importance of this process in terms of student success yet they all still experience the lack of buy-in of the process by all stakeholders. They all reported that they get great support from the student, their family, and any outside support staff that work with them yet they struggle to have representation from the home schools. All of the principals have extended invitations for participation but the home schools often do not send someone to represent them. This sends a negative message to the student and their families as they feel that the home schools are operating on an “out of sight, out of mind” mindset. One district in the study has recently allowed

the ALP to refuse the intake of suspended student unless there is an administrator present at the meeting.

Another problem that was discussed a length was the fact that once a student had completed their assignments in the alternative learning program, many schools were not prepared mentally to welcome the student back. One way that was discussed to alleviate this problem was shared by Mr. Johns. He suggested suggest “putting the student on a different schedule where the teachers don’t know the student because usually what happens is the student and the teacher resume their conflict with one another.” This, he states, “is not going to be a good transition if you are not giving the kid an opportunity to be successful, and my goal is to take every little step we can to make sure they have the ability to transition in the way that will yield student success.” This change has often been viewed as difficult by the receiving schools because of the timing of the student’s return. Other elements discussed to address the return process was building in transition plans where some students may start of a half day return in the mornings and spending their afternoons back at the ALP. This allows the ALP staff an opportunity to troubleshoot and provide support for the student.

Research Question #3: Value of Human Relations in ALPs

The Human Resource Lens emphasizes that is paramount that the right people are in the right positions to begin the change process. This lens focuses on the family concept of the organization. The Human Resource Lens reiterates, “that organizations need people (for their energy, effort, and talent) and people need organizations (for the many intrinsic and extrinsic rewards they offer)” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 137). Each

of the schools in the study spoke highly of the staff that is in place at their respective sites. All of the principals were adamant that hiring the right people to serve their school population has the greatest impact on the success of the program. School leaders must hire the right staff members to help create a positive culture for the learning environment to be a positive experience for the students. Kafele (2014) supports this statement by adding that in order “to create a climate and culture to close the attitude gap, principals and teachers must create a genuine environment of caring” (p. 19). They all stressed that working in an ALP takes a different mindset and each only wanted people who understood at-risk students and knew how to make the necessary adjustments working with them. Some of the schools were lucky and has/had complete control over who was employed at their school while others were not so lucky and had staff “appointed or assigned” to work at the site. During the interviewing process, Mr. Johns shares that he will not stray from his non-negotiables. He looks for “potential teachers having a heart for people, having a compassionate heart for kids, and being positive.” Mr. Boyd of Right Academy echoed the same sentiment. He added when hiring staff, we look at demeanor, body language and overall personality. During the interview process, he adds,

We ask situational questions. We look for people who are patient and know these students have many obstacles to overcome. We look for people who are more tolerant of troubled students. We typically look for people who don't have a lot of school experience so there are no preconceived ideologies of how a school “should” operate.

As for the teacher's perspective, Mr. King added “I knew it was a high risk, high reward job in my view and I was at a point in my career where I was ready to take that risk and

it's obviously been a great reward so far.” Every principal in the study looked for people who could build positive relationships with all the stakeholders and involved all the stakeholders in the hiring process. Mr. John's from Best Academy shares “that he will not stray from his non-negotiables”. He looks for “potential teachers having a heart for people, having a compassionate heart for kids, and being positive.”

By hiring this caliber of educator for the program, all of the schools felt that they were able to bring a new attitude not only with their students but with the community as well. It is crucial that schools continue to build on having the right staff in place and building positive relationships with all stakeholders. This includes the staff communicating with one another, staff and students, and the program with the community.

Working in an alternative learning program can be draining both physically and emotionally. Many underestimate the work that school staff puts in on a daily basis. No two days seem to be the same in an alternative learning program and just when a day seems to be going smoothly, one incident can change the social climate on an instant. It is important that everyone working in this environment understands their roles and realizes the importance of being there for one another. Mr. King shared his pride of working with a great group of colleagues that he considers family as he shared,

I've grown some of the closest friends that I've ever had in this job with the people I work with as well. We are close; I've played on sports teams, I've had a lot of different jobs but this is the closest thing to a true team, a real cohesive team, that I've ever been a part of and it has all to do with the culture of the school.

