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The Impact of Distance Learning on Nontraditional High School Students' Attendance and Dropout Prevention

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THE IMPACT OF DISTANCE LEARNING ON NONTRADITIONAL

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ATTENDANCE

AND DROPOUT PREVENTION

A Dissertation

by

TERESITA DE SARO

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ABSTRACT

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High school dropout rates have long been a problem for school districts and various contributing factors have excavated the problem. Most of these students have been plagued by the inability to integrate into the mainstream of school life due to socio-economic standing, lack of parental support, and many other problems. This qualitative study examined how distance learning courses have the potential to increase high school graduation rates and attendance rates. The research perspective was conducted at an alternative high school where the primary goal is to ensure nontraditional students' academic and personal support needed to graduate from high school. A single instrumental case study was conducted at an alternative high school utilizing a sample of twelve nontraditional students that took distance learning courses which allowed the researcher to understand a particular phenomenon, dropout, and attendance. Individual interviews were conducted to explore student experiences with distance learning courses and how these courses played a part in their graduation attainment; focus group methods, the analysis of learning analytics reports, lesson plans, and progress reports were conducted to understand student experiences. The researcher analyzed the data by coding the participant's answers. Eight themes emerged from the participants responses: Academic Acceleration, Flexible Scheduling,

Academic Support, Safe Environment, Transportation, Socializing, and Teacher Instructional Pace. These themes data was consistent with previous literature that supports the success and demand of distance learning settings and the lower dropout rate for older students.

Keywords: Online courses, alternative high school, graduate, dropout, nontraditional students, socio-economic status

DEDICATION

My study is dedicated to my brother and best friend Gregorio de Saro (deceased) who always protected me and inspired me to reach all my goals. My aunt Lourdes de Saro (deceased) who always believed in me and she always reminded me that Jesus is alive and that he is always walking next to me.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Policymakers and school administrators have been troubled with student dropout rates for

a long time (Steeg et al., 2012). A variety of approaches have been tried to combat student

dropout rates (Kyun-Nyum, 2014). The numbers, however, continue to rise. Research has shown

that in 2012 alone, three million high school age students were not enrolled in high school

(Gottfried & Plasman, 2018). The Texas Public School Attrition study (IDRA 2018-19)

concludes that in 2018-2019 attrition rate in Texas was 21% which is the lowest that the state

experienced since the Intercultural Development Research Association was formed in 1986. The

Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) study shows that Texas schools have

lost 3.9 million students since 1986. It also shows that schools lost more than one out of 5

students in the year before the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in $17 billion in lost income,

tax revenues, welfare, and other services.

According to Bowers and Sprott (2012), empirical findings show that high school

students drop out for a variety of reasons, therefore is difficult to predict and implement effective

dropout prevention measures. However, declining grades is a sign of student disengagement that

leads to student dropout.

Attending class lectures and tutorials have a direct impact on the improvement of

students' test scores. Furthermore, attending both lectures and tutorials is especially beneficial

for under-performing students (Kwak et al.,2019; Nyatanga & Mukorera, 2019). The Corona Virus pandemic in 2020 has shaken the world and accelerated distance learning within the public-school systems. Deepika et al. (2020) argue that distance learning is the most helpful method that can best be defined as any educational endeavor conducted through the internet. A two-way process that requires efforts from the learner and the instructor. Distance learning is a viable method that can be used without geographical or time zone limitations (Deepika et al.,2020), provide flexibility and opportunities for nonperformance students to continue their education (Goodman et al., 2019) in school institutions that are able to provide a supportive learning environment (Ginright & Cammarota, 2015).

The school learning environment is a determinant factor in the academic success of the school. School climate has a direct impact on academics (Davis & Warner, 2015). Ortigosa et al. (2019) findings showed how distance learning allowed nontraditional students to continue their education in spite of personal situations that impede them from attending face-to-face courses. Nonperformance students that experience negative encounters at their traditional schools while experiencing personal struggles end at alternative school settings receiving a supportive environment of family and community (Ginright, 2015). Belsky and Pluess (2015) argue that if the school intervenes promptly and provides guidance and assistance to the students to cope with the stressors and provide an alternative solution the student could overcome the situation without dropping out.

Numerous programs have been developed to target high school dropouts. However, studies show that high school dropouts' rates continue to be high. A vast number of studies have been done on the positive outcomes of distance learning in higher education but limited studies have been conducted at the K-12 level. For this study, the criteria used to identify nontraditional

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students will be based on choices and behaviors that contribute to risks of attrition and are, therefore, responsive to change or interventions if these take place at strategic points in the students' school experience. This study explored the perceptions and experiences of nontraditional students attending an alternative high school setting of distance learning as a means of dropout prevention. This study is important because although research exist in the positive outcomes of distance learning in higher education, few have knowledge of which prevention practices are the most effective in improving dropout rate conditions. This study provide principals, school administrators, and teachers additional information needed to implement more effective distance learning programs to combat dropout rates.

