

**THE IMPACT OF THE SAMANTHA ACADEMY OF CREATIVE
EDUCATION (SACE) ON STUDENTS PLACED AT RISK AT A
SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL IN SOUTHWEST TEXAS**

A Dissertation

by

PATRICK JAY VALDEZ

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2009

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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Approved by:

Co-Chairs of Committee,	Luana Zellner Gwendolyn Webb-Johnson
Committee Members,	Virginia Collier Alvin Larke
Head of Department,	Jim Scheurich

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ABSTRACT

The Impact of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) on Students
Placed at Risk at a Suburban High School in Southwest Texas. (May 2009)

Patrick Jay Valdez, B.S., Texas A&M University;

M.A., The University of Texas at San Antonio

Co-Chairs of Advisory Committee: Dr. Luana Zellner
Dr. Gwendolyn Webb-Johnson

Reducing student dropout is of extreme importance to the United States. The loss in revenue as well as in human terms is huge. Several problems exist concerning students placed at-risk for dropping out. These include no agreed upon method of calculating drop out rates, differing opinions on the causes of school dropout, and a body of literature that is sparse concerning educational approaches for keeping students placed at-risk in school. This study examined the impact of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) on the students placed at-risk and the teacher perceptions of the SACE program by the teachers working in the program at a suburban high school of Southwest Texas.

The population of this mixed-methods study consisted of secondary general education students from a large suburban high school in Southwest Texas who had been placed at-risk. One of these groups consisted of students that participated in the SACE program while the other group consisted of a similar group of students not participating in SACE. Statistical tests were conducted to determine if a difference

existed between the two groups with regard to graduation rate, attendance rate, and core grade average. Perceptions of the SACE program by the teachers that worked within the SACE program were gathered.

Results indicate that student placed at-risk who participated in the SACE program had higher core grade averages, higher rates of graduation, and higher rates of attendance compared to students placed at-risk within the same high school who did not participate in SACE. Teachers perceived that the SACE program was efficacious for students placed at risk because of three broad themes. This study further demonstrated that effective programs aimed at helping students placed at-risk can be developed within the context of a regular high school setting. Recommendations for further research and implications for practice were provided.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
ABSTRACT		iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		v
TABLE OF CONTENTS		vii
LIST OF TABLES.....		ix
LIST OF FIGURES		xi
 CHAPTER		
I	INTRODUCTION	1
	Statement of the Problem	4
	Purpose of the Study.....	5
	The Samantha Academy of Creative Education.....	6
	Research Questions.....	11
	Operational Definitions	11
	Assumptions	14
	Limitations.....	15
	Significance of the Study.....	15
	Organization of the Dissertation.....	16
II	LITERATURE REVIEW.....	18
	The Research Problem.....	18
	Historical Evolution of the Definition of Dropouts.....	21
	Characteristics of Student Dropouts	26
	Why Students Drop Out of Schools	30
	What Schools Are Doing to Address the Student Dropout Problem	40
	Alternative School Approaches to Dropout Prevention	46
	Dropout Prevention Programs	49
	Conclusion.....	52
III	METHODOLOGY.....	55
	Introduction	55
	Purpose of the Study.....	56
	Research Design	57

CHAPTER	Page
Population of School and District.....	58
Student Population of Study.....	59
Population of Teachers Used in the Study.....	61
SACE.....	61
Procedures Used for the Study.....	62
Procedures and Instruments.....	63
Limitations.....	66
Human Participation.....	67
Summary.....	67
 IV RESULTS—QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	 69
Variables within the Study.....	71
Research Question 1.....	73
Research Question 2.....	78
Research Question 3.....	82
Summary of Findings.....	84
 V RESULTS—QUALITATIVE RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	 85
Data Collection and Analysis.....	86
Participant Profiles.....	88
Research Findings.....	90
Summary.....	98
 VI SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	 99
Summary.....	99
Purpose of the Study.....	100
Summary of Results.....	101
Statement of the Problem.....	102
Methodology.....	103
Conclusions and Findings.....	104
Implications for Practice.....	111
Recommendations Based on This Study.....	113
Recommendations for Further Study.....	115
 REFERENCES.....	 117
 VITA.....	 124

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	Page
1. Counts of Students by Grade of Students Represented in Both the SACE Group and Non-SACE Group	60
2. Percentages of Student Groups by Ethnicity and Race	61
3. Number (N), Mean, and Standard Deviation for the Core Subject Grade Averages of Students Organized by Their Status in the SACE Program and the Semester of Analysis	73
4. Independent Samples t-Test for Core Subject Grade Average for the Semester of SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances not Assumed	75
5. Independent Samples t-Test for Core Subject Grade Average for the First Semester after Completion of SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variance not Assumed	75
6. Independent Samples t-Test for Core Subject Grade Average for the Second Semester after Completion of SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variance not Assumed	76
7. Independent Samples t-Test for Core Subject Grade Average for the Third Semester after Completion of SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances Assumed.....	77
8. Independent Samples t-Test for Core Subject Grade Average for the Fourth Semester after Completion of SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances not Assumed (Alpha Level Is 0.05.)	78
9. Number (N), Mean, and Standard Deviation for the Attendance of Students Organized by Their Status in the SACE Program and the Semester of Analysis	78
10. Independent Samples t-Test for Attendance for the Semester of SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variance not Assumed....	80
11. Independent Samples t-Test for Attendance for the First Semester After SACE Enrollment with Equal Variances Assumed	80

TABLE	Page
12. Independent Samples t-Test for Attendance for the Second Semester after SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances not Assumed	81
13. Independent Samples t-Test for Attendance for the Third Semester after SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances not Assumed	82
14. Counts of SACE and Non-SACE Students Who Graduated, Dropped Out, Left the High School to Attend Non-Public School, and Students Who Transferred during the Time Period of Fall 2005 – Spring 2008.....	83
15. Chi-Square Analysis for SACE Enrollment and Graduation Rates	83

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	Page
1. The Three Themes—Bureaucratic Autonomy, Flexibility and Responsiveness, and Educational Paradigm Reversal Working in Concert to Keep the SACE Program above the Line of Effectiveness.....	98

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The No Child Left Behind Act has mandated increasing accountability within schools with the aim of making sure that all children within the public school system are successful. The purpose of this legislation is to institute an accountability system via high stakes testing for all student groups. Schools will be judged according to the statistics generated by their students' test scores, as well as their students' completion rates and dropout rates (Shriburg & Shriburg, 2006). Dropouts have been a problem within the system for many years, and have reached epidemic proportions (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). The issue of high school dropouts was not a wide spread concern for the general public and even educators until the early 90s (Dorn, 1993). With the increased accountability that No Child Left Behind has brought into play, school districts can no longer ignore the drop out problem (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). Unfortunately, defining a dropout, as well as such terms as graduation rate and school completion rate are notoriously difficult to do. The definition and method of calculation of such terms varies by state and even by district within states (Shriburg & Shriburg, 2006). They went on to state that this lack of a

The style and format for this dissertation follow that of the *Journal of Educational Research*.

common language muddies the waters for educators and researchers seeking to address this issue, but that the dropout problem is huge and is most likely bigger than reported.

A wide body of literature exists on the potential causes as well as the predictors that may typify potential dropouts (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Two broad hypotheses exist to explain why students drop out (Finn, 1989). The first, Finn posited, lies in the frustration and subsequent low self-esteem felt by academically struggling students. These students develop a self-perception that causes them to struggle and oppose school and may lead to an impairment that eventually leads them to drop out of school (1989). Finn developed the participation-identification model, which indicates that the reason for students dropping out is the marginalization and alienation felt by students who are not actively involved in some way with the school. Students who are involved gain acceptance into the larger school culture and are thus able to identify with the school's mission and objectives, making successful school completion more probable (1989). These broad causative factors are fleshed out into great detail and specificity in the accompanying literature. Although the literature of this type is rich with information on the causes and characteristics of dropouts, the same cannot be said of the literature that pertains to dropout prevention programs (Kelly & Prevatt, 2003).

In order to garner a basic understanding of the dropout problem in the United States, one must first understand the historical roots of school dropouts. The term *dropout* first appeared in the literature in the early 1900s (Dorn, 1996). In fact, early in the 20th century, students who did not complete high school were the norm, rather

than the exception. Dorn further stated that the problems associated with students who did not attend school and eventually left the school system were not documented at length until the mid 1950s. The first terms used to describe these students included *student elimination*, *withdrawals*, and *early school leavers*. The term *dropout* was not popularized until the 1960s. Cohesive research into this area of education may not have moved to the forefront of educational research because students' completion or non-completion of high school had no real economic impact until the late 1950s and 1960s. During this time, critics voiced concerns that high schools were failing to train enough students for a highly technical workforce with enough high-level skills and comprehensive schooling. Critics further argued that high schools were not producing a workforce capable of maintaining a technical elite work force that could keep America safe from the threat of the Soviet Union. Other researchers recognized the need not only for a technical elite workforce, but also for a universally well-educated society educated by the high school. This fact points to a shift in the education paradigm as students graduating with a high school diploma became the societal norm. Whereas the school systems of the first part of the twentieth century were concerned with improving efficiency by creating attrition, school systems of the latter half of the twentieth century were concerned that dropouts become "poor, mal-adjusted, and delinquent" (Dorn, 1996). Dorn contended that the resulting strain between egalitarian and manpower concerns produced a great debate that may have placed students in the middle as their respective school districts and high schools vacillated between the existing educational ideologies. The result, Dorn asserted, is a lack of research and literature, as well as no clear agreement, about the causes and

solutions to the ever-present problem of school dropouts during this time. James Bryant Conant (1959) once stated in so many words that over a million kids in America fail to obtain a high school diploma, comparing it to a loss of our most important natural resource. This statement is an important one to note since it is as salient now, as it was more than forty years ago (Dorn, 1993).

Statement of the Problem

The cost of high school dropouts to the United States is huge. Billions of dollars are lost each year in lost productivity and tax revenue. The cost in human terms is equally high. Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, divorced, and have children that ultimately dropout of high school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Bridgeland et al. stated that for each dropout the cost to the nation is between 1.7 and 2.3 million dollars over their lifetime. Further, these authors stated that despite the known facts that dropouts can expect to lead lives of lower quality and negatively impact our society economically, the problem has largely been ignored. With increased accountability systems being brought to bear on the nation's public educational systems, the problem of students dropping out of school can no longer be ignored.

Most importantly, literature indicates a scarcity of existing research documenting effective dropout prevention programs. Research is quick to point out cause and effect of school dropouts, but does not indicate solutions. The research question of what impact an alternative program within a regular high school has on the academic performance variables of core grade average, attendance, and dropout rate for

students placed at-risk of dropping out begs to be answered. Couple these questions with the additional question of what the teacher perceptions of the impact SACE has on student academic would give a complete picture of the true impact of a dropout prevention program based within a high school has. Answering these research questions would add to the very sparse research base of characteristics of effective dropout prevention programs.

Purpose of the Study

A program within the context of a large 5A high school that is part of a suburban school district of Southwest Texas was developed. The program is named the Samantha Academy of Creative Education, also called SACE. SACE is unique because it incorporates the most current educational practices alongside strategies employed by alternative school settings. These include such things as small teacher-student ratios and individualized curriculums that incorporate student choice, all without having to give up the benefits that students receive when attending a large traditional school setting. These benefits include increased elective and career preparatory course offerings as well as clubs, athletics, and fine arts offerings. The basic premise of this program is that once students fall behind in their number of credits and are not promoted to the next grade, they are more likely to disengage from school and drop out. The SACE program catches students up to their peers academically by making it possible for them to recover credits at twice the normal pace and reconnects them to the academic institution from which they had had been disconnected.

The purpose this study is to examine the impact of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) on the students placed at-risk as reported in school records and the teacher perceptions of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) program by the teachers working in the program at a suburban high school of Southwest Texas.

The Samantha Academy of Creative Education

The Samantha Academy of Creative Education, or SACE, was conceived by the head of guidance and counseling at a suburban high school of a school district located in Southwest Texas in 2004. It is a program designed to reach students that had been placed at risk of dropping out of school by allowing them to retake core courses at an accelerated rate and receive support services, while continuing in their age-appropriate course of study. The creation of the program was a direct response to the changing of the districts promotion policy and the inability of the district's dedicated dropout prevention campus to deal with underclass students. This new promotion policy mandated an increase in the number and type of credits needed to move from one grade to the next. Students were thus being retained at alarming rates as a result of this policy, thereby placing them at risk of dropping out. In the school year 2004-2005, approximately one third of all freshmen were retained because of insufficient numbers of credits. Failure was most pronounced in the core subjects of mathematics, social studies, English, and science.

The school district has one dedicated alternative campus to address dropout prevention, and retrieval. This small campus, named The Academy of Creative

Education (ACE) services all six of the district's 5A high schools. ACE utilizes non-traditional curriculum and procedures. Procedures are very non-traditional at ACE. There are no bells. In fact, students can work in any classroom for as long as they like. ACE teachers do not use direct teaching; instead they utilize small groups and individual instruction for their mode of instructional delivery. The campus is open, and the hours of attendance are flexible. Students can come and go as they wish, but they must complete at least 20 hours of attendance per week. Hours and behavior are monitored on cards. Students and their teachers also use these cards to provide feedback. Rooms are decorated with student work and there is a variety of furniture, not just desks, for the students to use. The curriculum is tailored around the student's needs, abilities, interests and learning styles. High academic standards and small teacher to student ratios are a hallmark of classes at ACE. Students are allowed to work in a self paced fashion and can earn credits as quickly as they can finish them. Students are directed to finish two half-credit courses, usually in different subject areas, by nine weeks. Technology and integration of subjects are key facets to the ACE program of study. Examples of this type of integration include math/science projects, or art/English projects. All of this is coupled to the expectation of ACE personnel to build strong personal relationships with their students. A strong mentorship program is present and comprised of key members of the local science, engineering, and business community. This provides students with ample opportunities to plan their life after graduation. The aforementioned points illustrate the strengths of ACE.

Two drawbacks concerning ACE do exist, however. The first, and the most relevant to SACE's formation, is the entrance requirements. In order to be considered for admission, students have to have at least 16 credits (Juniors), be at least 17 years of age, and have passed all sections of the exit-level, state-mandated assessments. The second drawback is the small size of the campus which can only accommodate a maximum of 120 students. These drawbacks had the effect of marginalizing a huge section of the at-risk population of the district. This section is comprised of the underclass, under-aged students who could not attain the admission requirements, or could not wait to be fit into the campus because ACE was full. It was these two drawbacks and the increasing number of underclass retentions due to the new promotion policy which led to the formation of SACE.

The basic design of SACE emulates many of the practices, procedures, and curriculum beliefs of ACE. The SACE classroom allows students of all grades, subjects and levels to recover core credits in English, mathematics, science and social studies in an accelerated fashion. Students can earn back in nine weeks what would normally take a semester. The curriculum is written by the teachers and it is designed to be project based and self paced. Student choice is a valued part of the curriculum as well as opportunities to integrate subjects. Credit recovery software is also available as a supplement to the curriculum. SACE teachers do not use any form of direct teach lecture. Small group and individual instruction, like ACE, is the norm within SACE. In order to become a SACE student an interview is conducted by a SACE teacher so that the student is aware of expectations and knowledgeable about the workings of the program. A contract is signed by the student, teacher, and parent

acknowledging their commitment to success. One of the student's electives is dropped from their schedule and a period of SACE is added. The non-traditional design of ACE is pervasive in the SACE program, and it can be seen in its curriculum, pacing, and student choice.

The physical arrangement of the SACE room was made to enable students to utilize computer stations, work tables, and desks. Student work samples and works of art decorate the walls. The normal drab and impersonal feel of the typical high school classroom was replaced in SACE with a room that is personal and vivid for the students. This arrangement was purposeful so that the arrangement of the room was made comfortable and nurturing. The physical arrangement is also practical because it permits students ease of access, especially to the computer stations.

Guidance services are regularly provided to the students. Schedules are hand prepared to give students the optimal arrangements of subjects and sections. Other guidance services readily available to the students include career counseling and interpersonal counseling. Students are taught to interpret their transcripts and monitor their own progress thereby helping students to establish an internal locus of control. Families of the students are encouraged to be an active part of the program. SACE holds parent nights twice each semester to inform and advise parents. Community members form a mentorship component for SACE. These mentors visit the students regularly to reinforce the importance of staying in school as well as providing them an invaluable support structure. Perhaps the most important part of SACE is the relationships that are formed between the educators and the students. To sum it up, once a student is part of SACE, they are part of it until they graduate. No matter what,

the student has a connection to the school through SACE. For the most part, they never have had this connection before. SACE students always have resources available because of their connection to SACE.