On the other hand, Ms. Tompkins said her colleagues had a different view. She added, “we like each other a lot and we are here for one another, but at the end of the day, we do not do things outside of school together because we spend so much time and energy here that we need to get recharged and away from one another.” This was not meant as a negative statement as they felt it important to get their energy and refocus by being away from one another as opposed to always being together.

All of the schools in the study also shared their focus on building positive relationships with their students and incorporating ways that they could impact the student’s lives in a positive manner. Mrs. Dowdy utilizes calmness when dealing with the students. She always allows the student voice to be heard first before she attempts to address any issues. She said that for so long, students did not have a voice or chose not to use it appropriately thus their assignment to the alternative learning program. She builds relationships first. She shared,

when students come here, they have a label on them from the home school. I have a relationship with them; they don’t disrespect me and I don’t disrespect them either. That’s why I have a rapport with them—I treat them the way I want to be treated and also, I’m a parent, I get it.

This rapport allows a bond of trust to be formed with the student and then, changes in the mindset can begin. Mr. Wright agrees with this relationship building and says he starts his process from the very beginning of the student’s arrival. He shared

we get one attempt to make a first impression on a student; that is when he walks in the door. I try to make sure the students are met with respect and let them know through body language that we are glad they are with us.

Building this comradery with students and gaining their approval will go a long way in establishing a positive school culture where student feel that it is ok to learn. Students who come to the ALP are often so frustrated not only with school in general, but feel like they have no one behind them pushing them to be successful. If the right relationship components are in place, major changes in student mindset can occur in the smaller setting provided by the ALP.

All of the schools in the study looked for ways to give back to their school community and involve their students in a multitude of events that would highlight their talents. Since the majority of the community has a negative perception of the alternative setting, Mr. Johns makes it a priority to find ways to get his kids interacting with the school community. He invited a Congressman to come to the school to speak and the students were very receptive. The school also has a newsletter where they showcase the good things that are going on around the campus. Mr. Johns says he

really wanted to target this year to let people know the good things that are going on here. We have kids that are doing good things, and if you'll look at our website, we had some kids go down here to Cooperative Community Ministries and help out there, and that's the picture on our website, because I want people to know that these are not bad kids. Our kids; they are doing good things to help, they got good hearts, so I mean, and that's a big thing to advertise.

Mrs. Wright also stressed that the school is in the process of taking the students out into the community to let the community see firsthand that he kids are not bad kids. She adds

the alternative setting is not a bad place. It just has a bad stigma that being associated with it. We just have to get our kids out in the community and give back so the stigma can begin to erode.

Success Academy's Ms. Griggs had one of the most honest answers of all participants. She stated that in her school community, people viewed their students as "a bunch of rabble-rousers, truants, deviants; the behavior kids who got kicked out of school." She said "that's how they see us" until they come to visit and then they say "oh, I had no idea you were doing this."

Regardless of which school is discussed, the importance of the community relationship cannot be overstated. This is a piece that is often overlooked in the alternative setting due to the preconceived ideas that some have toward alternative schools.

Research Question #4: Navigating the Politics in ALPs

The leader must be aware of where the minefields are located within the organization and prepare a plan to avoid any negative setbacks. It was revealed in the study that the school leader must be very mindful of this as it is a make or break on many levels. School leaders must always be cognizant of what is happening not only in his/her building, but in the school community as well. All stakeholders must be held accountable to assure that the mission and the vision is being carried out in the school. Bolman and Deal (2008) suggested that school leaders develop a political map to help leaders understand what was happening around them. They say "that a simple way to develop a political map for any situation is to create a two-dimensional diagram mapping players (who is in the game), power (how much clout each player is likely to exercise), and interests (what each player wants). Kotter (1985) suggests that a leader should follow a basic four-step approach while exercising political influence. They are:

- Identify relevant relationships. (Figure out which players you need to influence).
- Assess who might resist, why, and how strongly. (Determine where leadership challenges will be).
- Develop, wherever possible, links with potential opponents to facilitate communication, education, or negotiation. (Hold your enemies close).
- If step three fails, carefully select and implement either subtler or more forceful methods. (Save your big guns until you really need them, but have a Plan B in case Plan A falls short) (Kotter, 1985, p. 219)

In both cases, school administrators must know their staff and what role they are playing regarding school culture. This is very important to the schools in the study when the leaders were working with distributive leadership opportunities. If power was granted to a staff member with negative tones, it could be detrimental to the overall success of the program. It was cited not only by the principals, but by some staff members as well that oftentimes they had to have the critical conversations with other staff members to remind them of the intentions of the overall program. The ALP staff is its best source of advertisement and it was mentioned by all four school sites the importance of spreading the good that was happening as opposed to staff members going out and complaining.