Statement of the Problem

The high school dropout rate continues to be high nationwide. In my tenure as a school administrator, I have served in different alternative school centers servicing nontraditional students. For this study I utilized the term nontraditional students rather than at-risk students, due to the fact that some of the at-risk students do experience the traditional school setting. In my experience nontraditional students do not experience fully the traditional school setting. Nontraditional students drop out of high school due to job schedules or family responsibilities that impede them from attending the traditional school hours. The findings of this study may be used to strengthen and increase effective distance learning programs in school districts, resulting in reducing dropout rates and increasing student attendance.

Dropout is a problem that schools, and policymakers have been concerned with for a long time. School administrators and legislators have searched for programs and interventions to assist with the high dropout rates (Steeg et al., 2012). According to Kyung-Nyun (2015), numerous attempts have been made to improve high school graduation rates, such as Improving

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America's School Act of 1994, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, to mention some. This legislators' effort was to retain potential dropouts at school or increase dropout employability in the labor market (Kyung-Nyun, 2014). According to Goottfried and Plasman (2018), dropout rates have slowly decreased over the past decade to a rate of 3.3%. However, dropout numbers continue to be high (Gottfried & Plasman, 2018). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2019, two million young people between 16 and 24 years old were not enrolled in a high school (NCES, 2019).

Studies show that a higher proportion of high school dropouts are unemployed, arrested, fired, receive government assistance, and suffer from poor health (Gottfried & Plasman 2018; Steeg, et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2017). Dropout is a national concern since each high school student dropout costs the US economy at least $250,000.00 during his/her life because of the costs of welfare, Medicaid, and fewer tax contributions (Lansford et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2017; Goux et al., 2017). According to Obinna and Ohanian (2018), eleven million of the students in America are Latinos. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (NCES, 2019), the Latino dropout rate is the highest: Latino 13%, African-American (8%) and Whites (4%) (Obinna & Ohanian, 2018).

To appropriately target our present high school dropout problem, it was necessary to understand better the reasons why students do not graduate from high school.

Need for the Study

According to the 2011 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), on average, a high school dropout earns approximately $25,000.00 compared with $46,000.00 for an individual that has a high school diploma or an equivalent degree. Furthermore, a high correlation exists between dropping out and poverty (Ausikaitis, et al., 2015). High school

dropout continues to be high; however, few studies on the need for successful distance learning settings at the 6-12 educational level that can target these issues have been conducted. The need for continued investigation and growth in effective distance learning programs. Moreover, educators, parents, and students will have information available to make informed decisions about enrolling on distance learning programs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to explore nontraditional high school students' attitudes regarding the effectiveness of distance learning courses and their impact on high school graduation rates and attendance rates. This design allowed the researcher to use a case study, a bounded system by time and place to learn about a specific problem or issue (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In this case the researcher learned about the impact that distance learning has on high school nontraditional students' attendance rates and graduation rates at an alternative high school setting.

The study employed a qualitative research method to explore student's perceptions on how distance learning courses impacted their credit accrual and attendance rates. The data was collected through the process of reviewing individual student interviews, focus group interviews, learning analytics reports, and the analysis of artifacts such as lesson plans. This study proposed a distance learning academic setting for nontraditional students that are able to graduate from high school while holding a job and meeting family obligations. The findings of this study have the potential to provide school administrators and teachers key components of the success of student distance learning completion course work to develop effective distance learning programs.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the researcher in the proposed study:

1. What effect does distance learning have on nontraditional high school attendance rates at an alternative South Texas high school?

2. What impact does distance learning have on nontraditional high school graduation rates at an alternative South Texas high school?

3. How do face-to-face and distance learning compare in nontraditional high school graduation rates at an alternative South Texas high school?

Methodology

The research design appropriate for this study is a qualitative single instrumental case approach. This design allowed the researcher to use a case study to learn about something else. In this case the researcher learned about the impact that distance learning has on high school attendance rates and graduation rates. Since the case chosen is an alternative high school, the population provided the researcher with the desire nontraditional target population for the investigation. A single case study is the best approach to study a group of students that will provide an insight into a particular issue of interest (Yin, 2009). According to Mills and Gay (2016), a case study allows you to study a unit such as a school (Mills & Gay, 2016). Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This qualitative single instrumental case study explored how an alternative high school, due to its nontraditional population, provided the researcher with a viable population for this study.

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Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that the case study approach may be implemented to explore more detailed educational strategies, allowing the researcher the opportunity to observe the subject in his/her environment. The case study may be implemented to explore more detailed educational strategies, allowing the researcher to observe the subject in his/her environment, such as a classroom. Moreover, the researchers argue that a case study, which requires multiple data sources, such as interviews, learning analytics, artifacts, can be properly conducted at the educational institution. Furthermore, a single instrumental case study involves a deep understanding of these data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Twelve participants were selected to illustrate their experiences with distance learning courses, representing a homogeneous sample for the study. Data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews, focus group interviews, learning analytics, and artifacts.