The suburban high School designed SACE to allow students to recover credits in core classes at an accelerated rate so that they are not subject to the ill effects of academic failure and grade retention that often lead to dropout. The students are connected back to their school and given lasting interpersonal guidance services and academic supports. They are made to feel, often for the first time, that they are part of a family at their high school. Students are eligible to apply to the SACE program if they have failed at least one core class. Students fill out applications and, along with their parents and SACE staff, sign a contract of commitment. The students are then interviewed by one of the SACE teachers where they are informed of the program's expectations. If the student chooses to pursue entrance into SACE they are admitted. Students are then withdrawn out of an elective that they do not need to graduate and are signed up for a period of SACE. Students continue in their age and grade appropriate core classes at the high school while in SACE. When the students have completed their course in SACE, they receive a grade of 70 (since they are replacing a failing grade) and if possible go back into their elective that they left. If circumstances do not permit re-integration into the old elective class, then they work on TAKS preparation until the completion of the semester. SACE therefore allows students to catch up to where they were supposed to be academically and get on track to graduate at the high school, or garner enough credits to transition to ACE. SACE therefore is unique in that it enables very at-risk students to be successful on their

own campus. SACE does this by employing non-traditional practices and an accelerated self paced curriculum coupled with guidance services, mentoring, nurturing staff, and parent involvement all within the context of a traditional setting of a high school.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in core grade averages at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?
2. What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in attendance at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?
3. What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in graduation rates at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?
4. What are the teacher perceptions of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) program by the teachers working in the program?

Operational Definitions

The findings of this study were reviewed within the context of the following definitions of operational terminology.

Academic Achievement Records: These are records for students in grades 9 – 12. The records are kept in cumulative files and they reflect pertinent information such as attendance and grades. These records also include information stored electronically in the district's mainframe computer system.

Academic Performance: A student's accomplishments while enrolled in school are considered to be his or academic performance; variables for academic performance for this study include attendance, core grade averages, and completion of high school.

At-Risk Students: These students are placed at risk of dropping out of high school before they have earned a diploma. This may be due to many factors including, but not limited to, psychosocial problems, school failure, and retention. Students failing at least one semester of a core class are classified at-risk for this study.

Attendance Rates: The attendance rate is number of times that a student attends class and is marked present by the teacher of record into the official attendance record. For this study the attendance period of record is second and sixth periods.

Core Subjects: Core subjects in this study are defined as any science, social studies, mathematics, or English class. These courses must be taken by students to fulfill graduation requirements.

Core Subject Grade Average: The grade average is determined by adding together all of core class semester grades shown on the student's academic achievement record and then dividing that total by the total number of semester classes taken.

Dropout Rates: The dropout rate is the percentage of students who do not complete their graduation requirements. It is determined by dividing the number of students

that drop out of high school and by the total number of students who begin high school.

Dropout: A student who has left the school district and cannot be accounted for as a transfer, non public school student, or graduate.

Grades: Grades are assigned to students based on a scale of 0 – 100. Letter grades are assigned to ranges within this scale as 0 – 69 = F, 70 – 74 = D, 75 – 79 = C, 80 – 89 = B, 90 – 100 = A.

Graduate: A student who has met the graduation requirements of the state of Texas

Graduation Rate: The percentage of students who successfully graduate; this percentage is calculated by dividing the number of students who meet graduation requirements divided by the total number of students in either of the study's two groups of students.

Non-SACE Student: Any student in grades 9-11 who is not enrolled, but eligible to be in the SACE program is considered a non-SACE student

Non-Public School: Any school that is not a state accredited school; this term includes charter schools, private schools, and home school.

SACE: This is an acronym for the Samantha Academy of Creative Education. This is a dropout prevention program. The curriculum is self-paced and interdisciplinary. The SACE program is limited to the core subjects of English I, II, III, and IV, world geography, world history, United States history, government, economics, algebra I, II, geometry, integrated physics and chemistry, and biology. It is housed in one room in a suburban high School, located in Southwest Texas.

SACE Students: These are students in grades 9 – 12 who have been identified as needing to recover credit for classes due to previous failure or non-credit because of absences and scheduled into the SACE program. These students have been placed at-risk.

SACE Teachers: A teacher at the 5A suburban high school who teaches in the SACE program for at least one period

Southwest Texas school district: This school district encompasses approximately 140 square miles. The district has a student population of approximately 60,000 students.

Suburban High School: This high school is one of six 5A high schools located within the boundaries of a school district located in Southwest Texas.

Transfer: A student who has left the studied suburban high school and either moved within district, out of district, out of the city, or out of the state.

Assumptions

The findings of this study were preceded by the following assumptions.

1. The researcher was impartial and objective in collecting and analyzing the data.
2. Interpretation of the data collected accurately reflects the intent of the respondent.
3. The methodology proposed and described here offers the most logical and appropriate design for this particular research project.
4. The records used to collect data are accurate and precise.

Limitations

This research was bound by its context. The findings may not be generalized to any other groups of students or schools. The scope of this study was limited to a high school in Southwest Texas. The study was based upon school records, the information obtained from the literature review, and the interviews obtained from the SACE teachers. The accuracy of these records and literature has the potential to affect the validity of the findings.

Significance of the Study

A definition of insanity may be *doing the same thing again and again and expecting different results*. Students who fail a required course or who receive non-credit for a required course are most often required to repeat, sometimes repeatedly, the same curriculum employed the same way. A suburban high school has used some of its resources to create a program that enables students to recover these lost credits in an accelerated way that employees student choice within the curriculum. This in turn leads to an increased rate of student success in recovering lost credits. These students are able to catch up to their classmates and ultimately graduate on time.

School failure is a major reason that students drop out of school. One group of researchers cited that 35% of students who drop out say school failure is a major factor for them leaving school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Some of the characteristics cited in National Association of Secondary School Principals (2004) can be found in the SACE program. Two of these are the foundation of SACE. One, the curriculum and teaching strategies are adjustable to allow students to realize their academic

goals. Two, the interactions between the students and teachers are increased in both quantity and quality. There is a tight knit relationship among the SACE faculty and students. Students will do things for teachers and staff that they care about (Sergiovanni, 1996).

The demonstration that settings such as SACE can have very positive effects may serve as an example that not all students respond to rows of desks and lecture after lecture followed by a test. Some students need out-of-the-box settings to really respond and connect with school. Choices and pacing of programs like SACE should influence student success. Smaller learning communities, like SACE, have a positive impact on dropout rates, increased attendance, and increased grade averages (McAndrews & Anderson, 2002). Settings like SACE may point the way towards solutions to increasing success for all students.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into six major chapters. Chapter I contains an introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, operational definitions, assumptions and limitations, and significance of the study. A review of the literature is found in Chapter II. Chapter III is a description of the methodology employed, including the population, procedure, instrumentation, and data analysis. Chapter IV contains the analysis and comparisons of the quantitative data collected in the study. Chapter V contains the analysis and results of the qualitative data collected in the study. Chapter VI is a summary of the findings from

this study and conclusions and implications from those findings. Recommendations for practices and direction for future research are addressed in this chapter as well.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Research Problem

Shriberg and Shriberg (2006) stated that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has mandated increasing accountability within schools with the aims of making sure that all children within the public school system are successful. This legislation is intended to institute an accountability system via high stakes testing for all student groups (NCLB, 2001). Schools will be judged according to the statistics that are generated by their students' test scores, as well as their students' completion rates and dropout rates (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). It is important to use these multiple indicators of student success, because institutions have demonstrated that the overall scores on standardized tests can be raised by encouraging students to dropout or targeting test scores without addressing dropouts. In addition, NCLB legislation calls for states to incorporate graduation rates into their annual report cards (Bowditch, 1993; Riehl, 1999). Students on the academic bubble, like English Language Learners and students with disabilities, have trouble passing their state's standardized exit exam and appear to be squeezed out of school because they cannot pass the state's standardized test (Minnici, Zabala, & Bartley, 2007). Accurate interpretation of individual indicators such as test scores, dropout rates, and graduation rates can also help school leaders zero in on where scarce resources should be funneled (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Dropouts have been a problem within the system for many years (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Bridgeland et al. have even stated that dropout rates have reached epidemic proportions. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) (1983) published *A Nation at Risk*. This report sounded an alarm by stating that the United States educational system had fallen behind other industrialized nations (NCEE, 1983). This had the effect of calling for dramatic reforms in the educational system, yet little attention was brought to bear on the problem of school dropouts (Suh & Suh, 2007). The issue of high school dropouts was not a wide spread concern amongst the general public and even educators until the early 1990s (Dorn, 1993). With the increased accountability mandated by legislation similar to No Child Left Behind, school districts can no longer ignore the dropout problem (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). Unfortunately, defining a dropout, as well as such terms as *graduation rate* and *school completion rate*, is notoriously difficult. The definition and method of calculation of such terms varies by state and even by districts within states (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). Shriberg and Shriberg went on to state that this lack of a common language muddies the waters for educators and researchers seeking to address this issue, but one thing is clear: the dropout problem is huge and is most likely bigger than reported. Orfield (2007) wrote that depending on the state or school district, statistics are calculated in a number of ways, which affects how a school operates. It is not simply a case of adding the number of dropouts and the number of graduates to account for 100% of the students. For example, some districts assume that when a student drops out, they enroll at another school. This is the line of thought in Texas and California school districts. These two states report

very low dropout rates, yet have huge numbers of students who never graduate (Orfield, 2007). Very little money is spent addressing the issue of calculating correct data concerning dropouts. This is coupled with the fact that the traditionally structured high school does not facilitate the educational needs of the students placed at-risk, and the problems of dropouts equates to one of catastrophic proportions (Munoz, 2002; Orfield, 2007).

There exists a wide body of literature on the potential causes and predictors that may typify potential dropouts (Bridgeland et al., 2006). This does, however, not hold true for prevention programs that target potential dropouts (Kelly & Prevatt, 2003). Research into this area is needed because of the lack of relevant data concerning the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs (Kelly & Prevatt, 2003). This literature review was an examination of the literature concerning the history of dropouts in the United States, current statistics on dropouts, the indicators and causes of dropouts, and current school efforts to curb dropouts. This literature review further examined the state of the existing research as it pertains to effective treatments and strategies for the prevention of dropouts. The reviewed literature will serve as an indicator of the lack of research regarding effective dropout prevention programs, especially those housed on school campuses. The research problem revolves around the problem of effective programs within school systems aimed at preventing and reducing the dropout rate. Background issues that surround the problem of school dropouts illustrate possible causes of the lack of research into the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs.

Both primary and secondary sources relevant to the elucidation of the multiple facets of the research problem regarding successful dropout prevention programs were utilized to garner full understanding of the research problem. The following areas were addressed in this literature review.

1. Historical evolution of the definition of dropouts
2. Characteristics of student dropouts
3. Why students drop out of school
4. What schools are doing to address the student dropout problem
5. Alternative school approaches to student dropout prevention
6. Dropout Prevention Programs

With one exception, there is a large body of literature on all the subjects regarding dropouts. This exception is the lack of empirical research on effective dropout prevention programs based on campuses, including teacher perceptions of what makes certain programs more or less successful than others.

Historical Evolution of the Definition of Dropouts

The term *dropout* has its roots in the early 1900s (Dorn, 1993). Early in the twentieth century, not finishing high school was the norm, rather than the exception. Students were expected to attend through grammar school. Indeed, for children of the earliest of days of the United States, schooling after grammar school was considered only for the privileged (Cohen, 1974). The first high schools sprang up in the early nineteenth century, but attendance was not mandatory (Reese, 1995). The most important fact about these high schools was their availability and access to all

youth regardless of the class of individual (Reese, 1995). This was markedly different from the private schools reserved for the wealthy, but the purpose of both types of schools was to prepare students for college (Dorn, 1996). Early high schools remained selective in their admission. In fact, selectivity was encouraged to promote enrollment of only the best students into high school from the primary grades (Dorn, 1993). As Dorn pointed out, this selectivity caused high schools to be unpopular with the local citizens that supported them. The majority of these schools had little connection to community save for the selected few headed to a university or college (Dorn, 1996). As attendance became more widespread in high schools of the early twentieth century so did their popularity (Dorn, 1996). During the early 1900s, child labor was restricted and there was an explosion of immigration. This had the effect of freeing up more adolescents to enroll in high school and attendance of high school was encouraged to keep students off the streets (Dorn, 1996). More and more citizens were able to connect to the idea of high school as more of their children attended them (Dorn, 1996). According to Dorn, however, problems associated with students that did not attend school or eventually left the school system were not documented at length until the mid 1950s. Indeed, the problem of students who did not complete school was not at the forefront of public education. Non-graduation was considered merely an inevitable effect of Social Darwinism. The vacillating purpose of high school education, to be a credentialing institution for graduates to enter the world of work, or a preparatory institution for graduates planning on attending college or a university, also played a significant part in student non-graduation and may still play a role today (Dorn, 1996).

The first terms used to describe students that left high schools before graduation included *student elimination*, *withdrawals*, and *early school leavers*. The term *dropout* was not penned until the 1960s and arose out of the idea that students who left the system with no job would end up as social pariahs and delinquents. Perhaps the lack of cohesive research into this area of education did not move to the forefront of educational research because it had no economic impact until the late 1950s and 1960s. During this time, critics such as Admiral Hyman Rickover raised concerns over whether the high schools were failing to train enough students for an increasingly technical workforce requiring high-level skills and comprehensive schooling. Rickover argued that high schools were not producing a workforce capable of maintaining technical elite that could keep America safe from the threat of the Soviet Union. Other researchers recognized the need not only for a technical elite workforce, but also for a society universally well educated by the high school (Conant 1959; Snepp, 1956). This fact indicates a shift in the educational paradigm as students who graduated with a high school diploma became the societal norm. Whereas the school systems of the first part of the 20th century were concerned with improving efficiency by creating attrition, school systems of the latter half of the twentieth century were concerned that dropouts become poor, maladjusted, delinquent and involved in criminal activities (Dorn, 1996; O'Neil, 1963). Dorn (1996) continued by stating that the resulting strain between the egalitarian and labor concerns produced a great debate that may have placed students in the middle as their respective school districts and high schools vacillated between the existing educational ideologies. The result, Dorn contended, is a lack of research and

literature, as well as no clear agreement, about the causes and solutions to the ever-present problem of school dropouts during the latter part of the 20th century.

Several important researchers helped form some very insightful points concerning students that failed to graduate from high school. Schrieber (1964) was one of the first researchers to look at the problem of dropping out of school and one of the first crusaders in addressing the dropout problem. Schrieber pointed out that how American education solves the problem of school dropouts may well determine America's future. Schrieber (1964) was one of the first researchers to recognize that dropping out was also an issue affecting the poor and disenfranchised. Students that dropped out of high school would ultimately affect the economy of the nation because they would be unemployable due to a lack of a high school diploma. Conant (1959) stated that over a million youth in America fail to obtain a high school diploma, comparing this to a loss of our most important natural resource. It is important to note these issues still maintain their saliency more than forty years after these initial observations (Conant, 1959; Dorn, 1993; Schrieber, 1964). Dorn (1993) maintained, however, that the idea of students dropping out as leading to social chaos is false. He contended that dropouts are not the end all of educational problems, but just one of the many problems to be faced and that this problem does not to be over simplified, nor do students who drop out need to be stereotyped. To Dorn, the purpose of high schools should not be to act as purely credentialing bodies, or as comprehensive institutions to prepare graduates for college. He further argued that these two dichotomous functions traditionally served by the United States'

public high schools marginalize some students to the point of pushing them out of the system and onto the streets before matriculation (Dorn, 1996).