Another area that was apparent as in important issue was the relationship that ALP's had with the student's home school. Each school in the study had an intake/transition policy in place for students that were assigned to the ALP. As a part of this plan, home schools were supposed to have a representative present at the intake process to support the student in the change of placement but many did not adhere to this piece. The importance of this cannot be taken lightly as the message that many students

and parents receive is that the home school does not care about the child, thus damaging the relationship even further. One school in the study began to not accept students unless the home school was represented in an attempt to resolve this issue.

Not only should the home school take an active role in the transition process, it was noted by all the sites in the study that there was very little if any communication between the two schools once the child had been transitioned. All of the schools in the study stressed that they had attempted in multiple tries to invite home school staff over to visit and follow up on the progress of their students at the ALP but very few took them up on the offer. It was noted several times principals visited the campus but did not want to walk the hallways due to not having time to check up on their kids in person. Several of the staff members in the study spoke regarding sending messages to the previous teachers but never received any response back from them. This created a negative dialogue between the two schools and became an adult affair with no good coming from it for the student. The lack of home school support impacted student success when the transition time came as the students were often re-enrolled amid the same expectations from them as they left. Schools in the study felt that their programs were not valued by the traditional settings as they would not work with them to promote the positive growth of the students. This was why many of the transitions seemed to fail in their opinions.

Another area in the political arena that was discussed in the study was the relationships between the ALPs and the district support teams. All of the sites noted that there was very little visitation from members of the curriculum team and that resources were not allocated equally in their districts. One school spoke passionately about

students being sent to their ALP from a school with computers and many online resources only to find that when they got into their classes at the ALP, none of these existed. Many of the ALP's in the study felt that they were living the "leftover life" as they would only receive programs and resources after the home schools had used them and moved on to a newer model. One teacher spoke about having to contact the company herself to obtain teacher editions of books and supplemental materials as the district did not allocate funds for the ALP in those contracts. They all agreed that more visits from district personnel could help spotlight some of these issues and let district leaders witness firsthand the impact it has on learning.

Another opportunity for students that was highlighted in the findings from the study was increasing the opportunities for students in the ALP to volunteer in the school community. Since the community often had a preconceived notion about what a typical day was like in an ALP as well as an opinion about the students, it is crucial that school leaders find ways to get the students involved in as many community partnerships as possible. Three of the four schools in the study worked time into their schedules to provide an opportunity for their students to serve. Everyone that participated in the study stressed how important this was for everyone associated with the school. They all stressed that there were many great things happening in the school and they wanted to showcase the talents of their students. Activities that emerged from the study included having a school float in the annual Christmas parade, cleaning up the downtown areas, working in the public library, participating in community food drives and fundraisers, and one school even showcasing their graduation ceremonies. Regardless of the stage, it is

crucial that students in the ALP's get an opportunity to show the good that they have to offer and oftentimes, when they were given this opportunity, the school personnel saw a change in the attitudes of the students as well.

Research Question #5: Symbolic Representation in ALPs

Symbols take on many shapes within the organization; they are expressed through the culture of the building and the core values and beliefs for which they operate. Bolman and Deal (2008) state, "it centers on complexity and ambiguity and emphasizes the idea that symbols mediate the meaning of work and anchor culture" (p. 277). The culture emulates the values of the organization and helps form an identity for the organization. The categories that emerged during the study relating to the cultural characteristics centered on defining the culture for the school, celebrating student successes, and finding a means to understand the school community and find ways for students to participate in a positive light for the community. All of these are important to the redesign process but it all begins with establishing a positive school climate for students and the school community.

A positive school culture will be possible only if all stakeholders have a buy-in to the process. The first barrier that many alternative learning programs have to overcome is the community mindset pertaining to the term "alternative." For many, this term conveys a negative connotation and usually alludes to "those that could not make it in a traditional setting." Many immediately stereotype not only the students as troublemakers, but often school personnel are viewed as those that "are not up to par" to work in a traditional setting.