Significance of the Study

By analyzing this single instrumental case study, the researcher uncovered untapped resources at the 6-12 level. Recent studies show that distance learning courses and distance online extended day instruction have the potential to increase high school graduation rates and attendance rates (Borup et al., 2019; Goodman et al., 2019; Mc.A Baker et al., 2020; Popa, 2017). Distance learning has the potential to target not only nontraditional students but also students that need to accelerate their graduation while providing other services that traditional students are afforded, such as counseling and mentoring.

The findings of this study provided school administrators and teachers with effective program tools to develop an effective distance learning program to increase student retention and decrease student dropout. The findings of this study provided a foundation to develop an effective distance learning environment to reduce student dropout. School administrators could

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review this finding to guide them in the development of an effective distance learning program. This study may assist in the effective instructional interventions needed to implement an effective program. This study can also guide other districts to implement effective distance learning strategies to prevent student dropout. Providing an effective distance learning environment can assist students to accelerate their graduation and therefore increase their earnings and provide a better lifestyle for their families.

Definition of Terms

Key terms defined for the purpose of this study are:

Academic Communities of Engagement (ACE)

Borup et al (2020) defines the Academic Communities of Engagement framework as the student's independent ability to successfully perform in an online or blended course with the needed support (Borup et al., 2020).

Dropout

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines a dropout as a student who is enrolled in a public school in grades 7-12, does not return to public school the following fall, is not expelled, and does not: graduate, receive a high school equivalency certificate, continue school outside the public school system, begin college, or die (NCES 2018-19).

Graduation Rate

The IDRA study defines graduation rates as a measure by the percentage of students who started as nine graders who graduated with a high school diploma (IDRA, 2018-19).

Learning Analytics

Slade and Prinsloo (2013) study defined learning analytics as the gathering, analysis, and educational diffusion of student data with the ultimate goal of developing a suitable and effective cognitive environment support for learners (Slade & Prinsloo, 2013).

Nontraditional student

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines a nontraditional student as a student that due to choices and behavior has increased his/her risk of attrition (NCES, 2018-19).

Online learning

Singh and Thurman (2019) study defined online learning as an internet experience where individuals are involved in teaching and learning.

Distance learning

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines distance learning as a method of study where teachers and students do not meet in a classroom but use the internet, email, etc., to have classes (On-line Webster dictionary).

Distance learning synonymous terms

E-learning, web-based learning, distance learning, online learning

Chapter Summary

Policymakers and school administrators have been troubled with student dropout rates for a long time (Steeg et al., 2012). Ortigosa et al. (2019) finding showed how distance learning allowed nontraditional students to continue their education in spite of personal situations that impede them from attending face-to-face courses. A variety of approaches have been tried to combat student dropout rate (Kyun-Nyum, 2014). The numbers, however, continue to rise. A vast number of studies have been done on the positive outcomes of distance learning in higher

education but limited studies have been conducted at the K-12 level. This study explored the perceptions and experiences of nontraditional students attending an alternative high school setting of distance learning as a means of dropout prevention. This study may provide principals, school administrators, and teachers additional information needed to implement more effective distance learning programs to combat dropout rates.

Distance learning is not a new concept. The idea to provide education to the nontraditional learner breaking distance barriers has been developing for quite some time. According to Stattie et al. (2020), K-12 distance learning has become a common choice for educators that want to teach without the limitations of the traditional classroom. These educators choose to make education accessible to students without time and space limitations. Some families are seeking flexibility in class schedules, not limiting the student due to time or geographical space. Distance learning platforms have a positive effect on nontraditional students that need the flexibility of these platforms. Tingir et al. (2017) state that studies show positive achievement effect in all subjects at the K-12 level.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review focuses on providing a scholarly context of research and publications regarding distance learning, distance learning advantages, dropout prevention, high school attendance issues, and the advantages of alternative high school settings.

According to Bowers and Sprott (2012), overaged students who cannot graduate in four and a half years are likely to become dropouts. An alternative school setting offers them the opportunity to graduate in an environment that provides a positive and nurturing school climate.

Furthermore, Bowers and Sprott's findings show that high school students drop out without having experienced a history of academic or behavioral problems in elementary or middle school. Furthermore, that stressful and dramatic events that take place late in their academic life, such as parenting, the loss of a close relative, economic hardship, mental illness, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, among other stressors, result in student drop out. Belsky and Pluess (2015) recently identified more than fifty vulnerability stress studies in which only four were considered education problems, and none of these stressors focused specifically on dropout. However, it mentions the fact that adolescents under stress make sudden decisions that affect their lives due to these impulses.