It is crucial to recognize that high school dropouts cost the United States billions of dollars each year due to lost productivity and tax revenue. More than 12 million students are expected to drop out of school over the next decade. This will cost the nation approximately 12 trillion dollars in lost revenue (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, divorced, and have children that ultimately dropout of high school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). For each dropout, the cost to the nation is between 1.7 and 2.3 million dollars over their lifetime (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Dropouts represent more than 50% of the United States prison population (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1998) and more than half of all heads of households receiving welfare support are dropouts (House Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. Congress, 2000). Dropouts have poorer levels of mental and physical health (Brusca-Vega, Yawkey, & Gonzalez, 1996; Morton, 1998; Stewart, 1999). Reduction of the dropout rate by 1% would reduce costs in the criminal justice system by 1.4 billion dollars every year (America Youth Policy Forum, 2006). Despite these economic facts and the fact that this problem has been recognized for more than a hundred years, dropouts have continued to stay off the radar of the American public, nor has there been any research into effective dropout prevention programs (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Characteristics of Student Dropouts

It is important to recognize the characteristics of dropouts, the statistics surrounding dropouts, why students drop out, and their regrets about dropping out of school. This is true because by better understanding this student population, educational leaders can more thoughtfully approach the basic problem of effective treatment approaches to reducing and preventing high dropout rates (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

One of the six goals enacted by lawmakers in the United States was to achieve a 90% graduation rate by the year 2000 (Dorn, 1996). Currently in Texas, this has not been achieved, even employing somewhat dubious measures that neglect to take into account students who are home-schooled or who cannot be accounted for outside the state (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). Texas is reported to have achieved a high school graduation rate of 84.2% for the class of 2003, 84.6% for the class of 2004, 84.0% for the class of 2005, and 80.4% for the class of 2006 (Texas Education Agency, 2006). Texas, as Shriberg and Shriberg (2006) wrote, removes any student that cannot be accounted for from its dropout calculation. Therefore, correlation between the graduation rate and the dropout rate present in the Texas calculation are nebulous at best. This problem of accounting for dropouts is not unique to Texas (Kelly & Prevatt, 2003). There is no universally accepted definition of what a dropout is amongst the states, thus confusing any statistical calculations (Kelly & Prevatt, 2003; Orfield, 2007). In another report, it was concluded that there are too many ways for states to calculate graduation and dropout rates (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The authors wrote that this enables systems to disguise the problem. More work

needs to be done to insure that data collection is accurate so that information on graduation and dropout rates can be monitored by each state over time (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Kemp (2006) described the two most common means of calculating dropout rates. The first is termed *the event method*. This method, she wrote, is favored by most school districts. The total number of dropouts is underestimated by this approach because it only measures the number of students who drop out in a single year. The cohort method is different in that it measures the number of students that start together and then graduate at the end of four years of high school. Until there is a uniform method of statistical calculation throughout the land, comparison of programs as well as overall general figures is difficult at best (Kemp, 2006).

In the United States, national research puts the graduation rate in the 68% to 71% range. This translates to nearly one-third of American youths failing to graduate from high school. These statistics may indicate much lower rates, depending on the accuracy one assigns them and depending on the method of the state calculations (Greene & Winters, 2005).

In the broadest of terms, dropouts are representative of the students that have poor grades, low attendance, high rates of grade retention, and disengagement from the school and classroom (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Newman, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992). These overarching characteristics are more important than a student's race, gender, or socio-economic status (Jerald, 2006; Rumsberger, 2007). It is important to note, however, that minorities within the United States fair much worse than normal. Nearly 50% fail to graduate with a regular diploma (Bridgeland

et al., 2006). While dropping out is not endemic to the inner city, these students are more likely to drop out than their suburban peers are. Students who have children while attending high school dramatically increase their risk of dropping out. In summary, low-income, minority, urban, single-parent students who attend large high schools located in the inner city are most likely to drop out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Minority student populations constitute the group of students with the highest growth rates within the United States. Unfortunately, these students are the ones that are characteristically the most probable of being at-risk and eventually dropping out of school (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2000). Nationally, 50% of African Americans and Hispanics will not graduate from high school in four years (Greene & Winters, 2005). Rumberger (2007) gave two primary reasons for this disparity. The first, he wrote, is based on a lack of resources and human social capital frameworks, thus termed a socioeconomic cause. Because these populations of people are most often the ones without resources, they are the ones most at risk of dropping out of school. Racial and ethnic minorities in the United States are more likely to be impoverished and attend poorer schools that have scarcer resources and poorer learning environments. This has the effect of increasing the likelihood of poor academic outcomes, including dropping out of school (Rumberger, 2007). If racial and ethnic groups attended schools with comparable racial and socioeconomic compositions, up to half of the observed differences in dropout rates that exist between whites and non-whites would be reduced (Mayer, 1991). Rumberger's second reason for the disparity in dropout rates between racial and ethnic minorities and whites is based on differences

in cultures, values, and attitudes. This can be termed a *sociocultural* cause. Rumberger wrote that sociocultural perspectives illustrate that racial groups and ethnic groups view education with very different lenses. This is explained by Ogbu (1992), who wrote that minorities can be classified into two groups. The first group is the group he terms voluntary minorities. These people immigrated to the United States of their own free will. Voluntary minorities do not see the learning of new behaviors and attitudes that are prerequisites for school success as threatening to their own language, culture, and identities. Voluntary minorities are, therefore, more likely to experience school success and stay in school. Ogbu called the second group involuntary minorities. These minorities, he points out, came to the United States against their own free will through either slavery or domination. This group of minorities does not easily acculturate to the behaviors and attitudes that lend themselves to school success within the dominant white culture (Ogbu, 1992). Rumberger (2007) pointed out that there is limited empirical evidence into the socioeconomic and sociocultural mechanisms that come into play that have the effect of dramatically increasing the probability that a student from a racial or ethnic minority will dropout of school.

According to Kemp (2006), students with disabilities also represent a population with a higher statistical probability of dropping out. Student with disabilities have a higher rate of dropping out of school as compared with their non-disabled peers. Minimal research into this specific population exists.

Dropout calculations remain nebulous. One specific uniform method of identifying school dropouts does not exist. This makes identifying characteristics of students

most at risk for dropping out difficult. There are certain broad characteristics that can be used to identify categories of students that are most at risk. The most commonly identified traits within the literature pertaining to students most at risk of dropping of school include: Students not involved in school, students with poor grades, students who have been retained, students of lower socioeconomic status, students of single parent households, minority students, and students with disabilities. Dropout rates are calculated to be between 29% and 32%, and there are broad characteristics for students that are most at-risk for dropping out. Therefore, it is incumbent to examine the literature for answers to understand more fully students who do drop out so that effective programs can be identified to prevent them from dropping out of school.

Why Students Drop Out of Schools

This question has been answered in several ways. In the simplest of definitions, it was stated in one article, “Dropping out of school is easy. Students who have done it said they simply stopped going one day” (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002, p. 43). Indeed, this attendance problem, although not as complex as some of the other issues in play, may be one of the most significant factors in determining one’s probability of dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The authors of this report continued that each absence makes students less willing to go back. These students describe patterns of refusing to wake up, taking lengthy lunches, and skipping class. The respondents within this report stated that the lack of academic challenge and lack of interest in their coursework made them feel that absences could easily be made up. This held true to a point, until the students just quit coming altogether or fell too far

behind to recover (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Some students have reported simply not identifying with the goals of the school and have gradually detached themselves from the system to the point of eventually leaving school. These students do not share the norms and values of the school and reject the demands placed on them by the mainstream culture (Munoz, 2002).

Shriberg and Shriberg (2006) pointed out something quite insidious concerning the unintended consequences of the No Child Left Behind Act. They write that this legislation actually encourages students to drop out because more and more students are being held back in the early years of high school, thus increasing their probability of dropping out. This practice is encouraged by school officials who desire the proportion of students that pass high stakes competency exams to be higher, thus making their school systems look better (Shriberg & Scriberg, 2006). One of the reasons cited for grade retention due to a student's inability to pass mandated standardized tests is to improve motivation to pass the exam (Allensworth, 2007). This practice, however, increases the dropout rate, especially in minority students (Madaus, 2001; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). The drive to improve academic performance does not necessarily translate into better academic performance for all, especially in large schools where the dropout rates are higher (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Schools that advocate for student learning measured by growth in achievement are not necessarily effective in reducing the dropout rate (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Higher learning rates are demonstrated by the students who remain enrolled in the school and efforts are concentrated on making these academic practices as streamlined and efficient as possible with little impact evident on

dropout rates (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Rumberger and Palardy continued by stating that with intense efforts and maintenance of the established efforts that brought about academic gains, dropout rates could be improved. Wagner (2003) pointed out that the No Child Left Behind Act is well intentioned at increasing accountability within the educational system, but it has increased failure rates and dropout rates and thus increased the gap between the haves and have-nots within education.

Academic failure is cited as one of the key factors determining which students drop out (Ekstrom, Goetz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Kemp, 2006; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999). One researcher found that the probability of dropping out of school was between 40% and 50% if a student failed one grade, and it increased the risk to 90% if the student failed two grades (Roderick, 1994). In a longitudinal study, researchers found that of a sample of students who were retained in the first grade, only 52% went on to graduate from high school (Randolph, Frazer, & Orthener, 2004). In high school, ninth graders that had to repeat their freshman year had a 90% probability of dropping out of high school (Balfanz & Letgers, 2006). School failure is cited as a major contributor to the dropout problem. In one study, 35% of students who had dropped out cited school failure as a major factor for leaving school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

For many of the students in these authors' reports, their problems began in middle and elementary school (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rumberger, 1995). Nearly half of these respondents, 45%, cited failure in the school years leading up to high

school. This early schooling experience, students reported, did not prepare them adequately for high school. In the same study 32% of the respondents stated that they were required to repeat a grade before they dropped out (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Students in this report also cited a lack of help and support on the part of the school when they experienced failure and difficulty (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Not all students associate dropping out with academic failure. One report cited classes as not being interesting and relevant enough (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The same set of authors found that nearly 47% of responding dropouts stated that boring classes were a major factor. The same students further responded that they were not motivated or inspired to work and they were highly disengaged from school and associated with other disengaged students. The fact that school was found to be boring by this group is notable in that this subgroup also had the highest grade point averages of the sampled group of dropouts (Bridgeland et al., 2006). This group, the authors' stated, expressed the need to be inspired and motivated in their classes. These students actually had a feeling of high expectations about their courses and remarked, when later surveyed, that they were very disappointed when they experienced what they perceived to be a teaching staff that did not care about whether or not any actual learning was occurring (Bridgeland et al.). The students actually indicated that they would have preferred that the school make them work harder and expect more from them (Bridgeland et al.). One student remarked in his own words, "The work here wasn't even hard.... Once I figured I wasn't going to get any learning done in there, there wasn't any need to go" (Bridgeland et al., p. 5). The authors summed it up best by stating that a lack of challenge and boredom contribute

to attendance problems, and attendance problems can become dropout problems (Bridgeland et al.).

Students not engaged in school and class activities or social activities that connected them with peers who valued school were cited as those students most in danger of dropping out (Newman et al., 1992; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). These researchers went on to state that dropping out of school is the final stage in a fluid and additive process of disengagement (Finn, 1989; Newman et al., 1992; Wehlage et al., 1989). In one study, it was found that among a sample of students who were retained and then monitored for a while, only 26% who were not involved in any activity at school even finished high school (Randolph et al., 2004). The same study illustrated that within the sample of students that were not retained only 43% of those who were engaged in school activities successfully completed high school (Randolph et al.). Conversely, 90% of the students that were engaged in a school activity successfully graduated from high school (Randolph et al.). Simply put, students who were involved in school stayed in school, while those who were not significantly increased their likelihood of not completing (Randolph et al.). The authors of another report echoed the previous study when they stated that lack of involvement in school and class activities is a key component in the slow process of student disengagement from school that may ultimately lead to a dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

School and residential mobility has also been linked to increases in rates of dropping out of school. South, Hayne, and Bose (2007) demonstrated the link between these factors and school dropouts. They pointed out that there is an

increased rate of dropping out of schools between both mobile students and non-mobile students when these students were attending schools that had a high mobility rate (South et al., 2007). They attribute this increased probability of dropping out of school to the fact that these high mobility schools generally have lower levels of school attachment and academic performance. These authors contend that peer networks and the academic performance of their friends within these networks are powerful factors that play into the probability of dropping out of these high mobility schools (South et al., 2007).

Some students experience life adversity that places a perceptual barrier so gargantuan, that successful high school completion is insurmountable. In the Bridgeland et al. (2006) report, the authors stated that in a sample of dropouts, personal reasons were listed as a major factor in students' decisions to leave high school. Of these respondents, 32% said that they had to drop out of school to get a job. The authors further stated that nearly one-third of the participants that cited personal reasons as a major factor for dropping out cited becoming a parent as the reason. Caring for a member of their family was reported by 22% of this category of dropouts in the authors' study (Bridgeland et al.). This same group of respondents reported doing well in school at the time they decided to drop out and they cited that they would have been more apt to stay in school if given additional aid or support (Bridgeland et al.). It is interesting to note that these students were not aware of any assistance or other school support, even when these were available within the school (Bridgeland et al.). Given the myriad number of interpersonal challenges that some youth face, it is not hard to imagine why they eventually leave school. If students

can use their strengths to overcome and survive some of the challenges and real-world problems in their lives, with support and guidance in school, there is no reason why these survival strengths cannot be funneled into tackling the academic issues at hand (Miller, 2006).

Some researchers have attempted to integrate the causes of dropping out of school into broad categories. LeCompte (1991) gave names to three distinct factors that work to increase the likelihood of dropping out. They labeled these *pupil-related factors*, *school-related factors*, and *macro-system factors*. *Pupil-related factors* are things such as socio-economic status, social roles of the student, and familial supports available to the student. *School-related factors* are factors that vary across schools. These factors may be the overall quality of teachers or administrative staff as well as the quality of the central office administration. *Macro-system factors* are the socio-political and economic contexts in which the school systems are interwoven (LeCompte). According to LeCompte, if these factors are not optimal then they work to weaken the probability of a student staying in school and completing their course of study by graduation.

Rumberger (2007) cited four school factors that influence students to stay in school or drop out. The first of these he has termed *student composition*. Rumberger wrote that social composition of the school is a predictor of the school's dropout rate. Rumberger's next school factor is the *school's resources*. He explained that the resources at a school's disposal have an impact on the dropout rate. These resources include teacher quality and the pupil to teacher ratio (Rumberger). If the student perceives the quality of the teaching staff to be high, dropout rates are lower, and

lower student-teacher ratios also lead to lower dropout rates (Rumberger). Interestingly, Rumberger and Thomas (2000) found that if the principal perceived the faculty's teaching quality as high, then the dropout rate was higher. The third factor that influences school dropout is what Rumberger termed *school structures* (Rumberger, 2007). These include the type of school, public, private, charter, rural, or urban. These factors can be anything related to a school's size or location (Rumberger). There have been demonstrable differences between these schools based on these physical attributes. Rumberger was quick to point out that it remains unclear whether the dropout rate differences are based on these structural characteristics or if they are because of the differences in student compositions. Most studies have found that private schools have lower dropout rates than public schools (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). In this same study, the researchers noted that most often the private school students ended up enrolling back in a public school before, or instead of, dropping out. This makes the turnover rates of the two types of institutions not statistically different. School size was found to have a direct effect on the dropout rate, with lower sizes proving optimal in keeping the dropout rate low. This effect was most pronounced in schools serving children of lower socioeconomic levels (Rumberger & Thomas). The fourth factor cited by Rumberger (2007) as influencing the dropout rate is termed *school policies and practices*. Therefore, poor administrative practices had the effect of producing a negative effect on academic and social climate factors. The most notable of these factors included attendance rates, fair discipline policies, and the numbers of students taking advanced placement courses. Consequently, these schools had increases in dropout

rates (Rumberger). The final factor that Rumberger spoke to is influence of community and peers. He explains that students who have family or members within their social peer network that have dropped out are themselves more likely to dropout out. Rumberger and Thomas (2000) further wrote that students who live in poor neighborhoods are also more likely to dropout. In short, students follow the economic trends of their neighborhood. Students who see the economic benefit from staying in school are thus more likely to stay in school and earn a diploma. Those students who do not see the economic benefit from staying in school are more likely to leave school without attaining a diploma (Rumberger, 1983).

Two broad hypotheses exist to explain why students drop out according to Finn (1989). The first, Finn posited, lies in the frustration and subsequent low self-esteem felt by an academically struggling student. This student develops a self-perception that causes him or her to struggle and oppose school and creates an impairment that eventually leads the student to the unsuccessful completion of school. In a second hypothesis, Finn wrote about the participation-identification model. This model indicates that students drop out of school because of the marginalization and alienation felt by students who are not actively involved in some way with the school. Involved students gain acceptance into the larger school culture and are thus able to identify with the school's mission and objectives, making successful school completion more probable. Effective dropout prevention programs must address these two broad hypotheses to enable students to be successful in completing school.

It bears noting that there are concentrated pockets of large numbers of dropouts centered on what Balfanz and Bridgeland (2007) have termed *dropout factories*.

These schools produce 81% of all Native American dropouts, 66% of all Hispanic dropouts, and 73% of all African American dropouts (Balfanz & Bridgeland). Dropout factories represent 12% of United States Schools. This translates to roughly 1700 schools, and Balfanz and Bridgeland wrote that efforts should be made to improve these dropout factories because great strides can be made toward lowering the dropout rates.

Transitions from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school may prove to be crucial landmarks for future student success or school dropout. It has been noted that students begin to drop out in middle school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Balfanz and Herzog (2005) cited the alarming statistic that more than half of the sixth graders who attend school less than 80% of the time, exhibit poor school behavior, and fail a core subject eventually dropout of school. Eighth graders who miss 30 or more days of school and fail a core subject have a 75% chance of dropping out of high school (Nield & Balfanz, 2006).