The schools in study addressed this issue in various ways. At Best Academy, Mr. John's says, "I use the word 'positive' a lot of times in staff meetings. If you are positive, then you have the ability to develop something successful." He feels that if students "get to the point where when they feel this guy genuinely cares about me, this lady legitimately cares about me, then they have the ability to want to work and want to make you proud." Success Academy staff adds "the home environment plays an important role on how students act in the school. Students are not always able to remove the negative atmosphere from their lives and oftentimes this behavior carries over in the classroom." They strive to create an atmosphere where students feel a sense of belonging and a willingness to attempt their work without fear of failure. Mr. Griggs says he spends a lot of time in the hallways during class change not only to monitor the students, but states that this is where one can learn the most from kids regarding their personal issues.

All of the schools in the study alluded to the importance of celebrating their students for their good work. These celebrations were accomplished in many ways ranging from inviting special dignitaries to speak with their students, having student/staff interactions in sporting events, schools participating in community food drives and volunteering in the community. Only one of the schools celebrated their students with their own graduation ceremony but was proud of the participation from the entire school community. All of the schools in the study were excited about the opportunities they created for their students and felt that providing students the opportunity to receive positive reinforcements after successfully completing a task was one sign of approval that many at-risk students are not accustomed.

The schools in the study have established a positive relationship with the community they serve. This positive interaction continues to help mend the breakdown of the community mindset regarding alternative learning programs and many of the communities are praising the schools for the work they are doing for the kids. It is important to note here that the school must also know and understand the community. One of the most powerful stories from the study was from the principal of Best Academy regarding an invitation to a community bar-b-que in an area of town where most of his student lived. Here was a Caucasian male showing up at a minority celebration where he learned one of the most valuable lessons pertaining to the environment from which his students came. Upon his arrival, he sensed that “everybody screaming yet seemed to be having a good time.” He said, “I am sitting here thinking everybody is screaming and using lots of gestures but later realized that they are screaming in order to have a conversation. Everybody was loud.” The realization came to him that when a teacher has a student in the classroom from this type of environment, just because they are loud, they are not being disrespectful. This is their life. This has been a story that he shares with everyone as to the importance of knowing the whole student as opposed to operating on a presumption.

Research Question #6: Key Attributes Implemented in the Redesign Process

This section is answered via the major themes that emerged deemed necessary for student success in ALPs. The five major discussions that emerged from all of the research data from the participants were staffing, relationships, communication, equity and district support. Each component was present at each of the study sites and discussed by most of

the people that I interviewed. It is recommended that school leaders examine these five areas when looking to make changes in school in their own districts.

The first area that requires careful consideration would be the selection of the school staff. It is important that people working with at-risk students have a place in their heart for the students and be willing to take the time to get to know the whole student before attempting to teach them. Smith and Palmer (2015) share, “staff at the alternative schools should be regularly trained to demonstrate unconditional acceptance—receiving and witnessing frequent and often extreme external behaviors such as anger and aggression from youth without responding likewise” (p. 139). Study participants spoke about the issues that students brought to school with them each day and how important it was to give them some time to make the necessary adjustments before attempting to educate them. Students require time to adjust to an environment where someone believes in them and it is often a struggle for them to separate their school environment with the ones they return to daily. It is important for all school staff to understand the community where the student lives and begin to recognize the challenge students have when trying to do well. In schools where teachers and administrators are “placed” this type of environment usually does not exist thus leading to a toxic situation for all parties.

The second attribute that exposed as essential by the schools in the study was the formation of positive relationships with students, staff, and the school community. I have spoken about the importance of the relationships with students, but the relationship among the school staff is important to consider as this relationship sets the foundation for the culture of the school. If staff members love to come to work this attitude conveys

through all of their actions and sets a positive tone for the whole environment. When students come into a building where everyone is working together and happy being there, the students notice and it often affects their behaviors as well. When entering all of the schools in this study, I was immediately at ease due to the positive climates that I experienced. Everyone was nice, everyone had smiles on their faces, and this included the students as well. There was very little commotion and when speaking with the participants, many attributed this to the fact that they were all there working for the common cause, the students. The few times that I witnessed the excitement leave from their voices was when they spoke of the relationship with the home school.