Studies of the success and demand of distance learning settings have been conducted in recent years (Anderson, 2018; Borup et al., 2020; Glass & Sinha, 2018). According to Matzakos and Kalogiannakis (2018), students presented a lower dropout rate for older students who are working people, therefore experiencing greater difficulties attending traditional face-to-face education. According to Lee (2017) and Grant (2019) studies have been conducted in the need of distance learning courses, however, his study suggests that further investigation is needed on effective student practices with real-life student experiences to better understand the reasons why students do not complete distance learning courses. Previous studies have focused on the content of the distance courses and courses accessibility at the higher education level; however, few studies have focused on the actual learning environment design at the K-12 level. This study targeted student's experiences that will assist in the improvement of distance learning design courses. This single instrumental case study methodology and design fills the gap with the voices of nontraditional students that have experienced distance learning, which will allow educators to continue improving in dropout prevention avenues. This study adds to the scholarly discussion offering a preventive measure to afford nontraditional students the flexibility of continuing their studies and graduating from high school.

Technology plays a crucial role in today's educational settings. This study explored nontraditional student's experiences with distance learning. This study may provide school administrators and teachers insights on how distance learning assists nontraditional students and prevent them from dropping out. This study is important because although research exists about how school districts work with nontraditional students of dropping out, few studies have knowledge of which prevention practices are the most effective in improving dropout rate conditions. This study may give principals, administrators, and counselors additional information

needed to implement more effective dropout plans and programs. It will be of value to school leaders in the deep South that are experiencing similar challenges.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this qualitative study is constructivism and Bandura self-efficacy. Constructivism is a theory that supports the idea that knowledge is acquired when the individual constructs knowledge based on previous experiences. As the individual increases these experiences and own representations are created new knowledge is created. Social constructivism was developed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky who postulates that individuals are active participants in the development of their own knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). The constructivism theory counterpart's classroom instruction with technology access. The student environment is centered on the student and where the teacher acts as an instruction facilitator (Chen et al., 2008).

Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, which facilitated the development of research questions related to the impact of distance learning on high school nontraditional student's graduation rates and attendance rates. Bandura defines self-efficacy as "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Furthermore, Bandura suggested that individuals tend to function at their best when their physiological arousal is at the medium stage, not too high nor too low. Furthermore, reducing negative emotional situations strengthens self-efficacy. The proposed conceptual framework for an effective 6th through 12th distance learning program is to explore the relationship of distance learning opportunities in a supportive, flexible learning environment with experienced teachers. Student experiences and different learning styles play a role in identifying strong instructional strategies (Beasly & Beck, 2017). Albert Bandura's self-efficacy,

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1997 theory is a crucial component for social learning. Students with low self-efficacy will struggle in the learning process. On the other hand, students with high self-efficacy will translate their learning as a challenge (Olson & Hergenhahn, 2013).

Distance Learning

The idea of bringing education to the nontraditional learner despite geographical barriers has existed since the 19th century. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica Online (2021), the development of the U.S. Postal Service which provided secure and reliable correspondence originated the reliable distribution of instructional materials between students and professors. Correspondence schools developed in the 19th century with programs to assist religious groups like the Chautauqua Lake Sunday School Assembly in New York that started in 1874. This program facilitated the training of Sunday school teachers as well as church employees. Due to the success of the program, the correspondence program added nondenominational courses targeting reading correspondence. This new correspondence learning environment is known as the Chautauqua movement. In 1873 the first official correspondence program the "Society to Encourage Home Studies" was originated in Boston, Massachusetts. And later, the University of South Africa originated a strong distance learning program.

As technology continued to improve, in 1953 the first televised college classes were developed, Houston PBS. The courses were televised in the evenings to allow the learners that hold jobs the opportunity to view the material. The University of Phoenix, established in 1989, was the first distance program that offered bachelor's and master's degrees fully online. According to Rehn et al. (2018) in 1990 higher education institutions began implementing videoconferences for the delivery of courses. Glen Jones and Bernard Luskin in 1996 developed the first fully web-based university, Jones International University. As technology continues to

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grow and break new ground, in 2003 the development of Blackboard Learning allowed the teaching of more than 150,000 online courses across 55 countries. Furthermore, according to Hoskins (2013), the continued growth and development of innovative technology has drastically changed education. Teachers at the higher education settings started using instructional strategies where students were taking the lead, shifting the learning responsibility to the students. This is what we call now flipped the classroom. "Adult, distance, and continuing educators have always led the movement to take education to the student rather than requiring the student to come to the education" (Hoskins, 2013, p. 190).

According to Statti et al. (2020), K-12 distance learning has increased at a fast pace since the start of the 21st century to accommodate families that are not content with the traditional educational system. Traditional education is not able to accommodate issues such as family illnesses or other social responsibilities. Families that are seeking flexibility in class schedules not limiting the students due to time or geographical space. Furthermore, Green (2019) states that due to high school settings offering college courses while attending high school, advance placement courses, credit recovery needs, homebound, and homeschooling needs, distance learning is part of K-12 school systems. However, Statti et al. (2020) stated that few studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of distance learning with younger students.