There are numerous reasons cited within the literature as to why students drop out of school. In fact, the literature in this area was expansive and rich in information. In the review of existing literature, these reasons were not followed by detailed discussions of dropout prevention. The existing literature did paint a picture of the various reasons for school dropout. Some of the most common reasons included poor school attendance, lack of relevant subject matter, school disengagement, academic failure, and high rates of mobility. High stakes testing was also shown to be a factor when schools employed practices that promoted students to drop out. It is

vital that these reasons be addressed in any research into what constitutes effective dropout prevention programs, something that the literature lacks.

What Schools Are Doing to Address the Student Dropout Problem

The report *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution* by the National Association of School Principals (NASSP) (1996) put it quite eloquently when it made the following observation: “High school lays the foundation for what Americans become, and what Americans become shapes the high school that serves the succeeding generations” (p. 3). The passage of No Child Left Behind legislation has placed schools under enormous scrutiny as they encounter greater accountability through standardized testing (Wagner, 2003). Although some researchers have remarked that schools are not changing to meet the demands of this increase accountability (Wagner, 2003), there is an outcry for schools to change their ways (NASSP, 1996).

Some of these recommendations mirror the research done by Bridgeland et al. (2006) in their report titled *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropout*. Indeed, one of the top recommendations in the report, *The Silent Epidemic*, is building a school climate that fosters academics (Bridgeland et al.). This environment, respondents of the study indicated, would be one with strong academics and would be safe from violence, as well as one that offered diverse and interesting curriculum. This is also the recommendation of the authors of the 1996 NASSP (1996) report, *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*. This report called on school leaders to foster a school environment that is free from

intimidation and appealing to students. It further encouraged school leaders to shape schools into institutions that are clean, comfortable, and secure, and staffed with teachers that teach to student's strengths and attributes (NASSP, 1996).

Miller (2006) stated that schools should be ripe with choice and passion, places that instill personal connections with students, places that foster trust and are responsive to all needs, not just academic ones. Miller further stated that schools should set students up for success and hold them accountable for their actions, while still pushing students outside of their comfort zone to foster new learning.

Administrative practice is a key component of schools that nurture students and provide them with safe and inviting places of learning (Rumberger, 2007). Administrative practices that shape academic and social characteristics of attendance, discipline policy, and the equal access of students to enroll in advanced placement courses have demonstrated an ability to lower dropout rates (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000).

Shrinking our large American High School has been the challenge undertaken by some reformers. Indeed, small schools do have lower dropout rates (Rumberger, 2007). Sergiovanni (1996) made the case for smaller, more responsive schools in his book *Leadership for the Schoolhouse*. The sense of community that is fostered by these smaller units is his answer to fostering a positive academic environment. Sergiovanni stated, "Community understandings have enduring qualities. They are resilient enough to survive the passage of new members through the community over time" (p. 51). He continued by stating, "Being part of a community of memory sustains us when the going is tough, connects us when we are not physically present,

and provides us with a history for creating a sense of meaning” (p. 51). It is this lack of identification and participation of students with their school that is one of the prime factors that leads students to drop out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Randolph et al., 2004). Smaller schools have long been thought to be more costly, but Sergiovanni (1996) stated that smaller schools are actually less expensive to run. Even if school and community leaders choose to stay with the large high school, there are ways to break it into smaller units that would foster community amongst stakeholders within schools (Sergiovanni). Some of the models for this approach include the “school within a school,” teaming, and the house model (Sergiovanni). The intricacies of these models will not be discussed here, but suffice it to say they all involve breaking down large impersonal units into small units that foster academics, community, responsiveness, and belonging (Sergiovanni). The benefits of these smaller schools have been demonstrated to be effective in lowering the dropout rate (French, Atkinson, & Rugen, 2007; Rumberger, 2007). According to French et al. (2007), smaller schools allow for lower student to teacher ratios, longer instructional blocks, increased parental involvement, and increased advisory and student support.

Models of smaller learning communities can be expanded further when schools serve a large population of one culture or minority. Certain schools may serve primarily a Native American, African American, or Hispanic population. These smaller learning communities may also add a culturally contextualized program for these students (Yamauchi, 2003). These programs serve to increase the relevancy for at-risk students by contextualizing instruction (Yamauchi). Contextualizing curriculum ties students to learning because it motivates them by linking academic subjects

and making these ideas relevant to their life outside of school (Yamauchi). It also serves to link them with their culture and history (Yamauchi). This may be a key component to school programs because minorities are cited as some of the most at-risk students to drop out of high school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Students begin to drop out in middle school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Balfanz and Herzog (2005) cited the alarming statistic that more than half of those sixth graders who attend school less than 80% of the time, exhibit poor school behavior, and fail a core subject eventually dropout of school. Eighth graders who miss 30 or more days of school and fail a core subject have a 75% chance of dropping out of high school (Nield & Balfanz, 2006). Some researchers state that ninth graders should be strictly monitored and given support services at the first signs of failure, especially in the core subjects of reading, writing, mathematics, and science (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). These authors contend that focused efforts should be made in the beginning of the middle grades and the beginning of ninth grade. They further elucidate some measures that should be taken to prevent school dropouts. These include attendance and behavior monitoring, tutoring and counseling, establishing smaller learning communities (ninth grade academies) for student personalization, focusing on positive school climate, having rigorous coursework and high expectations, and engaging students in the school community (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). It is interesting to note that Kennelly and Monrad found that there is no extensive menu of proven strategies and intervention tailored for dropout prevention. They suggested that research programs that deal with students individually and work in tandem with school-wide efforts hold the most promise (Kennelly

& Monrad). Lunenburg and Ornstein (2000) stated that schools should initiate 10 strategies for dropout prevention. These strategies include modification of the instructional environment, establishment of effective school membership, establishment of career academies, development of supportive school board policies, development of practices that acknowledge learning styles, development of community-based collaborations, establishment of a case management system, establishment of a mentoring program, establishment of smaller learning communities, and the avoidance of negative sanction policies (Lunenburg & Ornstein). Hardy (2007) concurred with Kennelly and Monrad, stating that schools should offer personal attention to potential dropouts, dropout specialists, and transition programs to entering ninth graders. In this way, potential dropouts can be brought back into school engagement one at a time (Hardy, 2007).

Smink (2005) of the National Dropout Prevention Center published 15 effective dropout prevention strategies grouped into four categories. The first category is *early intervention*. The strategies in this category include family involvement, early childhood education, and reading programs. The second category is termed *basic core strategies*. The strategies of this category include mentoring and tutoring, service learning and alternative schooling, and out of school experiences. The third category is *making the most of instruction*. This includes professional development for staff, learning styles and multiple intelligence training for staff, and individualized instruction for students. The final category is *making the most of the wider school community*. The strategies associated with this category include systemic

renewal of the school, community collaboration, career education, and violence prevention (Smink, 2005).

In two studies, it was found that career and technical education programs have been effective in dissuading students from dropping out of school. These programs may take the form of tech preparatory courses within the context of the regular school system, career academies within or apart from the regular school, cooperative education classes, job shadowing, and mentoring. Participation in a career major or in a coherent sequence of courses based on an occupational goal by student has been directly linked to a lower risk of dropping out. This point furthers the cause of career and technical education programs within regular school or alternative school dropout prevention efforts (Plank & Estacion, 2005; Reese, 2005).

A study conducted by the General Accounting Office of where found Las Vegas public schools as being highly innovative in their efforts at retaining potential dropouts. Researchers found three characteristics that made them effective. The first characteristic was supplemental services to provide counseling tutoring or other supports for students. The next characteristic was alternative learning environments that placed students who were potential dropouts into programs apart from the main student body in order to provide intensive support and help. The final characteristic was school-wide restructuring within the district to change the organizational dynamics and curriculum of the school to make it more responsive to student needs (Cavanaugh, 2002).

Interestingly, there is not a set or a proven menu of dropout programs from which to choose. The What Works Clearinghouse conducted a study of three

outcome domains that programs need in order to merit inclusion into their database: staying in school, progressing in school, and completing school. In a national search for programs that would meet these standards, only eight programs qualified as effective (Samuels, 2007). Thus, identifying programs that work and the characteristics that make these programs effective should take priority.

It has been shown in the literature that schools must change to meet the needs of the growing dropout problem. *Dropout factory* is the term that has been given to the 12% of United State's schools that produce the majority of dropouts. Some researchers have called on schools to become smaller and stress community. The review of existing literature points out schools must change, but interestingly avoids mention of how schools must change or what effective changes look like. Some have pointed to the establishment of alternative schools.

Alternative School Approaches to Dropout Prevention

Students may become disconnected from school due to a number of reasons. Some of the most extreme reasons include homelessness, teen pregnancy, extreme poverty, taking care of familial responsibilities, involvement within the juvenile justice system, and leaving the foster care system (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Zweig, 2003). These problems make the case for a less than orthodox approach to helping these students successfully complete high school (Zweig, 2003). One researcher found that conventional schools tend to address the learning style of the introverted-thinking-judging student, while the opposite of this type, the extroverted-sensing-feeling-perception learning style mostly associated with students placed at-risk goes

largely unmet (Van, 1992). The very nature of highly personalized and individualized programs like alternative schools may create environments where these youth can feel comfortable as they work to complete their high school education (Zweig, 2003). Other writers contended that these alternative schools are often where educational reform is in practical use as the larger settings are slow to implement change (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Such alternative schools are not new to the educational landscape; some of the oldest have been around nearly 50 years (Lange & Sletten). It is important that whenever possible, students be served within the mainstream educational setting, except when the needs of particular students cannot be met (Zweig, 2003). Zweig continued to state that it is important that these alternative schools not be created as dumping grounds for problem youth. Rather, he stated that these alternative schools benefit students by providing students with services related to health issues, family issues, or other social services.

One promising alternative approach may lie in the coupling of technology and alternative schools (Peck & Catello, 1990). Instructional media has made possible an instructional delivery system whereby most individual student academic needs can be met. Use of this technology enables students to learn at their own pace and receive specific prescriptive plans concerning their academic progress. Computer systems do not judge; they repeat instruction as many times as needed and they do not run out of patience. This system of computers and related peripherals has also facilitated the use of flexible hours, allowing students who must work full time to do so. Academic gains have proven to be very substantial in a school in Oceanside, California, and despite the associated costs with technology-increased student

attendance and increased funding needed to offer this type of technology, the results have more than compensated for cost (Peck & Catello).

In closing, alternative schools have steadily grown in number, but there is no comprehensive inventory of them (Zweig, 2003). There has been criticism that the research on the effectiveness of alternative schools is limited and lacks rigor (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Lange and Sletten further emphasized that research on outcomes needs to be stressed, especially as it concerns achievement and retention. Rumberger (2007) expounded on the point of empirically proven alternative programs). He stated that it is made evident by the existing literature that alternative programs can be effective. Rumberger contended that the alternative programs that targeted potential dropouts need to share four characteristics. The first is a non-threatening environment conducive for learning. The second is a caring and committed staff that accepts responsibility for student success. The third is a school culture that encourages risk taking, professionalism, collegiality, and self-governance. The final characteristic is a school structure that enables a low student teacher-student ratio and small class size (Rumberger). Of interest is the concept that Lange and Sletten (2002) wrote concerning certain generalizations that can be gleaned from the available literature that pertains to the success of students within alternative school settings. Generally, students experienced positive academic and interpersonal gains. These interpersonal gains were made in belonging, satisfaction, and self-esteem. It should also be noted that persistence of students to attempt to succeed within alternative schools was linked with students that chose to attend, rather than were forced to attend. Lange and Sletten further reported that there are feelings of being

stigmatized amongst students that attend alternative schools. The authors wrote that students need to feel that the school they are attending and will eventually graduate from is perceived as high in quality and high in prestige (Lange & Sletten). These alternative schools are often perceived as offering a lower level of education as compared with their traditional counterparts (Lange & Sletten). Generally, alternative schools have garnered a negative perception by students, parents, and educators as a dumping ground for the problem kids and they are projected as a failure of the regular system (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998).

The reviewed literature has demonstrated that alternative school approaches can be effective in keeping students in school, but these alternative programs are hit-and-miss. There is still not an agreed upon recipe for effective alternative schools. Some common characteristics of effective alternative schools could be generalized to any school. Alternative Schools that emphasize the use of technology have shown promise, as have schools that emphasize individual learning styles coupled to a caring and committed staff and a positive culture. The literature has shown that students should be kept in the mainstream school settings whenever possible (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Prudent student choice of enrollment into alternative programs can be an effective way of engaging students in alternative settings.

Dropout Prevention Programs

There exists a great body of literature on the suggestions for successful interventions, but a sparse amount of sound data on successful dropout prevention programs (Kelly & Prevatt, 2003). Dorn (1996) in his book, *Creating the Dropout:*

An Institutional and Social History of School Failure, pointed out that dropout prevention programs have been around since the mid 1960s, but have often died quick deaths. In many ways, they have been a band-aide for a problem that has demanded much more. These programs, he wrote, have been very sparse amongst the school systems of this country. In their earliest form, they involved vocational and counseling programs. Dorn stated that they were too small in number to prevent much larger policies and practices that encouraged students to dropout. These programs have traditionally been sporadic and short-lived with inadequate funding and no lasting impact on school policies, and were often hindered by government bureaucracy and were slow to respond to student needs. The successful programs were frequently limited in their scope and effect (Dorn). This suggests that programs can be successful, but policy and bureaucracy prevents the scope from becoming large enough to be successful. Dorn viewed the dropout problem as a basic problem of inequities within the system as a whole. Therefore, any prevention effort or program should address this most basic of all problems or it will meet with failure (Dorn). As Kelly and Prevatt (2003) pointed out, there are many studies on causal factors leading to school dropout, but relatively few intervention programs that address the dropout problem are properly researched. Therefore, there is not only a scarcity of programs, but also a scarcity of information regarding what an effective program looks like. Some of the general trends amongst dropout prevention programs can be stated in broad terms. These programs most often targeted mentoring, the facilitation of supportive relationships, psychosocial skills development, and academic enhancement with their students (Kelly & Prevatt). One key facet that was

found in successful prevention programs was the element of personalization (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). There is no shortage of out-of-the-box thinking when practitioners approach the dropout dilemma. Dynarski (2007) stated, however, that the lack of research into dropout prevention programs and the resulting lack of scientific basis into the effectiveness of existing programs or which programs should be chosen for implementation by schools or districts, results in a hit or miss approach that is not ideal. He stressed that programs should be clear about how they will affect teaching and learning, or how they plan to keep students in school. Confusion about how a chosen program will accomplish the aforementioned should be viewed with caution (Dynarski).

Some of the most creative ideas on dropout prevention have employed the use of innovative technology (Roblyer, 2006). Roblyer examined the use of virtual school programs that allow students to take course work without going to a physical location; instead, students work on their courses in cyberspace. The verdict on this program is still out and the initial findings are mixed, but this serves to illustrate that educators are willing to employ very innovative means to combat the problem of students dropping out of school (Roblyer).

Some programs have been implemented with the goal of having students earn the General Education Development (GED) diploma, rather than the high school diploma (Dorn, 1996). This, Dorn warned us, has provided a largely useless credential. He writes if an adult education program can only provide dropouts with a GED, then it is a failure. Further, he believed, that the highest level of academics should be the imperative of a dropout prevention program. Dorn contended that graduation

statistics are important as a means for gauging the equality of schooling and a means for measuring how well schools educate everyone.

Dropout programs have a history of becoming bureaucratic slugs unresponsive to student needs. They are often underfunded and limited in scope (Dorn, 1996). A variety of approaches has been attempted. Some of these approaches target the GED diploma, some stress mentoring and the facilitation of supportive relationships. Some focus on psychosocial skills development. Some programs cite academic enhancement as the remedy for dropout prevention. Others target all of the aforementioned. One important fact concerning dropout prevention programs is shown in the review of literature; the research into the effectiveness of dropout prevention is relatively nonexistent.

Conclusion

The existing literature has been reviewed in the following areas.

1. Historical evolution of the definition of dropouts
2. Characteristics of student dropouts
3. Why students drop out of school
4. What schools are doing to address the student dropout problem
5. Alternative school approaches to student dropout prevention

Several key facts can be stated. The literature has indicated that dropout rates have reached epidemic proportions (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The passage of No Child Left Behind legislation has increased the accountability of schools, making the issues of dropouts a very real issue, although some research has illustrated that the

dropout rate is growing due to the rise of standardized testing and its effect on student retention (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). The causes and factors of who drops out of school have a substantial research base (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Kemp, 2006; Randolph et al., 2004). The research base for effective intervention programs is not substantial and needs more of a knowledge base (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Kelly & Prevatt, 2003). Alternative programs have an important role in fighting the growing trend of students dropping out (Lange & Sletten, 2002). These alternative schools may be held for the most extreme of situations so they do not become dumping grounds and because students that chose to attend these types of schools tend to experience the most success (Lange & Sletten). These authors also cautioned against the stigma that these students may experience from attending these school (Lange & Sletten). Change in school practices and structures are thought to be key factors in keeping students in school. Most importantly, the review of literature has indicated a scarcity of existing research documenting effective dropout prevention programs. Research is quick to point out cause and effect of school dropouts, but does not indicate solutions. The research question of what impact an alternative program within a regular high school has on academic performance, attendance, and dropout rate for students placed at-risk of dropping out begs to be answered. Couple these questions with the additional question of what the teacher perceptions of the academic performance of students within this program are would give a complete picture of the true impact of this dropout prevention program. Answering these research questions would add to the very sparse research base of characteristics of effective dropout prevention programs.