A major issue that addressed on multiple occasions in this study was the relationship between the alternative learning program and the student's home school. It was discussed how in most cases, once a student was assigned to the ALP that the home schools did not have any connection with them. The goal of all of the ALP's is to provide the opportunity for a student to transition back to their home school once they completed their assigned time at the ALP and the lack of communication between the two programs often lead to an unsuccessful transition for the student. It is vital that home schools take the time to participate with the ALP to let the student know that they are supporting their student while they are at the ALP. It is important that home schools come to the intake/transition meetings and provide some type of support for the students. All of the ALP's spoke of their willingness assist the home schools with the transition of the student back to the home school by providing continued support. This ranged from the ALP checking in on them to see how they were doing, assigning a mentor at the home

school for them to check in with when they were having difficulties, or even starting the student back on a half day plan to assure their successful transition back into the traditional program. The two schools should operate as an extension of one another and not viewed as two separate settings.

This extension of the two programs also includes equity in school funding. A general complaint that came from three of the schools in the study dealt with the finances of the schools. The three principals argued that for students assigned to the ALP for long-term suspension, a portion of the student's ADM monies should come with them. There is always a spike in referrals at the end of each of the three grading periods where students are struggling academically and having disciplinary issues at the same time. This comes long after the schools have received their ALP allotments for the year and the funding for the suspended student always remains in the home school budget. It would be interesting to see if these ADM allotments were prorated according to when the student was suspended if the home schools would look to be more proactive in keeping the less severe cases in their population. Principals in the study also complained about the lack of allocated resources that did not compare with those that the traditional schools receive each year. Many felt as if they got the resources that passed down when they were dealing with the students with the greatest needs.

This leads to the importance of the district office supporting the alternative learning program on all levels. Financially, the at-risk populations should receive the necessary resources to provide a quality education for all of their students. One of the schools in the study received Title I funding but the other three relied on the district

allotments. Outside of finances, it was discussed that district representation at the ALP was not consistent with that of the traditional schools and their staff needed the support equal with their peers in the traditional setting. In many ALP's, departments consisted on one teacher so the opportunity to participate in active professional learning communities was not possible. Teachers in the study noted how much help it would be if they were allotted time to spend with teachers in the district in their content areas. This would help with planning and lesson design and more importantly assure that if a student did transition back to the traditional classroom, they would not be too far behind in terms of the pacing guides for the courses. It would also allow teaches to share resources and be able to bounce ideas around with their peers in the traditional setting. Kennedy-Lewis et al. (2016) also support these claims, saying,

district level administrators should more closely scrutinize the implementation of school level interventions and ensure that educators receive the training and resources to implement appropriate interventions thoroughly and with fidelity before students are blamed for the failure of those interventions. (p. 15)

Finally, district leaders should plan time in their schedules to visit the alternative learning programs in their respective districts to assure that the instruction in the ALPs match the vision that the district has for the program.

Recommendations

I chose to look at four alternative learning programs that were deemed successful in terms of student success. This success was defined in the number of students who graduated from high school or transitioned successfully back to their home schools, a reduction in discipline referrals, or a reduction of dropouts. My goal was to find out what

practices had the four schools embedded into their cultures that made them successful in working with their students. I felt that some great discussion points emerged from the study and the key attributes that the school sites deemed important had a desired impact on their daily operations. There were two major areas that evolved from the study that would warrant further research. These focused on district leaders and principals.

At the district level, it would be interesting to explore how different district leaders viewed alternative education and how they measured the success of their own programs. After conversations with school district officials while attempting to obtain permission to conduct research in their districts, it would be a good investigation as to the number of school districts that placed personnel in the ALP programs because of having them removed from a traditional setting. I had three school districts that had shown tremendous success in serving students in ALP's in previous years but saw a decline in their programs after the principal left the system for another job. In all cases, the new principal did not share the vision of the program and immediately saw the program regress back to the punitive culture that had existed before their initial redesign. One system was open about their issues as to why they would not grant permission to study their program but was eager to learn of my findings.