According to Casey (2008) Distance learning continues to expand due to geographical and socio-economic barriers, the students' willingness to reach academic goals, and rapid technological improvements. As we discussed a brief history of the development of distance learning a clear understanding of the terms that contain certain variations is important. Kumar et al. (2018) states the importance of differentiating how instruction is delivered and the difference is important to understand the design of the instructional setting. Encyclopedia Britannica Online

(2021) defines distance learning as a form of education where physical separation exists between the learner and the instructor and the use of technology for student/teacher interaction. The most common variations of distance learning include e-learning/online learning as a learning environment where the internet is the instructional medium. And virtual learning refers to courses at the elementary or secondary level that take place outside the classroom utilizing the internet.

Mc.A Baker et al. (2020) findings show that distance learning has become an important development in the past decade. Students prefer hybrid formats because they offer flexible schedules, which will improve their attendance, and the material is accessible to the students at any time. The availability of technology has increased distance learning demands from families (Beck et al., 2019). Beasley and Beck's (2017) study reflect that more than 400,000 students attend distance online schools full-time, and 2.25 million K-12 students are receiving online supplemental educational services. According to Borup et al. (2020), distance instruction has increased intensely at all levels.

Moreover, distance instruction assists students that come from families that never attended high school, nontraditional students (overaged), and students struggling with the acquisition of a second language. Goodman et al. (2019) argue that distance learning options have open academic opportunities for students who would not have continued their education without this flexibility. Furthermore, Heissel's (2016) findings demonstrated that distance education systems provide opportunities to rural students that, without the flexibility of distance learning, education would not be feasible for them. Popa (2017) further argues that distance learning classes continue to increase educational institutions to accommodate student and social demands. Students can adapt faster to online platforms than traditional face-to-face settings.

Moreover, distance learning platforms have the advantage that the instruction is not interrupted. Students voiced their questions or misunderstanding via written correspondence (Popa, 2017).

Williams et al. (2020) reported students' positive feedback on regards to their distance learning classes. However, Thongsri et al. (2019) believe that to have an effective and positive learner's perception of distance learning, the institution must establish an educational management system that promotes a learning environment that supports flexible instruction and technology. The student learning environment has to reflect high-quality, relevant data applications. Shea and Bidjerano (2014) findings show that a higher percentage of students taking distance learning in college courses attained associate degrees at higher rates than those that took traditional face-to-face courses. The distance learning courses improved degree completion rates. However, both groups were academically at the same level.

As distance learning continues to grow and educators continue to find ways to inspire students to be lifelong learners. According to Huh and Reigelluth (2017), teachers perceive high importance on Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) in distance learning settings. Teachers agree that SRL is important, and they voiced the need to teach the needed strategies to develop higher levels of self-regulated learning. High achievers are linked as having elevated levels of self-regulated learning. Glazier (2016) argue that teachers that had a positive rapport with their students contribute to student success. Bandura (1986) states that Self-Regulated Learning has gained attention in education due to its positive relationship with learner's academic performance. Callan and Shim (2019) defined SRL as a cycle in which students are taught setting goals, planning how to attain goals, the implementation of targeted strategies, self-monitoring, and reflecting in their learning. Also, the need to integrate a motivational component in their learning is essential, to ensure the needed effort to reach the targeted goal. According to

Panadero (2017), SRL is a process that requires effort therefore, motivation is a crucial component. Furthermore, that SRL is a cycle in which the students adjust their ways to approach the task to deal with challenges. During the performance phase, students have to regulate and execute a variety of strategies to target the curriculum challenges. These strategies include their behavior, problem-solving skills, rethinking and analyzing the task. Panadero (2017) uses the example of a memorization task. When students need to memorize essential information, the students need to implement cognitive strategies. In memorization, the students usually implement prior knowledge to understand added information. Another example that Panadero provided was a metacognitive example such as summarizing information to ensure depth understanding. Furthermore, students can utilize behavioral strategies when the student encounters challenging tasks; implement a self-rewarding system for completing the task. Furthermore, Panadero (2017) states that the student can adjust their learner's physical environment. For example, the student can choose a room where distractions are minimized, avoiding social distractions.

A vast number of studies focused primarily on student knowledge acquisition through distance learning courses and technology access, however, few studies target student's experiences to improve the distance learning courses design.

Distance Learning Easy Adaptation

Distance learning is becoming more popular, due to the student's ability to adapt faster (Tortorella & Graf, 2015). According to Popa (2017), online learning classes continue to increase educational institutions to accommodate student and social demands. Popas's findings reflect that distance learning was more accessible to a diverse type of student due to work and family obligations. Furthermore, findings showed that nontraditional students were able to adapt faster

to online platforms than traditional face-to-face settings. Moreover, that the adaptation to online platforms also allows students to gain knowledge in the new technological platform features, which can be beneficial when they apply to the workforce (Popa, 2017). According to Cowen and Tabarrok (2014), universities have increased their online distance courses to meet student needs, for which some of the courses are exclusively using online distance education platforms.