Therefore, a program like the Samantha Academy of Creative Education can be successful because it employs many of concepts discussed in the literature. These include fostering a sense of school community and identification, a mentoring program, the use of technology, choice in an interesting curriculum that is made relevant, an accelerated curriculum that allows retained students to get back on grade level, a smaller classroom setting that is comfortable and safe, and access to counseling and social services. It also provides students with caring and nurturing teachers who have chosen to work in this setting, and have ample training in content and at-risk students. This setting resides within the large high school, enabling it to practice innovative methods while keeping students connected to their home school. It does everything a model alternative school does, without students experiencing the stigma of an alternative education setting. The true effectiveness of this program should be examined to add to the knowledge base of what effective dropout programs look like.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter is a description of the qualitative and quantitative designs used in the current study. A description of the population, the procedures used to conduct the study, the research questions, the research design, the procedures and instruments, the data collection tools, the limitations, the human participants and ethics precautions, and a summary of the methodology are used.

Introduction

One purpose of educational research is to acquire new information and learning concerning educational phenomenon (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). A second purpose is to build confidence that certain claims about the educational phenomena being studied were true or false. The goal of quantitative research is to gather data that help prove or disprove the knowledge claimed (Gall et al., 1996). This differs from qualitative research whose approach aims to gather data that is used to deepen the understanding of an educational phenomenon (Glessne, 2006). Mixed methods research uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide more comprehensive data relating to the research problem at hand (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). This research uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to address the research questions of the study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose this study was to examine the impact of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) on the students placed at-risk as reported in school records and the teacher perceptions of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) program by the teachers working in the program at a suburban high school of Southwest Texas. The impact of SACE was investigated by determining if statistical differences between SACE students and a similar control group of non-SACE students existed concerning grade averages, attendance averages, and graduation rates. The impact of SACE on students placed at-risk was further elucidated by using qualitative methods to examine perceptions of the teachers that work in the SACE program. The reviewed literature has shown that the bulk of existing research revolves around the causes and effects of school dropouts. Minimal research exists on effective strategies and programs that address dropouts (Kelly & Prevatt, 2003). It was also illustrated in the literature that there is no research on the effects of alternative programs within regular high schools on the academic performance variables of core grade average, attendance, and graduation rate for students placed at-risk of dropping out. Nor is there any current research on the perceptions of the teachers within these programs. This makes this study of SACE, important to increasing the body of research knowledge of effective dropout prevention programs within regular high schools.

Research Design

Investigations of statistical relationships with regard to academic performance between SACE students and similar students placed at-risk who did not participate in the SACE program were conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in core grade averages at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?
2. What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in attendance at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?
3. What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in graduation rates at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?

The choice of quantitative methods was most appropriate for this portion of the study because of the nature of the questions asked as well as the data that was gathered. For the purpose of this study academic performance was measured by student attendance, grade average in core subjects, and graduation rates.

A simultaneous qualitative investigation of SACE teacher perceptions of the impact of the SACE program on academic performance of their students was carried out to answer this additional research question, “What are the teacher perceptions of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) program by the teachers working in the program?”

Qualitative methods were most appropriate to answer this question since it focuses on perceptions of the SACE teachers and because this question sought to gain a deeper understanding of what makes a program like SACE effective with regard to impacting academic performance of the participating students. The qualitative portion of this study utilized face-to-face interviews with the SACE teachers. Through these interviews, data regarding teacher perceptions and perspectives was obtained. The collection and analysis of these data were fashioned using a process for interviewing and coding described by Patton (2002). A constant comparative method was facilitated to analyze the data that was generated by the participant interview. Because both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were employed in this study, it is mixed methods in nature.

Population of School and District

With a population of over 60,000 students and an infrastructure of six comprehensive high schools composed of grades 9-12, 13 middle schools composed of grades 6-8, and 45 elementary schools composed of grades K-5, the school district is one of the largest school systems in the state of Texas. The district encompasses an area of nearly 140 square miles in the Southwest region of Texas. The demographic breakdown of the district is 9.3% African American, 3.7% Asian, 47.1% Hispanic, .3% Native American, and 39.6% White. There is 39.1% of the district's students on the free/reduced lunch program. The aforementioned data were gathered at the district's Website.

The suburban high school, of this study, is one of the district's six comprehensive 5A high schools. It has a total enrollment of nearly 3,000 students. It was originally built in 1953. It served as the school district's only high school until 1955. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the campus was awarded the title of National Exemplary School as well as Blue Ribbon Acknowledgement. Starting in the late 1990s, however, there have been some demographic changes. These changes have resulted in a more diverse student population. The current demographics breakdown of the school is 10.2% African American, 3.3% Asian, 39% Hispanic, .4% Native American, and 47.2% white. Roughly 25% of the student population participates in the free/reduced lunch program.

Student Population of Study

The population of students chosen for this study consisted of two groups. The first group of students consisted of those who participated in SACE during the school year 2005-2006. These students were eligible to participate in SACE because they had failed at least one core class. Students took a variety of mandatory core classes in SACE including, English I-IV, algebra I, algebra II, geometry, world geography, world history, government, and economics. All Students were considered placed at-risk by the definition of at-risk used for this study (any student having failed a core credit course). Students were randomly chosen for SACE from the eligible, enrolled students of the suburban high school used in this study. There were 97 students that participated in the SACE program for the school year 2005-06. The sample used in this study consisted of all 97 students. Grades 9-12 were represented in this group.

Students were categorized for this study according to the grade that they should have been in if they had not been retained. For example, many of the students should have been classified as grade 11 or even grade 12; however due to retention, they were classified as grade 9 or grade 10 by the school system. The school district's promotion policy mandates that students be retained if they fail a core English or mathematics course. The second group of students used in this study consisted of a randomly selected group of 97 students placed at-risk who were eligible for, but did not participate in SACE. This group served as the control group. These students were categorized in a like manner to those of the experimental group. There were, therefore, the same numbers of 9, 10, 11, and 12 graders as the SACE group. Table 1 is an illustration of the numbers of SACE students and non-SACE students and the demographic breakdown of these students. Table 2 is a list of the percentages of students of each group broken down by ethnicity and race. These tables serve to illustrate the similarity and differences of the student samples.

TABLE 1. Counts of Students by Grade of Students Represented in Both the SACE Group and Non-SACE Group

Grade	9	10	11	12
Number of students	2	34	36	25

TABLE 2. Percentages of Student Groups by Ethnicity and Race

	African Am.	Hispanic	White	Asian	Native Am.
SACE	18.6	35.1	42.3	4.1	0
Non-SACE	18.6	41.2	37.1	3.1	0
The High School	10.2	39	47.2	3.3	.4

Population of Teachers Used in the Study

The population of teachers used for this study consisted of the four teachers who taught in the SACE program during the 2007-08 school year. All four teachers were asked for their participation by the school principal to avoid coercion since the researcher of this study is an administrator at the same school. Of the four who were solicited, three chose to participate in face to face interviews. The demographics of the teachers were homogenous by ethnicity and experience. All were white. One of the teachers was female. The three teachers were in their upper 50s in age and all held masters degrees. They all had at least 15 years of teaching experience.

SACE

SACE is an integral part of the suburban high school campus used in this study and it is not only unique to the school district but also to the region of Southwest Texas. The SACE program services students who have been placed at-risk due to academic failure of core classes or retention. It should be noted that the suburban high school used in this study has a graduation rate that is much higher than the state and its dropout rate is much lower. According to the Texas Education Agency's criteria

for Recognized School Districts, which was earned by the school district, and the suburban high school's current acceptable rating, the academic setting of the school is optimal for the great majority of its students. The need for a program like SACE remains, however, since not all students successfully graduate. The academic success of all students remains a priority for the campus as well as the school district.

Procedures Used for the Study

The researcher sought and obtained permissions by the principal of the suburban high school as well as the Director of Research and Information Technologies of the school district before undertaking this study. The purpose of the study was explained in detail to the aforementioned parties. The list of SACE students by semester and school year when they participated was recorded in the SACE teacher records. The control group was randomly selected from a list of eligible students provided by the school district's department of research and information technology. Both lists were used by the researcher to gather the needed student information from each individual student Academic Achievement Record. Academic Achievement Records are kept by the district's mainframe computer system. The information gleaned from these records included cumulative grade averages in core classes, attendance data, and graduation status. The gathered data were organized using an Excel spreadsheet. Names of students were replaced with a numerical code before data were entered into the spreadsheet. Access to this spreadsheet was restricted to all parties except the researcher via encryption software.

A portion of the study used qualitative research methodology to analyze data collected from the SACE teachers regarding their perceptions of the SACE program. The researcher gathered the perceptual data by utilizing face to face interviews with the participating SACE teachers. A digital voice recorder was used to capture these interviews which were then transcribed by the researcher. Teacher names were not used in these interviews. Instead, teachers were referred to by assigned numbers instead of names. Interviews were conducted in the SACE classroom of suburban high school during the month of May, 2008. Follow-up questions to these interviews were sought as needed from participating teachers during the summer of 2008. Follow-up interviews were also recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. Interview transcripts were stored as a Microsoft file in the researcher's personal laptop computer. Access to these files was restricted to all parties except the researcher via encryption software.

Procedures and Instruments

The statistical procedures utilized in this study were both descriptive and inferential. Descriptive statistics are used to report the condition of the student data as well as to organize it. Inferential statistics use the technique of hypothesis testing to compare the sets of student data to determine if there is a statistical difference between them (Gall et al., 1996). Quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Multiple displays such as charts and tables were used to present the quantitative findings and are found in Chapter IV.

Two inferential statistical procedures were employed to answer the quantitative research questions of this study. The researcher used the t-test for two independent samples to determine the statistical difference of both the mean attendance and the mean grade core subject grade average for both the experimental and comparison group. This procedure was executed for the semester that students were enrolled in SACE and then for subsequent semesters that students stayed in school. These t-tests were done for up to a maximum of 3 semesters following SACE participation for the variable attendance. While the t-tests for the variable core grade average was repeated up to four semesters following SACE participation. These tests were repeated to their maximum either until a student graduated, transferred, enrolled in a non-public school, or dropped out. Since the control group did not participate in SACE, they were placed into the fall or spring semester (analogous to the semester of SACE participation) based on which semester they received the most failing grades in core classes. The same protocol was followed for this control group for comparison. These t-tests generate information that the researcher uses to reach a conclusions about population parameters (Spatz, 2005). The researcher used Chi-square tests to determine the statistical difference of the SACE group and control group with regard to graduation rate. Chi-square tests the association between categorical variables (Spatz, 2005). The categories of student statuses were graduate, dropout, non-public school enrollment, or mover. An alpha level of .05 was used on Chi-square and t-tests.

Qualitative data were generated via face-to-face interviews of the participating group of teachers. Face-to-face interviews were conducted. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The participants were asked the following questions.

1. Describe your past professional experiences in public education.
2. Describe how you ended up in your present teaching assignment.
3. Describe your first reaction when you were asked to be a part of the SACE program.
4. What were some of your initial thoughts?
5. Before you began working in the SACE program, what experiences did you have with students placed at-risk?
6. Before you began working in the SACE program, what were your views on students placed at-risk?
7. Describe your experiences working with students placed at-risk in the SACE program.
8. How have your views of students placed at-risk changed since your involvement in the SACE program?
9. How would you describe the similarities between the SACE program and the regular classroom environment?
10. Describe the differences between the SACE program and the regular classroom environment.
11. Describe the strengths of the program.
12. Describe the weaknesses of the program.
13. In your opinion, how does this program help students stay in school?

14. When the students finish the program, how do you think students' lives will be different? Effected? Impacted? In your opinion, how will the SACE experiences help them?

15. Where do you see the SACE students in five years?

The interview transcriptions yielded data. The data were analyzed according to the constant comparative method for analyzing qualitative data. In this method, data are coded inductively into like dimensions. Each of these dimensions are given a name, or code. These coded, or named, segments of data are compared. The comparisons of these segments allow themes and relationships to emerge from the data (Patton, 2002). From these relationships a grounded theory is built (Merriam, 1998). Presentation of the qualitative findings is found in Chapter V.

Limitations

The following limitations of this study necessitated caution in the interpretation of the results and restrict the ability to generalize the findings.

1. The findings may not be generalized to any other group of students or schools. The scope of this study is limited to a suburban high school, of a school district in Southwest Texas.
2. This study is based upon the school records and the information obtained from the literature review.
3. The accuracy of these records and literature has the potential to affect the validity of the findings.

Human Participation

Data used in this study were gathered using pre-existing student records as well as transcriptions of teacher interviews. The student records were not available to the public. Permission for obtaining the student records was secured by the director of research and information technologies of the school district. The confidentiality of all data was maintained by excluding student names and using student identification numbers unique to the school district. The researcher further maintained confidentiality by then excluded these identification numbers and employing a unique numbering system. Teacher participation was solicited by the principal of the suburban high school to avoid coercion. Teachers were given consent forms. These forms included relevant information concerning confidentiality and participation. Teacher identity was maintained by negating the use of any form of names during the interview and transcription process. The tapes of the transcripts were erased after they were transcribed. The researcher abided by all federal, state, and local confidentiality guidelines and procedures as they relate to the ethics governing research.

Summary

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were presented within this study. Therefore, this study is mixed methods in nature. The use of both methods was intended to lend validity, depth and scope to the findings of this study. The student data was analyzed using t-tests to determine significant differences in mean core grade averages and attendance. Chi-square tests were executed to determine differences between the means of the student population's graduation rates. Qualitative

methods were utilized to examine teacher perceptions concerning the academic impact of the SACE program on participating students. Chapter IV contains the statistical measures and results used to answer questions 1, 2 and 3. Chapter V contains the results of the analysis of the qualitative data used to answer question 4. Chapter VI contains summary, conclusions and recommendations of this study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS—QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of The Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) on students placed at-risk at a suburban high school of Southwest Texas. In order to facilitate this evaluation, comparisons between the group of SACE students who participated in the SACE program during the 2005-2006 school year and a group of similar students who did not participate in the SACE program were made. Academic performance was assessed according to the variables of core grade average, attendance, and graduation rate. Statistical tests were employed to determine differences between these variables amongst the SACE students and the comparison group of non-SACE students. The t-test for two independent samples was used to determine statistical difference of the mean core grade average between the SACE group and the comparison group beginning the semester the SACE students were actively enrolled in the SACE program and the non-SACE students were eligible for SACE participation. This statistical procedure was repeated for four semesters after the SACE students had completed their active participation in the program. The t-test for two independent samples was also used to determine statistical difference of the attendance rates for the two groups of students. This statistical procedure was repeated for three semesters after the SACE students had completed their active participation in the program. Chi-square analysis was conducted to determine statistical significance of the graduation rates between the

group of SACE students and the control group of non-SACE students. An alpha level of .05 was used on all tests.

The study addressed the following research questions: What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in core subject grade averages at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records? In order to address this research question, the study tested the following null hypothesis: There is no significant difference between the core subject grade averages of SACE students and non-SACE students. In addition, the study also addressed the following research question: What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in attendance at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records? In order to address this research question, the study tested the following null hypothesis: There is no significant difference between attendance rates of SACE students and non-SACE students.

Thirdly, this study addressed the research question: What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in graduation rates at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records? In order to address this research question, the study tested the following null hypothesis: There is no significant difference between the graduation rates of SACE students and non-SACE students.

This chapter is divided into five sections: (1.) Variables within the Study, (2.) Research Question #1 (What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in core grade averages at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?), Research Question # 2 (What relationship exists

between SACE students and non-SACE students in attendance at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?), Research Question #3 (What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in graduation rates at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?), and Summary of Findings. Academic performance of SACE students was investigated with the results of the three research questions guiding this study of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE), reported.

Variables within the Study

Core subject grade average, attendance, and graduation rate were addressed as quantitative variables in this study. The population utilized in the quantitative portion of this investigation focused on the group of SACE students for the school year 2005-2006 as well as a sample of non-SACE students also enrolled for the same period of time (2005-2006). Both populations were obtained from a suburban high school located in a school district in the Southwest region of Texas.