Another area for further consideration is the for local policy makers. In North Carolina, alternative learning programs accountably model is a local board decision. The problem that I see with this format is it allows too much flexibility in the reporting of data for ALP's. In some cases, this is a great way to hide the actual student performance index and replace it with goals that are easily attainable and can result in positive results

being reported to the constituents. My recommendation would be that all alternative learning programs use a growth index model to report student progress. This would result in student data being reported based on performance goals from the previous year. With many of the alternative school students entering with multiple years' deficiency, this would be a fair measuring stick for schools to show the impact they have on student growth. It would also be much more transparent to all stakeholders.

Policy makers should also consider the amount of funding that is being allocated to at-risk programs. These programs serve students with a vast array of issues including social, emotional and academic thus the need for additional funding is required for appropriate staffing and allocated resources. It is an area that local districts should be given the flexibility to exercise option as to the resources that are needed for the ALP in their district. A priority should be given to his area as these are the students who if are not successful and graduate from high school, often end up receiving in less desirable areas such as incarceration, food stamps, and unemployment benefits. It only makes sense to be proactive while there is still a chance to change the life of a student as opposed to providing support after the fact.

Learning Points from the Study

There were a multitude of learning points that emerged from the study, but the major takeaways from the research focused on three major findings: relationships, the hiring process, and a balanced curriculum. I will discuss each of these in the next few paragraphs while sharing the impact they each had on the redesign process. While many researchers have discussed these findings in their works as they related to traditional

schooling, there is little research that shows the impact these three themes had on student success nor the extent each must be stretched in order to have a positive impact in the alternative setting.

Relationships

Much was discussed in the literature review and in the examination of the data regarding relationships in any school setting, but what emerged from the study that is most discussed in this area was the extent of the relationship building that must take place to have an impact on school redesign. Defoe (2013) added “individuals have needs, feelings, fears, prejudices, skills and development opportunities. This frame enables one to focus on and understand the fit between the individual and the organization” (p. 2). First and foremost, relationship building must take place between the school leader and the staff. It was imperative that the leader have the right troops under his/her tutelage in order to build a positive school culture for the students. Bolman and Deal (2008) urge leaders to keep in mind the core assumptions that the Human Relations Frame is built upon:

- Organizations exist to serve human needs rather than the converse
- People and organizations need each other. Organizations need the ideas, energy, and talent; people need the careers, salaries, and opportunities
- When the fit between individual and systems is poor, one or both suffer. Individuals are exploited or exploit the organization—they both suffer
- A good fit benefits both. Individuals find meaningful and satisfying work and organizations get the talent and energy they need to succeed. (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 117)

There must be a bond of trust that is formed where staff members buy into the concept of school redesign and are in total agreement with the process. This refers back

to the literature regarding the importance of hiring the right people and assuring that everyone knows his/her role in the daily operation of the school. Mr. Johns emphasized the importance of empowering his staff so they could make their decision. Mr. Boyd echoed the same sentiments regarding the hiring process by adding “we look for people who are patient and know these students have many obstacles to overcome. We look for people who are more tolerant of troubled students.” So much emphasis is placed on the principal teacher relationship, but it was evident in the study that the relationships with the staff from the bus drivers to the cafeteria workers to the custodian were crucial. Everyone must feel valued in the organization and feel that they make a positive impact on the school. Bleuher (2015) added, “most people within education are there for an intrinsic desire to help others” (p. 2). It is evident that most who choose to work with students are coming to work daily with the right intentions. Building this type of school family enhanced the daily operation for each of the schools in the study. Everyone was there (with the exception to two teachers mentioned earlier in the study) for the right reason and had the heart to work with and understand at-risk students.

The next phase of relationship building was with the staff and the students. It was mentioned that the students came to the schools with a variety of reasons ranging from long-term suspension to school choice. It was noted on several instances the value of the choice students as they were able to provide role models for the other students and become active in the decision making of the school. These students were often called upon for leadership roles ranging from giving tours to visitors to providing peer tutoring for their fellow students. It was also noted that in each of the schools in the study that

students were greeted at the door each morning, some with handshakes, and students were called by name. This conveyed a message of a caring environment where students could learn to feel wanted, something they often missed in their home schools. Several of the school included students in student/staff events where students were able to see the “other side” of the staff in a fun filled environment. The relationship building with students goes beyond the knowing the name of the student to learning about their home life, their interests and their feelings. Conversations were a key. Students like to know that their voice was heard and many of the schools started conflict resolution with listening to what the kid had to say prior to discussing the issue. Mr. Downs shared his experiences regarding this by adding that “adults all too often demand the first words and this often builds a competitive atmosphere for an agitated child.” Relationships build trust and trust can be a great foundation for growth. The school culture can often be determined by watching the interactions that take place in the hallways between student and school staff. Mrs. Dowdy summed the value of building relationships with student by adding “relationships. It is all about the kids. You have to let them know that you have a genuine care for them before anything good can happen. Kids have to see that you have a genuine interest in their well-being before you can teach them anything.”