According to Kintu and Kagambe (2017) and Anderson (2018), distance education platforms facilitate the flexibility that some students need to meet their family and financial activities. This study included the entire female population of Sweden in the cohorts born between 1968 and 1991. McIntosh (2005) argues that in interviews, students have voiced how online distance education has helped them meet their student requirements with their adult roles and responsibilities (Anderson, 2018). According to Basak et al. (2018), distance learning allows teachers the implementation of new instructional strategies with different formats and the option to utilized blending learning settings to focus on competency-based learning to allow students for a deeper understanding of the curriculum. This setting allows the teacher to personalized instruction and also allows the students the opportunity to extend their learning at their convenience. Furthermore, allowing the teachers to personalized instruction to target student's needed skills. Teachers have the capability to assign students into groups for cooperative learning and organize the groups depending on the level of academic need. Students can work together and learn from each other. These capabilities include individualized student assessment. Students have the capabilities to upload their assessments, allowing immediate communication and feedback from the teachers. Teacher and student can reach others to clarify any questions or concerns. The teacher can upload supportive instructional material according to student needs.

Online education platforms have a positive effect on nontraditional students that need the flexibility of these platforms.

Better Academic Performance in Distance Learning Instruction

Tingir et al. (2017) state that studies show positive achievement effects in all subjects at the K-12 level on students that have access to mobile devices. Students that were exposed to mobile devices score significantly higher than the students with traditional educational methods. Furthermore, in this 21st century, students need technology skills to reach their academic goals. Slover and Mandernach (2018), and Anderson (2018), findings show that nontraditional students are more likely to take online courses than their traditional-age counterparts. Furthermore, Slover and Mandernach (2018) argue that nontraditional students scored higher in academic online instruction. The nontraditional students can perform at the online level due to the flexibility of curriculum materials and the flexibility of classes. This study tested 1,276 undergraduate students majoring in business in an accredited university in the southwest United States. In this study, age was determined via institutional records. A direct comparison of both traditional and nontraditional students completing the Peregine Outcomes Assessment was utilized to examine the learning outcomes as a function of student age (traditional versus nontraditional) concerning the mode of instruction, distance learning versus face-to-face instruction.

Borup and Graham (2020) believe that student engagement increases when personal communities are created to ensure better integration of course materials and communities' integration. Moreover, these online personal communities are especially beneficial for the students struggling with the acquisition of a second language. Cela et al. (2014) believe that student success also increases as communication increases in the activities.

Distance Learning Supplemental Instruction

Other studies emphasize that curriculum implementation plays a significant role in distance learning student success. The implementation of cooperative learning in online courses and teacher support with immediate student feedback is essential for student success (Marsteller & Bodzin, 2015; Williams et al., 2016). Moreover, Hizer et al. (2017) argue in their findings that students have responded positively to online supplemental instruction. Online supplemental instruction assists with positive outcomes and is a new avenue for students that have trouble attending face-to-face supplemental instruction due to scheduling conflicts or transportation. Other studies reflect the importance of the effectiveness of online course design (Pape & Prosser, 2018; Ginda et al., 2019). Thongsire et al. (2019) argue that a strong and reliable web-based platform is necessary for the success of any online instructional program. Even though the system does not directly impact the effectiveness of the implementation of the curriculum, it does offer reliability for the user.

The Corona Virus pandemic in 2020 has not only shaken the world; it has also accelerated online learning within the public-school systems. Borup, J. (2016) argues that enrollment in K-12 online environments continue to grow despite attrition rates. Deepika et al. (2020) argue that e-learning is the most helpful instructional method that can be used without geographical or time zone limitations. Distance learning can best be defined as any educational endeavor that is conducted through the Internet. A process that requires efforts from the learner and the instructor.

Dropout Prevention

Dropout prevention has long been a major concern for school administrators. Many programs have been created to address this issue, and yet, the problem persists. One particularly

vulnerable population is what can be defined as nontraditional students who fall into one or more of these categories: married with children, family breadwinner, overage, and/or an underachiever. Because a traditional campus setting is not geared towards providing relief to these students, it is imperative that other options be explored. The most viable of these is distance learning which offers the flexibility and environment that these students require. Studies identify different behaviors that predict student dropout. According to studies dropping out of high school does not take place suddenly, is the result of a long development of events that have resulted in school disengagement (Baker et al. 2019; Wang & Fredericks, 2019). According to Baker et al. (2019), the identification of specific factors is linked with high school dropout; attendance issues, dress code violations, in-school suspension, poor academic performance, among others. The violation of dress code is a sign that the student no longer respects the school and no longer is willing to comply with school rules and expectations.

Wang and Fredricks (2019) argue that school engagement is a strong factor that prevents students from dropping out. Engagement with positive academic results allows the students to feel a positive relationship with the school. The positive connection students have with their teachers has a significant impact on student engagement. On the other hand, students that are disengaged receiving low grades, and engaging in negative behaviors were linked to dropping out of school. Furthermore, those mentoring programs are a common intervention that schools utilized with youth. The guidance that a counselor or a mentor offers also has a positive impact on school engagement. Llakkuvan and Price (2021) state that preventive dropout behaviors are student participation in extracurricular activities and feeling safe in the school environment. Moreover, when students fear bullying, school attendance decreases. Chen et al. (2019) findings show that family engagement in school has a positive effect on student academic engagement.