Core Subject Grade Average

The variable of core subject grade average was one of the factors used to test academic performance of SACE students. This variable was determined using only the core subjects of English, mathematics, social studies, and science. Core subject grade average was calculated according to the student's semester of SACE enrollment, and then subsequent semesters, up to four semesters, after completing their semester with SACE. For the comparison group, student's core subject grade

average was calculated during the semester of the 2005-2006 school year. It was during this year that students were eligible to enroll in the SACE program, but did not, and then up to four following semesters following the initial semester.

Attendance

The variable of attendance was a second factor used to test the academic performance of SACE students. This variable was determined by obtaining the respective student group's attendance data that were recorded on each academic achievement record. The student's attendance was noted for the initial period of either SACE enrollment or eligibility and then for each succeeding semester, up to three semesters.

Graduation Rate

Graduation was the final variable that was used to evaluate the academic performance of SACE students. This variable was a categorical variable. Students in both groups were classified as either a graduate or a non-graduate. Non-graduates were further sub categorized to students that dropped out, students that transferred, and students attending non public schools. This final category of students comprised students that enrolled in charter or private schools as well as those participating in a curriculum of home school.

Research Question 1

The first research question was, “What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in core subject averages at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?”

This first research question examined what relationship existed between SACE students and non-SACE students in core subject grade averages. In order to address this research question, the study tested the following null hypothesis: There is no significant difference between the core subject averages of SACE students and non-SACE students. The null hypothesis investigating the core subject averages of the group of SACE students and the group of non-SACE students was analyzed using an independent samples t-test. Table 3 is a report of the descriptive statistics for the two groups.

TABLE 3. Number (N), Mean, and Standard Deviation for the Core Subject Grade Averages of Students Organized by Their Status in the SACE Program and the Semester of Analysis

SACE Enrollment Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Grade Averages – semester participating			
Non-SACE	97	58.337	16.0840
SACE	97	70.705	10.7559
Grade Averages– semester plus one			
Non-SACE	65	66.4923	19.41759
SACE	77	70.7071	10.53256

TABLE 3. Continued

SACE Enrollment Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Grade Averages – semester plus two			
Non-SACE	29	66.8552	18.38766
SACE	57	74.9140	9.14521
Grade Average – semester plus three			
Non-SACE	16	68.050	15.8921
SACE	43	75.953	9.8392
Grade Average – semester plus four			
Non-SACE	12	61.48	15.455
SACE	20	78.32	7.874

Note. The mean grade averages are based on a scale of 0-100. N represents the number of students represented in both the SACE and Non-SACE groups. The number (N) of students decreased as students in both groups graduated, transferred, left the high school to attend non public school, or dropped out over the course of five semesters.

Table 4 is a representation of the data for the independent samples t-test for the semester of SACE enrollment and non-SACE student eligibility. The level of significance was 0.000. This was less than the alpha level of 0.05. As a result, the decision was made to reject the null hypothesis of no difference. It was therefore inferred that the means in the population, from which these samples were drawn, were different. That is, there is statistical difference between the population means. In other words, the core subject average means of SACE students is higher than those of non-SACE students during the semester of SACE enrollment or non-SACE student eligibility.

TABLE 4. Independent Samples t-Test for Core Subject Grade Average for the Semester of SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances not Assumed

t	df	Significance*
-6.088	167	0.000

*Significant < 0.05

Table 5 is a representation of the data for the independent samples t-test for the first semester following active SACE enrollment and non-SACE student eligibility. The level of significance was 0.121. This was greater than the alpha level of .05. As a result, the decision was made to accept the null hypothesis of no difference. Therefore, it was inferred that the means in the population, from which these samples were drawn, were not different. That is, there is no statistical difference between the population means. In other words, the core subject average means of SACE students was not different than those of non-SACE student during the first semester after active enrollment in the SACE program.

TABLE 5. Independent Samples t-Test for Core Subject Grade Average for the First Semester after Completion of SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances not Assumed

t	df	Significance*
-1.566	94.184	0.121

*Significant < 0.05

Table 6 is a representation of the data for the independent samples t-test for the second semester following active SACE enrollment and non-SACE student eligibility. The level of significance was 0.033. This was less than the alpha level of 0.05. As a result, the decision was made to reject the null hypothesis of no difference. Therefore, it was inferred that the means in the population, from which these samples were drawn, were different. That is, there is statistical difference between the population means. In other words, the core subject average means of SACE students is higher than those of non-SACE students during the second semester following SACE enrollment or non-SACE student eligibility.

TABLE 6. Independent Samples t-Test for Core Subject Grade Average for The Second Semester After Completion of SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances not Assumed

t	df	Significance
-2.224	35.212	0.033

*Significant < 0.05

Table 7 is a representation of the data for the independent samples t-test for the third semester following active SACE enrollment and non-SACE student eligibility. The level of significance was 0.025. This was less than the alpha level of 0.05. As a result, the decision was made to reject the null hypothesis of no difference. Therefore, it was inferred that the means in the population, from which these samples were drawn, were different. That is, there is statistical difference between the population

means. In other words, the core subject average means of SACE students is higher than those of non-SACE students during the third semester following SACE enrollment or non-SACE student eligibility.

TABLE 7. Independent Samples t-Test for Core Subject Grade Average for the Third Semester after Completion of SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances Assumed

t	df	Significance
-2.300	57	0.025

*Significant < 0.05

Table 8 is a representation of the data for the independent samples t-test for the fourth semester following active SACE enrollment and non-SACE student eligibility. The level of significance was 0.003. This was less than the alpha level of 0.05. As a result, the decision was made to reject the null hypothesis of no difference. Therefore, it was inferred that the means in the population, from which these samples were drawn, were different. That is, there is statistical difference between the population means. In other words, the core subject average means of SACE students is higher than those of non-SACE students during the fourth semester following SACE enrollment or non-SACE student eligibility.

TABLE 8. Independent Samples t-Test for Core Subject Grade Average for the Fourth Semester after Completion of SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances not Assumed (Alpha Level Is 0.05.)

t	df	Significance
-2.300	14.489	0.003

*Significant < 0.05

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was, “What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in attendance at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?”

The second research question examined what relationship existed between SACE students and non-SACE students in attendance. In order to address this research question, the study tested the following null hypothesis: There is no significant difference between the attendance of SACE students and non-SACE students. The null hypothesis investigating the attendance of the group of SACE students and the group of non-SACE students was analyzed using an independent samples t-test. Table 9 is a report of the descriptive statistics for the two groups.

TABLE 9. Number (N), Mean, and Standard Deviation for the Attendance of Students Organized by Their Status in the SACE Program and the Semester of Analysis

SACE Enrollment	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Absences - Semester of SACE Participation			
Non-SACE	97	14.54	14.830
SACE	97	9.51	10.989

Table 9. Continued

SACE Enrollment		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Absences – Plus 1 Semester				
	Non-SACE	67	14.36	16.521
	SACE	78	12.64	13.031
Absences Plus 2 semesters				
	Non-SACE	31	10.19	12.597
	SACE	59	7.68	6.551
Absences Plus 3 semesters				
	Non-SACE	17	11.18	15.294
	SACE	46	7.93	7.359

Note. The mean represents the average number of absences obtained by the SACE and Non-SACE groups. N represents the number of students represented in each student group. The number (N) of students decreased as students in both SACE and Non-SACE groups graduated, transferred, left the high school to attend non public school, or dropped out over the course of four semesters.

Table 10 is a representation of the data for the independent samples t-test for the semester of SACE enrollment and non-SACE student eligibility. The level of significance was 0.008. This was less than the alpha level of 0.05. As a result, the decision was made to reject the null hypothesis of no difference. Therefore, it was inferred that the means in the population, from which these samples were drawn, were different. That is, there is statistical difference between the population means. In other words, the attendance of SACE students is higher than those of non-SACE students during the semester of SACE enrollment or non-SACE student eligibility.

TABLE 10. Independent Samples t-Test for Attendance for the Semester of SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances not Assumed

t	df	Significance*
2.687	177	0.008

*Significant < 0.05

Table 11 is a representation of the data for the independent samples t-test for the first semester following SACE enrollment and non-SACE student eligibility. The level of significance was 0.487. This was more than the alpha level of 0.05. As a result, the decision was made to accept the null hypothesis of no difference. Therefore, it was inferred that the means in the population, from which these samples were drawn, were not different. That is, there is no statistical difference between the population means. In other words, the attendance of SACE students is not different than those of non-SACE students during the first semester following SACE enrollment or non-SACE student eligibility.

TABLE 11. Independent Samples t-Test for Attendance for the First Semester after SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances Assumed

t	df	Significance
.697	143	0.487

*Significant < 0.05

Table 12 is a representation of the data for the independent samples t-test for the second semester following SACE enrollment and non-SACE student eligibility. The level of significance was 0.305. This was more than the alpha level of 0.05. As a result, the decision was made to accept the null hypothesis of no difference. Therefore, it was inferred that the means in the population, from which these samples were drawn, were not different. That is, there is no statistical difference between the population means. In other words, the attendance of SACE students is not different than those of non-SACE students of the second semester following SACE enrollment or non- SACE student eligibility.

TABLE 12. Independent Samples t-Test for Attendance for the Second Semester after SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances not Assumed

t	df	Significance
1.040	36	0.305

*Significant < 0.05

Table 13 is a representation of the data for the independent samples t-test for the third semester following SACE enrollment and non-SACE student eligibility. The level of significance was 0.412. This was more than the alpha level of 0.05. As a result, the decision was made to accept the null hypothesis of no difference. Therefore, it was inferred that the means in the population, from which these samples were drawn, were not different. That is, there is no statistical difference between the population means. In other words, the attendance of SACE students is not different

than those of non-SACE students of the third semester following SACE enrollment or non-SACE student eligibility.

TABLE 13. Independent Samples t-Test for Attendance for the Third Semester after SACE Enrollment or Eligibility with Equal Variances not Assumed

t	df	Significance
.839	18	0.412

*Significant < 0.05

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 was, “What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in graduation rates at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?”

The third research question examined what relationship existed between SACE students and non-SACE students in graduation rates. In order to address this research question, the study tested the following null hypothesis: There is no significant difference between the graduation rates of SACE students and non-SACE students. The null hypothesis investigating the graduation rates of the group of SACE students and the group of non-SACE students were analyzed using an Chi-square Test. Table 14 is a report of the cross-tabulation statistics.

TABLE 14. Counts of SACE and Non-SACE Students who Graduated, Dropped Out, Left the High School to Attended Non-Public School , and Students Who Transferred during the Time Period of Fall 2005 – Spring 2008

	Graduated	Dropped Out	Non-Public	Transfers	Total
SACE Enrollment					
Non-SACE	24	30	10	33	97
SACE	60	17	6	14	97
Totals	84	47	16	47	194

Table 15 is a representation of the data for the Chi-square analysis. The level of significance for the procedure was 0.000. This was less than the alpha level of 0.005. As a result, the decision was made to reject the null hypothesis of no difference. Therefore, it was inferred that the variables in the population, from which these samples were drawn, were dynamically related to each other. Statistical dependence existed. That is, if you know something about one variable you can make inferences about the other. In other words, students who participated in the SACE program were graduating at a significant higher level than non-SACE students.

TABLE 15. Chi-square Analysis for SACE Enrollment and Graduation Rates

χ^2	df	Significance*
27.705	3	0.0004

*Significant < 0.05

Summary of Findings

The results of this chapter have shown three findings. The first was that there is a statistical difference between the SACE students and the non-SACE students concerning core grade averages. The SACE students have higher core grade averages after enrolling in SACE and then up to four semesters after exiting the program. The second finding was that SACE students have a higher mean attendance rate after enrolling in the SACE program. Both groups of students, however, (SACE and non-SACE students) did not show any statistical difference in mean attendance rates after the semester of active SACE participation. The last finding showed that there is a statistical difference between SACE students and non-SACE students concerning graduation rates. SACE students graduate at a statistically higher rate than do non-SACE students.

Chapter IV was an analysis of the data collected for this study. Chapter V contains the qualitative aspects and the respective research question associated with it by reporting the interview data gleaned from the SACE teachers. Chapter VI contains the summary of the purpose of the study, the discussion of the findings, conclusions, and further recommendations for study.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS—QUALITATIVE RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) on students placed at-risk at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas. In order to fully evaluate the impact of the SACE program on the academic performance of students placed at-risk, a portion of this study was dedicated to examining teacher perceptions. This portion of the study was facilitated using qualitative methods to investigate the perceptions of the teachers working in the SACE program. This specific group of teachers was asked to recount their perceptions of the impact of SACE on SACE students. Active SACE teaching faculty of the 2007-2008 school year was asked to participate in face to face interviews with the principal investigator of this study. Of the four active faculty members, three choose to participate. Through face-to-face interviews, a qualitative research design was used to obtain data with regard to perspectives and perceptions of the SACE program and the corresponding impact on the SACE students, as well as the contributing factors that contribute to this. The collection and analysis of these data were fashioned using a process for interviewing and coding described by Patton (2002). The constant comparative method was employed in the analysis of the data that was generated by interviews with participants. The study thus addressed the following research question: What is the impact of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) on the academic performance of students as perceived by the SACE teachers?

In this chapter, the results for the research question guiding this portion of the study of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) are reported. Overall Perceptions of the SACE program, as well as the perceptions of the SACE program's impact on the academic performance of SACE students were investigated. This chapter is divided into three sections of data collection and analysis, research findings and summary.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted with willing participants. Responses were transcribed verbatim. These responses were subjected to researcher analyses using the constant comparative method. This analysis proceeded along the same methodology as suggested by Patton (2002). Responses to the interview questions were coded according to common themes. These themes included statements that supported the notion of perceived academic impact as well as the various themes that were illustrated by the participants that made the program effective or hindered the program's effectiveness with regard to impacting student's academic performance. A framework was constructed from the responses that will uncover what makes the program unique and effective as well as illustrated areas for needed growth. The following questions were used to guide the discussion of the interview participants on the perceptions of the SACE program effectiveness. These questions also served to guide discussion on elucidating the factors that enhance or refute the perception of the SACE program's impact on academic performance:

1. Describe your past professional experiences in public education.
2. Describe how you ended up in your present teaching assignment.
3. Describe your first reaction when you were asked to be a part of the SACE program.
4. What were some of your initial thoughts?
5. Before you began working in the SACE program, what experiences did you have with students placed at-risk?
6. Before you began working in the SACE program, what were your views on students placed at-risk?
7. Describe your experiences working with students placed at-risk in the SACE program.
8. How have your views of students placed at-risk changed since your involvement in the SACE program?
9. How would you describe the similarities between the SACE program and the regular classroom environment?
10. Describe the differences between the SACE program and the regular classroom environment.
11. Describe the strengths of the program.
12. Describe the weaknesses of the program.
13. In your opinion, how does this program help students stay in school?
14. When the students finish the program, how do you think students' lives will be different? Effected? Impacted? In your opinion, how will the SACE experiences help them?

15. Where do you see the SACE students in five years?

Participant Profiles

Prospective participants were selected among the three active SACE teachers. Two of the interview participants had been with the program during all four years of its life. The other was a new teacher, not only to the program, but also to the school. Another SACE educator chose not to participate, so he was not able to be interviewed. The other three active SACE teachers all allowed participation, and all were very willing to be interviewed. All participating SACE teachers have valid teacher certificates and hold multi endorsements on them. All of the participating SACE teachers hold masters degrees, all have at least seven years of experience, and all volunteered for this program. Two of the three teach SACE classes as well as regular core classes in the context of the larger school.

The aim of qualitative research differs greatly from that of the quantitative or positive research methodology. The philosophical orientation of qualitative research is that multiple realities exist and are constructed (Merriam, 1998). The researcher in this study attempted, therefore, to interpret and ascertain the perspectives and perceptions of the participating teachers during a specific time and in a specific setting. The objective was to maintain authenticity by making certain that multiple realities were represented, while addressing the issues of reliability, and validity. Even though the limitation of this study is the small size of its participants, interviews provided breadth and depth to the study. All of the participants came from varied levels of expertise and experience. The perspectives from this study include two white males in

the mid-50s, and one white female in the mid-50s. One educator has been in the profession for nearly 25 years. His most frequent assignment has been teaching gifted and talented students English. This particular teacher holds multiple certifications. In SACE he serves as a mathematics teacher. Another educator is a retired Air Force officer who has over a dozen years in the field of education. He also holds multiple certifications, but he has the most experience teaching literacy to the more academically challenged students. He also serves as a coach at McCarthy High School. In SACE, this particular teacher teaches Social Studies. The last educator has the least amount of teaching experience. She began her work in the teaching profession after her children were grown. She also holds multiple certifications including special education, art, and English. In SACE she teaches English.