The relationship building then extended to the school community. This included not only the central office personnel but with the community in which the schools were housed. Two of the schools talked about the importance of central office personnel interacting with the ALP in many ways. These included representation at the intake process as well as visiting classrooms and having conversations with the students. The

relationship between the ALP and the student's home school was crucial as the transitioning process for many students was measured by how the student transitioned back to the traditional setting. It was found that home schools that had the proper support in place and kept "tabs" on the student while they were in the ALP showed higher success rates than those that chose not to participate. All of the principals in the study talked about how they invited home school principals to visit their kids whenever possible to let them know they still believed in them and were looking forward to their successful return but only had a few of the principals take them up on the offer. This is a huge component of student's successfully transitioning back.

It was also noted on multiple occasions the relationships with school and the community. All of the schools in the study reiterated the importance of "showcasing" their students to the community. This included inviting community leaders into the school for presentations as well as having the students serve the community through volunteer activities. Some of the activities that were noted in the research was a student staff basketball games that was officiated by local law enforcement, students volunteering in the food shelters, students having lunch with local leaders, students participating in Christmas parades by preparing a float, students and staff participating in fund raising campaigns such as Relay for Life, volunteering at the town library, and cleaning up an abandoned grave yard. Principals in the study wanted the community to see their students giving back and "doing good" in order to remove the often-negative connotations associated with students in an ALP. It was also good for the students to feel

valued as well. None of this would happen if the right staff was not in place to support the students.

Hiring Process

It was noted many times that having the right staff working at the ALP made the biggest difference in the performance of the school. The major functions of the Human Resource Frame according to Bolman and Deal (2013) were: hire the right people, reward them well, empower employees, and foster self-managing teams. When operating in the human resource frame, Bolman and Deal (2008) urge leaders to keep in mind the core assumptions that this frame is built upon:

- Organizations exist to serve human needs rather than the converse
- People and organizations need each other. Organizations need the ideas, energy, and talent; people need the careers, salaries, and opportunities
- When the fit between individual and systems is poor, one or both suffer. Individuals are exploited or exploit the organization—they both suffer
- A good fit benefits both. Individuals find meaningful and satisfying work and organizations get the talent and energy they need to succeed. (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 117)

Each principal in the study chose to be the leader of the ALP and had a heart to work with at-risk students. All but two of the teachers that were chosen for the study wanted to work in the ALP. At Best Academy, Mr. Johns' looks for "people that I want to come work here, I want people with heart and compassion for people, not just kids, because this business is a lot more than kids, it's an entire community." He looks for staff members that "will not target my kids and target negative behaviors instead of trying to fix them." It was mentioned earlier in the dissertation that the only two "negative vibes" I got during my research came from these teachers. Three of the principals in the study noted that

districts have been known to “assign” teachers and school leaders to the ALP in order to remove them from traditional settings due to performance. This move often had a negative impact on the culture as the school personnel assigned to their roles had negative attitudes toward not only their jobs, but the students as well. Student expectations were lowered by these individuals as they did not take the time to get to know the students and their circumstances before passing judgement. In some cases, it also impacted the way they delivered instruction to the students.