Moreover, Gil et al. (2020) states that parents' participation in the student's education plays a critical role in student behavior and academic performance. And Borup (2016) state that to ensure parent involvement teachers need to initiate communication with parents.

Studies of the success and demand of online settings have been conducted at education institutions in recent years at all levels (Anderson, 2018; Borup et al., 2020; Goodman et al., 2019; Mc.A Baker et al., 2020; Matzakos & Kalogiannakis, 2018). According to Matzakos and Kalogiannakis (2018), students presented a lower dropout rate for older students who are working people, therefore experiencing greater difficulties attending traditional face-to-face education. The student is guided by the teacher utilizing several communication channels to ensure student success. This distance learning program in mathematics aimed to assist students in their transition to post-secondary education. The findings reflect a positive student acceptance of this program, presenting lower dropout rates.

De la Varre et al. (2014) argue that prior that a student starts a distance learning course an orientation meeting needs to take place between the parent, the student, and the teacher to ensure a clear understanding of the demands and the requirements needed to successfully complete the course. Parents need to be aware of the required curriculum, the time and effort needed for the completion of the course. Moreover, the parents can communicate with the teachers if the student is experiencing frustration and stress that affects the required progress. Teachers then can individualize the instruction and provide the tutoring and support that the student needs to be successful in the course completion. De Castro et al. (2016) state that the efficient process of monitoring student progress is a crucial factor in the prevention of dropout. The monitoring of student progress through a monitoring system allows the teachers to strategize to make changes to effectively impact student learning. According to Cohen (2017), predicting dropout behaviors

at an early stage of a distance learning course is especially important. Teachers can analyze these negative behaviors and intervene in tailoring instruction to target specific student needs. Effective learning management systems (LMS) provide web-based analysis reports that allow educators to identify student's behaviors and therefore intervene in the areas of need. Transitional programs.

According to Wang et al. (2019), there are two common reasons that students drop out: deficiency of academic support and level of difficulty of a course. To ensure academic support, the instructor needs to monitor student progress and inform the student of the course requirements throughout the course to ensure that the student is assimilating and applying the concepts accurately. Distance learners must work on the problems by themselves.   Also, the level of difficulty of the course material must be at the student level to reduce student frustration. Furthermore, Wang et al. (2019) state that social connections positively impact distance learning. Discussions, sharing student's notes, and Q & A activities positively affect student outcomes.

Distance Educational Flexible Opportunities

Goodman et al. (2019) provide evidence of how the distance learning options have open opportunities for students who would not have continued their education without this flexibility. According to the authors, no previous research had taken place regarding how distance learning education can develop a new venue to access education increases the number of students completing their education. The researchers analyze the applications to the new Online Master of Science in Computer Science (OMSCS) and the Georgia Tech in-person computer science master's degree (MSCS) offered by the Georgia Institute of Technology. The study reflected that few students applied to both programs. The average age for the students applying for in-person instruction is 24 years old.

On the other hand, the average age for the online program is 34 years old. Eighty percent of the online program applied due to the flexibility of the alternative education option (Goodman et al., 2019). This study extended educational opportunities to students who cannot attend the traditional school schedule, therefore expanding educational opportunities. These are the educational opportunities that we need to expand at the high school level. Gottfried and Plasman (2018) argue that online career and technical education (CTE) course taking is linked to lower high school dropout rates. Students are able to graduate from high school, benefit from CTE certifications that improve their employment opportunities.

Student Support Framework

According to Borup et al. (2020), distance learning instruction has increased intensely at all levels. They proposed a framework that consists of The Academic Community of Engagement (ACE). This framework describes the effects that parents, teachers, and even peers have on the adolescent student. According to the authors, student engagement increases when personal communities are created to ensure better integration of course materials and communities' integration. One of the examples that they shared was that parents are more likely to support their children if they are invited to participate in a supportive community (Borup et al., 2020).

This ACE framework can assist students who come from families that never attended high school, nontraditional students (overaged), and students struggling with the acquisition of a second language. Moreover, Borup and Stimson (2019) stated the importance of teachers creating a support system and the importance of online teachers starting communication with the support receiving individualized feedback from the teacher. Wang et al. (2019) argue that

distance learning platforms need to increase learner engagement with social-interactive activities, improve the distance learning experience and lower dropout rates.

High School Attendance

Attendance is one student behavior that is highly linked with positive student achievement (Darling-Adwana, 2019). Popa (2017) notes that online learning classes continue to increase educational institutions to accommodate student and social demands. Due to work and family obligations distance learning is more accessible to a diverse type of students. Furthermore, different reports and surveys of students attending distance learning educational settings continue to increase annually. The online setting provides the students and the institutions with lower costs due to the reduction of utility cost, consumables, travel expenses, educational materials, and the student opportunity to attend the educational setting while earning an income.