I have to clarify the fact that as the designer of this program, I had to deal with a certain amount of knowledge that I had the potential to have taken for granted. This did not hinder any research into this area. I simply had to keep my knowledge in check. I constantly had to ask myself “would someone that did not know anything about this program need to know it, or did a point require further detail.” It is the belief of this researcher that the interview questions were nonthreatening and that participants provided candid responses without coercion. One method that was employed by the researcher to ensure that the participants and their ideas were represented accurately was member checks (Glessne, 2006). These member checks were facilitated by the sharing of interview transcripts and the research findings with the interview participants to make sure that their answers were interpreted correctly.

Follow-up interview questions were also conducted as needed to clarify initial interview questions.

Research Findings

The following is a discussion of the results that were obtained as a result of analysis of the interview data that was obtained from the participants. The participants of this study are the teachers involved in the day to day operation of SACE and thus provide the most insight into whether the program is effectively accomplishing its objectives and meeting its purpose. These responses were used to gauge impact on academic performance of students for this reason.

Observation

The researcher walked into the room for the interview and his heart swelled. Just three short years ago, this was just an idea. Today SACE exists and it continually struggles to justify its existence. This provides him with the impetus to conduct this research to discover whether or not the SACE program is effective, especially regarding the impact it has on student academic performance. The researcher has to remind himself that he is here to conduct research, and he must remain unbiased. The physical structure of the room is different and one sensed uniqueness right away. It is like the researcher walked into another dimension. The room was comfortable. He did not witness any negative teacher/student interactions that have come to characterize many classrooms today. He did not see a typical sanitized room. Individual thought and creativity was nurtured here. Student work is displayed every where within the

classroom. Art abounds, and student desks are sparse. Plants and flowers were present. Students sat at tables, desks, or sat at one of the banks of computers that lined two of the four walls. The room was abuzz with activity. Students worked on the course credits that they have failed. These included social studies, science, English, and mathematics. There were two teachers present, and they were busy helping students as needed. They switched gears seamlessly as they answered questions from the novel *Animal Farm* and then moved to questions about linear equations. There were no behavior problems even with just five minutes until the bell rings to signal the end of another school day. There was reciprocity of respect and interest among students and teachers. I noticed that the teachers listen attentively to the students that they are worked with and that they seemed to be learning along side their pupils. I sat anxiously and observed these activities in anticipation of the interviews. The teachers acknowledged my presence with a quiet hello. They are a husband-and-wife team in their mid-50s. Both of these teachers initially opposed their involvement in this program. The bell rang and the students filed out of the classroom. Salutations were exchanged, and some of the students had to be shooed out. I sat down to interview my first participant. The second left the room and remarked that he will be back in an hour. I began my interviews.

As the literature has stated, there is a scarcity of research on effective dropout prevention programs. This portion of the study is an attempt to determine how the program is perceived by the SACE teachers and what do these perceptions say about the program's effect regarding the impact on the academic performance of the SACE

students. It further attempts to determine the factors that have enabled it or hindered the program's impact on student academic performance.

In regards to perceived effectiveness on impacting student academic performance, this was answered with a resounding positive response. All three participants cited that the program effectively impacted student academic performance. As one teacher stated:

One boy reported that SACE is just the best part of his week. He said that he felt accepted and at peace. We do not have many distractions, as most kids stay on task and are working on different credits at the same time. We have kids on the computer taking courses online, and we have kids at their desk working on paper pencil tasks. It just varies, and that seems to work. We can also offer them several courses within a semester, and they can't find that in a regular class.

Another SACE teacher offered another perspective:

I get to see the students succeed and grow in a way that I don't get to see in my other classes. They grow up. They come in here needing credits, and some have been failing in school for two or three years. They are on the verge of leaving school forever. In a semester they can recover most, if not all, of the credits they need. They connect with us, and I can keep up contact with most of them even this semester if they have returned back to their regular classes. They have someone now that they can come to if they are in a bind or if they want to share a success. A lot of them have never had in school. I kind of gravitate towards these kinds of kids, because I grew up poor and on the farm, and I know what education can do. I can really relate to a lot of these kids. I will say that I have been in credit recovery programs like Plato, before, and it didn't work the same. I did this in summer school. We would just sit the kids down in front of a computer and try to get them to learn. There is a difference the way that we handle things in here. These kids wouldn't graduate, or even have a chance if it wasn't for SACE.

This theme reoccurs throughout the interviews. I examined the question in the interviews that focused on the challenges of the program. The answer to this question revealed that none of the teachers perceived any sort of leadership or managerial deficit that needed overcoming. They all focused, instead, on the lack of physical

accommodations such as up-to-date computers and the lack of full-time teachers of math and science. The last interview that I conducted I even sought clarification on this by asking if there was anything beside physical accommodations and lack of staffing missing. The respondent stated that we could use more help (another full-time teacher allocation for SACE). Another respondent stated:

There are three critical weaknesses: we'd like more students, more computers, and more study halls to take our successful students once they are finished, but we know that we really can't control those things.

This was reiterated by another teacher who stated:

SACE was designed to cover all core area subjects, so we need full time teachers of all core areas, not just English and social studies. We could also use more of a variety of software packages besides PLATO to help students recover credits.

The experiences and perceptions of the teachers that work within the SACE program have illustrated some broad concepts that have made it effective. The experiences of these educators have demonstrated that teaching students placed at risk and maintaining an effective dropout prevention program depends on some key characteristics. These educators have initiated success by (a) establishing bureaucratic autonomy (b) educational paradigmatic reversal, and (c) teacher and student flexibility and responsiveness.

Theme 1—Bureaucratic Autonomy

The first of these concepts that developed from a recurring themes expressed by the responses of the subjects had been termed *bureaucratic autonomy*. This is a freedom to operate under the broad guidelines and policies of public schools, yet having the freedom to operate a program under less constrained conditions that

educators working within the context of the large high schools must. The program has thus established customization unheard of in today's school system. It is this element that can identify the needs that must be met immediately to save students that are at the verge of leaving the public school system. One of the subjects stated:

Sometimes the school system just beats the kids up, they get name tags like *losers*, they get d-hall as punishment, they get sassy comments from teachers—until they just leave.... I am now able to teach up to five different semesters of different math levels during one period. That's variety. I can work with a kid who earns Algebra credit in three days, and then next hour, a kid struggling to get it done in five months. And the rewards are palpable; the Katrina kids, barely able to vocalize needs and feelings, coming along—and smiling and earning credits.

Another respondent stated:

I am able to sit down right away and plan out a student's plan. I am not held back by the department's plans or by the district's curriculum. I follow the TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills), and the student and I decide how we will, and are going to accomplish the learning. The student is able to give me feedback on what he is interested in, and I give him choices on the projects and requirement. They don't have to waste their time rehashing stuff that they may have sat through twice or three times already. Why on earth do we give them stuff again and again and in the same way upstairs? (Upstairs is how the SACE teachers refer to the non-SACE classes since the SACE program is on the first floor). I assess them to be sure that they have mastered some topics and then use that assessment to see what they will be concentrating on while we have them in the program and I don't have to deal with layers of the system.

Another SACE teacher offered:

By passing the system in certain ways SACE gives students a safe haven. It works like a gateway, they can go back upstairs (McArthy's traditional classes) and graduate with their class, they can go to big ACE (the school district's dropout prevention high school), or they are always welcome back with us if they need more credits. I feel like we get to complete the students, not just see them for one subject a day for one year like a factory worker that does one job all day long. We advise students, help them in all different ways, we get them through school.

This bureaucratic autonomy has been shown to be a key characteristic in the success of an effective program like SACE. Educators and students alike do not have to be

subjected to an unfeeling impersonal system. They can creatively operate within the system, buffered from the constraints of the larger system by leadership.

Theme 2—Educational Paradigm Reversal

Another characteristic termed *educational paradigm reversal* deals with developing new practices and beliefs different from the traditional educational paradigm. These include student choice and individuation of lessons, self-paced curriculum, and student-teacher connection. In the regular school classroom students today are faced with large impersonal classrooms where students often are asked to move at the pace of the slowest in the class. The TAKS test drives instruction, and students that fail a semester of coursework must repeat the same exact course without variation. Student teacher ratios can be large with some teachers being responsible for up to 130-plus students. Teachers are pressured to get the students to perform on standardized tests and responsibility is placed squarely on their shoulders. SACE has moved away from these things. A new paradigm is being established everyday in the SACE program. Students are responsible for their success. Choice is central in all aspects of the program. Students choose and are held accountable for their actions. Class sizes are low, and students work at their own pace. As they finish, they are free to exit the program. They can stay if they choose until the end of the semester to work on guidance lessons or TAKS remediation. They are advised of their options, and their parents are briefed as well. One teacher that was interviewed stated:

The kids have choice. No one has forced them into our program; they are making the choice. They ask us for an education. Students know going in what will be expected of them, and what we are willing to help them with. All of the cards are

on the table. They know exactly what it will take to earn back credit, and they know they can earn more than one credit a semester. When we tell them that, their response is usually “cool.” Last semester we had a boy whose father had lost a leg in Iraq. The boy lost all of his credits for the first semester of that year. When he started with us this fall, he told us he wanted four second-semester core credits, and we just said okay, when will you be ready to start? He completed all of the courses before the end of the semester, and he has moved on. (This would have set him back at least a year to graduate.)

Another reiterated these sentiments:

Teacher and student empowerment mean that the program is fluid, and the kids see achievement. One by one, the kids earn their credits, and a sense of control begins to develop. And then that sense of control shifts a little to become self-control. It’s also just plain growing up. But the neat thing that goes with self-control is that it is one side of the coin, and as the kids cautiously turn over that coin, they discover responsibility. All of a sudden the “that teacher hates me” becomes “I messed up,” and isn’t that one of the most important markers of adulthood? They are in control of whether they earn credit and move on.”

Still another response included the following:

SACE is different from other things students can do to get credits. Summer school and typical credit recovery model themselves on regular classroom instruction ... a repeat of the course, with a different, compressed schedule. It involves teacher centered class activities and instruction, a repeat of the course, with the same course material. SACE, on the other hand, allows individual pacing, independent work, and clear goals divorced from the time spent in the seat.

Another teacher stated:

SACE is focused entirely on the student’s individual success. The curriculum is collaborative between the teacher and the student. We still follow the TEKS. Students organize their own portfolio of work. They have options of assessments. They might do a character analysis chart, or a traditional paper, or something else. SACE is responsive to individual student needs. It allows the student to accomplish their work without eliminating the key essential elements. Unlike other credit recovery options, we do not remediate material and we offer a multitude of support services. SACE students always know they are part of a team until they graduate, sometimes even after they graduate.

These facets intertwine to fashion a new educational paradigm that has been shown by the educators that work within SACE to be a key component of its overall perceived effectiveness.

Theme 3—Flexibility and Responsiveness

A third component that adds to the overall effectiveness of the program is the flexibility and responsiveness of the program. Everything within the confines of the program is open to change and responsive to the needs of the student except for the central tenets and beliefs of the program. Leadership has ensured this. This has proven very valuable when dealing with at risk students who demand this by their very “out of the box” nature.

We’re nimble. In SACE, a day without change is like a day without sunshine. And that goes to your credit—you’ve always allowed change and teacher empowerment. SACE benefits immeasurably from that management style.”

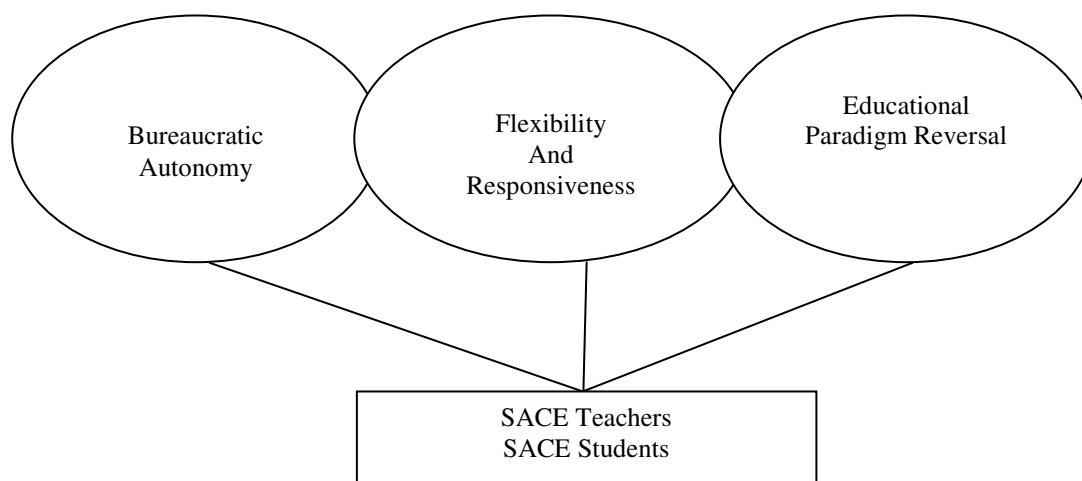
The third educator stated:

I feel that you will listen to what we need, and then you get it. I don’t always get this from other administrators or especially the support people at central office. I think that this translates into a feeling that the students pick up on, and I feel that I am able to respond to their needs much better and quicker, plus I feel like I can really think up different ways to teach, and I will be supported. The students actually come to me and ask if they can do it a different way, and I let them if it fulfills the requirements. There is no Scantron here.

This responsiveness and flexibility benefits not only the students, but also the teachers. As stated empowerment and professional freedom enable teachers to creatively address the needs of these students and a one size fits philosophy is avoided.

Summary

From the research it has been determined that the educators perceive SACE to effectively impact the academic performance of the SACE students. They cite three key factors that make this so. The three factors are (a) establishing bureaucratic autonomy, (b) educational paradigm reversal, and (c) teacher and student flexibility and responsiveness. These factors seem to work in harmony, and one without the other would greatly hinder the overall effect of the SACE program on the academic performance of the students. I have provided a diagram (Figure 1) that illustrates this relationship. Chapter VI contains the summary of the purpose of the study, the discussion of the findings, conclusions, and further recommendations for study.



Line of Effectiveness

FIGURE 1. The Three Themes – Bureaucratic Autonomy, Flexibility and Responsiveness, and Educational Paradigm Reversal Working in Concert to Keep the SACE Program Above the Line of Effectiveness.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Central to the purpose of No Child Left Behind federal legislation is the goal that all students within the public education system are successful. The primary way this legislation has been brought to bear on the public schools is the institution of an accountability system through high stakes testing for all student groups. Schools, however, will not only be judged on test scores, but on dropout rates as well (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). The problem of school dropouts is not a new one. In fact, the levels of school dropout have reached epidemic proportions. As Bridgeland et al. (2006) indicated, a wide body of literature addressing cause and effect of dropouts exists. The same cannot be said of literature addressing the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs (Kelly & Prevatt, 2003). Despite the costs associated with school dropouts on the national economy, the problem of school dropouts has largely been ignored (Dorn, 1993). The enactment of NCLB legislation has now made the problem of school dropouts one the public school system can no longer ignore (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). This make the expansion of the sparse body of existing research into effective dropout prevention programs a priority as public schools address the rising numbers of school dropouts.

The Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) is a dropout prevention program that is housed within the context of a suburban high school in Southwest Texas. It is a program designed to reach students who have been placed at-risk of

dropping out of school by allowing them to retake core courses at an accelerated rate while receiving support services such as mentoring and counseling. It is a unique program in that students are able to continue in their age-appropriate course of study and extra/co-curricular activities in their regular high school. It was designed to prevent school dropout by minimizing the effects of school failure and subsequent grade failure. The design of the SACE classroom is non-traditional in all areas, even including the physical arrangement of the room. Students are not segregated on the basis of grade, subject, or ability while in the SACE classroom. Curriculum is integrated, project based and self-paced and can be supplemented with credit recovery software. A central tenet of the SACE program is choice. Students are given choices on their entrance into the program, their course of study while in the program and the method they will be evaluated on. This characteristic of the SACE program makes each pupil's curriculum custom designed and student centered. This is accomplished by the SACE teachers while they are still held to following the state and district curriculum guidelines. The program differs from other interventions that allow students to recover credits. Neither does it remediate, nor does it follow the traditional classroom model. It keeps the students in their grade-appropriate course of study within the regular high school, and it provides students with a connection to school with support services until they graduate.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) on students placed at-risk at a suburban high school in

Southwest Texas. The impact of SACE was investigated by determining if statistical differences between SACE students and a similar control group of non SACE students existed with regard to the academic variables of grade averages, attendance averages, and graduation rates. Impact of SACE program was further examined by using interview data to investigate the perceptions of the program by the SACE teachers.