Balanced Curriculum

All of the principals and staff members in the study spoke of innovative ways to deliver the necessary curriculum to students in their schools. Ability levels of students were so vast in some cases that teachers were running multiple lessons within the same class period. This was one way that individualized instruction was taking place in the buildings. Some students were so far behind their peers on abilities that teachers had to get creative in meeting their needs. Three of the four schools used a blended learning model to incorporate both online learning along with teacher led instruction. Class groupings were the norm for the classrooms at the school sites. The one thing that stood out from the study for me was the fact that in many school districts, school leaders were providing tons of staff development to address differentiation in the traditional classrooms and this is an area that teachers in ALP’s seem to have down to an art form. It is highly recommended that district personnel visit and witness this in the ALP classrooms and allow the ALP teachers the opportunity to present how they incorporate this type of learning environment into daily operations. The success of this would be

twofold, traditional classroom teachers would know that it works and could visit and see it in action in their own districts but it would also validate a job well done for the ALP teachers. It would serve as a morale boost for the work that ALP teachers are doing. Another example of creative lesson design was seen at Best Academy where they incorporated the flipped classroom approach. They assigned video lessons as homework assignments where the teachers taped the teacher led instruction parts and the students practiced the model in the classroom the next day. This proved to be successful for all parties involved and the students always had a video to refer back to when they did not understand. It allowed the teacher more time to spend with students in small groups to address their comprehension issues. When speaking about curriculum at Best Academy, Mr. John's is always looking for innovative ways to expand current offerings with such a limited staff. He feels that students are not provided enough variety in career exploration when they are assigned to the Alternative Learning Program and he thinks this is one area that needs it the most.

Personal Reflection: Academic Academy Alternative Learning Program

During the 2012-2013 school year, I was given the opportunity to redesign the Alternative Learning Program in my district. The Academic Academy Alternative Learning Program admitted students using one of three criteria: long term suspended students (LTS), school referral for students who are having trouble adjusting to life in the traditional school setting either for academic or disciplinary reasons, and student self-referral. With little experience in alternative education beyond the normal scope of dealing with IEP's for students, I began the journey without a working knowledge of

dealing with students who were struggling with issues far beyond the scope of the regular classroom. I was given rein on how to redesign the school without a lot of assistance or guidance.

The former alternative learning program was suffering from a lack of proper guidance and poor academic success for the students. The school was full of students who had major issues and the discipline was a major concern. The students were running the school and this was obvious by the district having to employ additional School Resource Officers for the last two months of school just to assure the safety of those who attended. At a leadership meeting, our superintendent notified all principals of the plan to redesign and to move the location of the school to a new site in a neighboring town. She asked for experienced leaders to consider applying for the principal job as she was replacing the former administrative team. I had little to no interest in this position. As time passed, I was asked to apply and after meeting with both the Superintendent and the Assistant Superintendent, I was given the job.

One of the best things that I was given freedom in doing as the new leader was the opportunity to hire a new staff. All former employees of the school site were given the opportunity to apply and I ended up hiring only one teacher from that pool. The culture of a school is dependent on leadership and teacher involvement and I thought since I had the opportunity, it was a perfect time to make this change. The next major decision was the facility where we moved the program. It was a nice building but needed some aesthetic upgrades. I negotiated regarding the contents of the facility that the district allows us to purchase all new furniture and supplies to open the school. These two moves

were the only thing I knew that allow me to immediately impact the culture of the new school. As for curriculum, I was overwhelmed to see the drastic range of student comprehension as when the first group of students arrived on our campus but was blessed that I hired a competent staff to help figure out our plan for student learning. We began the year with 30 of the hardest students that were in the previous site and we knew the first few days would make the difference in how the school year would go. We had a plan.

I was blessed with the placement of an exceptional school resource officer that had a passion for working with students. He made the most impact of anyone on our redesign process. This is also an area that needs to be considered when redesigning a program. Creating a culture based on relationship was a necessity that we had gotten right. We greeted every student as they came in the door on a daily basis. We had great relationship with the parents. The one area that I would have benefitted from with this study was the relationship with the school community. We did some things in the area but we should have volunteered more often and advertised the success of our students. Taking the time to build quality working relationships with the local authorities would have strengthened our program by providing more role models for the students.

Conclusion

Alternative education can be successful if the right support pieces are in place from the beginning. It is widely known that students often work to the expectation of those supervising them and working with the at-risk population is no different. Each of the schools in the study has success stories of students who not only graduated from high

school, but also has gone on to enroll in the community college and is doing well. They noted that students often return to share their appreciation for all that the staff at the ALP did for them in redirecting their lives and told them that they would not have ever believed they could achieve what they have without them. For many of these students, the ALP was the first time in their schooling that they felt that someone genuinely cared about their well-being and was there for them regardless of their issues. If the right people are in the right places and they are working with a common cause, students will always benefit.

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