Summary of Results

Results of the study indicated that SACE students have higher core grade averages during the semester they were enrolled in SACE (Table 2). There is no difference in core grade averages among the two groups for the first semester after SACE enrollment (Table 3). During subsequent semesters, however, the SACE students have higher core grade averages as compared to the non-SACE students (Tables 4, 5, and 6). The results of the study indicated that SACE students had higher attendance averages during the semester they are enrolled in the program (Table 8). Regarding attendance averages, (Tables 9, 10, and 11) the difference was not evident between the SACE group and the non-SACE group after this semester of enrollment. SACE students were shown to have a higher graduation rate than the group of non-SACE students (Table 13). With regard to teacher perceptions of academic impact, three factors notably emerged from the interview data that effectively impacted the academic performance of SACE students. The factors were 1. Bureaucratic autonomy, 2. Flexibility and responsiveness, and 3. Educational paradigmatic reversal. These

three factors worked in unison to keep the SACE program operating effectively. A representative graphic model of this interaction is shown in Figure 1.

Presented in this chapter is a review of the statement of the problem, methodology and a discussion of the conclusions. Recommendations are made for additional research and the implications of these findings for stakeholders are provided.

Statement of the Problem

As illustrated in the review of literature, a small body of research on dropout prevention programs exists (Kelly & Prevatt, 2003). It was also illustrated in the literature that there is no research on the academic performance of alternative programs within regular high schools (Kelly & Prevatt, 2003). This study was an examination of the impact of SACE on students placed at-risk with regard to the academic performance variables of core grade average, attendance, and graduation rate. As pointed out in the literature review, a lack of academic success is a key factor in placement of students at-risk for school failure (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Kemp, 2006; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999). This study investigated the perceptions of the SACE teachers with regard to the SACE program. The study of the SACE program is important to the expansion of the literature on effective dropout prevention programs based in the regular high school settings. This study was designed and conducted to address deficits in the literature.

Methodology

The researcher employed a mixed method design to determine the impact of the SACE program on the academic performance of students placed at risk at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas. The researcher used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to widen the depth and scope of this investigation of the SACE program. The purpose of mixing research methodologies is to provide more comprehensive data relating to the research problem at hand (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007).

The quantitative portion of this study was a utilization both descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics are most appropriate reporting the condition of the student data and data organization. Inferential statistics are most appropriate when used for hypothesis testing when determining a statistical difference between sets of student data (Gall et al., 1996). With regard to the variables of core grade averages and attendance, the t-test for two independent samples was used to determine if there was a statistical difference between the SACE student group and the non-SACE student group. T-tests were conducted on the student groups for the time period of the SACE enrollment semester and then for up to four semesters following active SACE participation for core grade average and up to three semesters afterwards for attendance averages. Along with these t-tests, a Chi-square analysis was used to determine if there was a statistical difference in graduation rates between the SACE student group and the non-SACE student group. Due to the categorical nature of the variable graduation rate, a Chi-square analysis was employed. An alpha level of .05 was used on all tests. From these statistical procedures conclusions concerning the entire population were made (Spatz, 2005).

The qualitative portion of this study involved face-to-face interviews with the SACE teachers to generate data. These data were analyzed using the constant comparative method as prescribed by Glesne (2006). By using the constant comparative method to analyze the transcribed interview data, themes and relationships emerged (Patton, 2002). These themes and relationships were then pulled together to form a grounded theory concerning perceptions of the SACE teachers regarding the impact of SACE program.

Conclusions and Findings

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the understanding of effective dropout prevention programs by analyzing the academic impact of the SACE program on students categorized as at-risk in a suburban high school of Southwest Texas. This researcher used the academic variables of core grade average, attendance average, and graduation rate to examine the impact of the SACE program. A comparison between a group of SACE students at the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year and a characteristically similar group of non-SACE students during the same time period were used. Data were obtained using school records and academic achievement records. The yielded data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Coupled with the comparison of SACE and non-SACE student groups, SACE teacher perceptions regarding the impact of the SACE program on SACE students were also sought. The data addressed answers for each research questions in this study. Each question's conclusion and a summary of the results,

follows. The first three questions were answered using quantitative research methods while the fourth was answered using qualitative research methods.

Question 1

The first research question asked, “What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in core grade averages at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?” The question was addressed by using the t-test for two independent samples to determine if there was statistical difference between the two groups with regard to core grade average. The t-tests were conducted during the semester of SACE enrollment or eligibility and then up to four semesters following active participation.

Statistically significant differences were observed among SACE students and non-SACE students in core grade averages. Based on the results found in Table 2, 4, 5, and 6, the researcher found that SACE students have higher core grade averages during the semester of SACE enrollment, then during the second, third and fourth semester following their active SACE enrollment. It must also be noted that there was no statistical difference between the two student groups during the semester immediately after active SACE enrollment. This finding was based on the result found in Table 3. SACE students, therefore, earn higher core grade averages during their semester of SACE enrollment and for subsequent semesters they remained in school, with the exception of the first semester of active SACE enrollment. In the first semester following the semester of SACE enrollment, core grade averages were statistically the same between SACE students and non-SACE students. Students

placed at risk benefit by a smaller setting whereby educators are able to offer personal attention so that school engagement can be brought about, thus the probability for graduation is increased (Hardy, 2007). The findings of this study concur with the aforementioned statement. SACE students receive personal attention, are given access to instruction in a smaller setting, and are engaged in school as members in SACE until they matriculate. The increase in SACE student's core grade average as compared with the non-SACE group demonstrates the effectiveness of this type of setting.

Question 2

The second research question asked, "What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in attendance at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?" In answering the second research question, the t-test for two independent samples was used to determine if there was a statistical difference between the two groups of students with regard to the academic variable of attendance averages. These t-tests were conducted on the student groups during the period of time beginning with the semester of SACE enrollment and the period of corresponding SACE eligibility (for the non-SACE group) and up through the third semester afterwards.

Statistically significant differences between the SACE group and the non-SACE group were initially observed. Based on the results found in Table 8, SACE students demonstrated higher mean attendance during the period of SACE enrollment. Results found in Table 8, also supported the finding that SACE students have higher mean

attendance. These statistically significant differences, however, disappeared in the subsequent semesters after SACE participation. Based on the results found in Table 9, 10, and 11, SACE students do not have higher average attendance. SACE students, therefore, attend school more frequently while enrolled in SACE, but their attendance is no different from the comparison groups of non SACE students after the semester of active SACE participation. The conclusion can be made that SACE students benefit from the personalized care and attention that they receive while active within the program and thus maintain higher rates of attendance. In the semesters following their active status in the SACE program, this personalized care and attention disappears and their rates of attendance are the same as compared with students of similar characteristics.

Question 3

The third research question asked, “What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in graduation rates at a suburban high school in Southwest Texas, as reported by school records?” A Chi-square analysis was used to determine if there was a statistical difference between the graduation rates of the SACE students compared to the non-SACE students.

Statistically significant differences between the SACE group and the non-SACE group were observed. Based on the results found in Table 13, SACE students demonstrated higher graduation rates than non-SACE students. Therefore, SACE students graduate at higher rates than non-SACE students. Again, personalized care and attention as well as a smaller setting seemed to be the key to SACE student

success. The higher rates of graduation of the SACE students compared with a very similar group of non-SACE students indicates that SACE is effectively keeping students placed at-risk in school until they graduate.

Question 4

The fourth research question asked, “What are the perceptions of the Samantha Academy of Creative Education Program (SACE) as perceived by the teachers working in the program?”

The researcher gained an insight in addressing question 4 of this study through interviews with current SASE teachers using a series of questions, interview transcriptions, and analysis of the interviews. The resulting analysis indicated high levels of perceived academic impact on SACE students. The high level of academic impact, resulting from the SACE program was brought about by three factors working in concert to make SACE effective in executing its function of dropout prevention. The first of these factors was termed *flexibility and responsiveness*. The educators perceived flexibility and responsiveness, to be key components of the SACE program. These particular factors allowed SACE teachers to impact the academic performance of their students. Flexibility and responsiveness allowed SACE educators to quickly and efficiently meet the varied needs and characteristics of students who had been placed at-risk for failure quickly and efficiently. According to the literature, the characteristics of flexibility and responsiveness are unheard of in most dropout prevention programs (Dorn, 1996). A second prevalent factor, in the SACE program, was *bureaucratic autonomy* was prevalent in the SACE program. The SACE

educators remarked repeatedly about being allowed to operate under broader guidelines and with less constraints than their counterparts operating within the context of the regular high school classrooms. Additional comments by SACE teachers were that they did not have to contend with layers of bureaucracy. Teachers would normally have to contend with the layers in the traditional high school system. Literature indicated that this type of self governance is a key facet of effective alternative school approaches to dropout prevention (Rumberger, 2007). According to the SACE teachers, the final factor that makes SACE effective was termed *educational paradigm reversal*. This factor is defined as practices and beliefs that are different from the traditional educational paradigms. A few of the traditional educational paradigms that have been reversed in the SACE program include: large impersonal classrooms, remediation of coursework that has been failed, teacher centered instruction, lack of student choice into curricular decisions, a lack of support services, and cookie cutter curriculum. The contextualizing of curriculum has effectively tied students to learning by linking subjects to their life experiences (Yamauchi, 2003). Thus, curriculum was made relevant to students participating in the SACE program. According to SACE educators the fact that the SACE program achieves the opposite of the aforementioned traditional educational paradigms is one of the empowering traits that allow it to impact academic performance and keep students in school. These traits, institutionalized in SACE, work in unison to keep the program operating effectively and thus permit it to impact the academic performance of students who have been placed at risk for school failure.

The positive perceptions of the SACE educators illustrates how professional teams can work in concert to design an effective program within the context of a large suburban high school to reach students that have been placed at-risk of dropping out. This design can mimic effective practices of alternative schools. These key practices include, low teacher to student ratios, curricular contextualization, use of technology, personalized care and student engagement. Other key practices of the SACE program include the practice of self governance, risk taking, professionalism, collegiality, and the creation of non-threatening student environments. These aforementioned characteristics have been found to be key factors in successful alternative schools (Rumberger, 2007). It is important to reiterate that the unique aspect of the SACE program is that it allows students access to these practices within their regular high school environment.

Based upon the increase in the SACE student's core academic grade averages and graduation rates, SACE teacher perceptions of efficacy were well founded. The academic variable of attendance of SACE students may be a key component of SACE. The attendance average of the SACE students was found to be significantly less than the non-SACE student only during the time they were active within the SACE program. Attendance was never statistically different between the two groups after this time period. SACE student attendance was carefully monitored during their semester of enrollment. Close monitoring disappeared following the semester of enrollment. This close monitoring and personal care of students placed at-risk supports a difference in school attendance. The student attendance statistics showed no significant differences between SACE and non-SACE groups, even when aspects of

the SACE program remained, but the daily monitoring and personal attention of the SACE educators did not. Daily monitoring and personal care may be key factors in raising the number of successful graduates of students placed at-risk. It may also be a crucial factor in lowering the number of students who transfer.

Implications for Practice

A unique feature of SACE is its similarity to successful alternative schools. Alternative schools, with certain characteristics, have demonstrated effective results in keeping students in school who were placed at-risk of dropping out (Rumberger, 2007). These instrumental characteristics include: a learning environment that is non-threatening, a teaching staff that is caring and committed, low student to teacher ratios, and a staff that is encouraged to take risks, be collegial, and professional (Rumberger,). The unique feature of SACE is that it offers these important characteristics to the students while not making them attend alternative schools. These alternative schools are effective for the most extreme cases of potential student dropout, but suffer from negative characteristics such as lower perceived educational quality, social stigma, and feelings of failure (Lange & Sletten, 2002). With this study, the researcher has demonstrated SACE to have benefits of alternative schools while keeping students in the regular high school setting. These benefits can be replicated by mainstream educators and educational leaders. They are not limited to students placed at-risk.

With this study, the researcher has demonstrated that programs designed and housed within a large regular high school, targeting students who have been placed

at-risk for dropping out, can impact the academic performance with regard to the academic variables of core grade average, attendance, and graduation rate. The SACE program has shown that its students demonstrate higher core grade averages, higher attendance rates while enrolled in the program, and higher rates of graduation. The context of the large high school has been maintained, while providing the positive benefits of a smaller community of learners that have demonstrated lower rates of dropout (Sergiovanni, 1996). The qualitative research question (What is the perception of The Samantha Academy of Creative Education (SACE) as perceived by the teachers working in the program?) functioned to further solidify and deepen the understanding of the quantitative research questions findings (What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in core grade averages? What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in attendance? What relationship exists between SACE students and non-SACE students in graduation rates?). The researcher has further demonstrated that the factors of bureaucratic autonomy, flexibility and responsiveness, and educational paradigm reversal work in concert within the SACE program. These factors have the positive effect on SACE students with regard to academic performance variables of core grade averages, attendance, and graduation rates. These factors are not found in the traditional school settings. Clearly the success of the SACE program points to the need for change in traditional school leadership practice. School must become more responsive to the needs of their students. The teacher responses in this area demonstrate this.

It is the increase in graduation rates in the SACE group as compared with the graduation rates of the non-SACE group that point to the true effectiveness of the

program with regard to keeping students in school until they successfully matriculate. Teachers can be entrusted to design programs like SACE, which are designed to meet the needs of students. Educational leaders can give latitude and empowerment to teacher teams in order to establish programs with bureaucratic autonomy, educational paradigm reversal and responsiveness and flexibility. In doing this, important academic variables of attendance, core grade averages, and graduation rates can be positively impacted. Educational leaders within any setting should note the aforementioned as they are relevant to educational practice within this day and age. It should lastly be noted that the practices discussed within this study are relevant regardless of academic setting or type of student.

Recommendations Based on This Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of SACE on the academic performance of the SACE students during the school year 2005-2006, as well as the perceptions of the SACE teachers. The following recommendations are based upon the review of literature, the findings of this study, and the conclusions drawn from research.

1. This study demonstrated the SACE program effectively raised the rates of graduation amongst students who participated in the program compared with a like group of non-SACE students. As a result of this study, the first recommendation is that the SACE program be replicated on several high school campuses and subjected to the same type of investigation.

2. The study also revealed that SACE students demonstrated higher grade averages than their non SACE counterparts. The second recommendation is that schools institute credit protection programs and other interventions so students will not be placed at-risk of dropping out due to school failure brought about by low core academic grades. The literature has demonstrated that failing grades are a key aspect of placing a student at-risk (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Kemp, 2006; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999). Further study regarding SACE interventions may increase the probability of initial success in core academic subjects.
3. The study also illustrated that educators can be given latitude, freedom and creativity to design effective programs, while following state standards. Pockets of alternative schooling can be established within the large traditional high school. Programs that provide students placed at-risk with high levels of monitoring and personal care can be instituted in this manner (Zweig, 2003). A third recommendation is that non-SACE educators be trained on some of the interventions and support services that are provided in SACE to encourage application of SACE strategies within their classrooms.
4. Clearly there is room for improvement in the SACE program. This was evidenced from the teacher interviews. More teaching staff, especially a full-time mathematics and science teacher, are needed. Also needed is an additional room or rooms and equipment.

Recommendations for Further Study

The following are recommendations for further research.

1. Further research is needed since this study was limited in scale and should be replicated in other dropout prevention programs in other schools. This program needs to be replicated in as strict a fashion as possible so that comparisons be made. This includes similar staffing, equipment, curriculum, and operational practices.
2. A qualitative study involving SACE students should be conducted. This was the one facet of the program that was not directly studied. These students have valuable information to contribute.
3. A wider study needs to be conducted that includes more than the 2005-2006 group of SACE students. A wider study would allow a broader picture of the program and a deeper understanding SACE effect.
4. Design a study that addresses the question of student mobility and its effect on the probability of school dropout rate. The study should be focused on increased mobility rate and whether these rates are influenced by school factors or whether school factors influence these rates. In the literature, mobility was found to be a major factor of placing students at-risk (South et al., 2007).
5. The study demonstrated that the attendance rates of SACE students were only statistically higher than their non-SACE counterparts during the semester of SACE enrollment. The recommendation is for additional study to determine the causes of this result. Non attendance was illustrated to be a key factor in

placing students at-risk (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In this study, however, the SACE students and the non-SACE students' attendance averages were statistically the same after their semester of active SACE participation or SACE eligibility, but the graduation rates were higher in the SACE group.

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VITA

Name: Patrick Jay Valdez

Address: 17210 Mt. Everest
San Antonio, TX 78232

E-mail Address: pvaldez32370@att.net

Education: B.S., Zoology, Texas A&M University, 1992
M.A., Counseling, The University of Texas at San Antonio,
2000
Ph.D., Educational Administration, Texas A&M University,
2009

Professional Experience: Teacher, North East Independent School District, 1994 -
2003
Counselor, North East Independent School District, 2003 –
2005
Assistant Principal, North East Independent School District,
2005 - present

Professional Affiliations: Texas Association of Secondary School Principals
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

The typist for this dissertation was Mr. Bill A. Ashworth, Jr.