Flexible Scheduling and Attendance

The flexibility that online programs offer to nontraditional students positively affected students' attendance. The study was conducted at a Greek University with 1st year engineering students. Goodman et al. (2019) also believe that online options open opportunities for students who would not have continued their education without flexibility. Hurtbut's (2018), Jaggars's (2014), and Levy's (2011) study's findings also reflect those students that selected distance learning instruction voiced that due to job schedules or other responsibilities, distance learning was a better choice for them. Malczyk's (2019) findings indicated that the undergraduate students' intentions to use a specific modality; distance learning or face-to-face, did not match their original decision. The undergraduate students had the option to switch to distance learning at their convenience due to life challenges, such as new work schedules, family responsibilities,

or illnesses. Due to student's life challenges, they utilized the flexibility of other modalities to complete their course work and meet their job and family responsibilities. Hyflex blended learning environment offers nontraditional students the flexibility to attend school at their convenience with the flexibility to utilize different modalities to complete their assignments.

Moreover, allowing them to attend school successfully. Hizer et al. (2017) embarked on a study comparing the efficacy of face-to-face supplemental instruction (SI) versus online supplemental instruction. Asynchronous distance learning instruction was provided where the students had access to tools in which they were able to download their writings and receive feedback from the instructor within 24-48 hours. Students not only responded positively to the online supplemental instruction; they experienced very few technical issues. The online SI positive outcomes are a new avenue for students who experience scheduling conflicts, which is why students do not participate.

Alternative High Schools

Alternative school's settings are intended to provide individualized instruction for students who need intensive academic support (Griffiths et al. (2019). Alternative educational programs have been established for the past fifty years. These educational centers have been developed for young individuals of compulsory age that have been excluded from their home campuses. The main goal of the alternative high schools is to provide an alternative education route to continue their education and at the same time receive some work training skills (Pennacchia et al., 2016). Furthermore, Te Riele et al. (2017) argue that the student who attend alternative education centers are the ones with the highest needs. Therefore, the importance of providing a nurturing positive school environment is critical that teachers create an affective

justice learning environment. Alternative centers meet all the educational elements of the home campus, high academic expectations, attendance, and behavior.

Moreover, teachers must individualize instruction for each student. Te Riele's (2017) findings show positive student academic outcomes for students attending alternative centers. Students display increase engagement and increase of credit accrual. According to Fish (2017), students who attend alternative settings are due to parental support. Student's parents often also struggled during their young years with similar family issues. According to Davis and Warner (2015), the school learning environment is a determinantal factor in the school's academic success, and that school climate has a direct impact on academics. However, Te Riele et al. (2017) believe that support from teachers, administrators, and colleagues is essential for the success of alternative schools. Wilkerson et al. (2016) suggested that students attending alternative high school settings showed improved outcomes in credit accrual earnings towards graduation with the reduction of office referrals. Those students that are implementing Self-Regulated Learning and monitoring their progress in their self-reflection phase can benefit from external sources of feedback. These external sources may include teachers, coaches, parents, and even peers. Receiving external may be crucial to ensure that the self-generated feedback is accurate and beneficial. If the students' self-generated feedback is not accurate the external feedback gives the student the opportunity to make changes and adjustments in their goal settings for future tasks setting clear and effective goals. However, is important to note that teachers need to be trained to effectively implement Self-Regulated-Learning support (Callan & Shim, 2019).

Alternative High School's Class Size

Toro et al. (2019) argue that a crucial factor in the success of alternative education is class size. In a study conducted in Ecuador, teaching English in small classes provided important

benefits. Teachers pay more individualized attention to students, allowing them to assist them as well as getting to know them better. Moreover, Toro et al. (2019) findings show that teachers have the liberty to apply various resources, diverse strategies, and activities that allow students to interact in groups or individually. Due to the small classes, the teachers can arrange the room and utilize different settings that allow students to interact with all students. Students have more opportunities for hands-on instruction, and lively class discussions that promote problem-solving and high order thinking skills. Teachers have more opportunities to include activities that promote prior knowledge and new knowledge and make connections. Students receive immediate feedback from the teacher.

The students feel more comfortable communicating with the teachers due to respect and responsiveness that develops in small settings. Teachers get to know and understand individual student needs and the strategies that can help them overcome their learning barriers (Toro et al., 2019). Washburn-Moses et al. (2018) argue that the success of the alternative school settings includes a small class size element. Teachers can provide an environment where the at-risk population can be successful through elevated expectations, individualized instruction, best practices, and mentoring (Lin et al., 2018). Due to the structures of alternative school settings, such as a small number of instructional faculty, and student numbers in classes, the school staff can quickly implement innovative instructional practices (Bascia & Maton, 2016).

Teacher's Experiences in an Alternative High School Setting

The student-teacher relationship plays a significant role in students dropping out of high school. The study reflected a 34% of the students' dropout due to negative relationships with their teachers (Kim et al., 2015). School teachers at the high school alternative centers encounter highly challenging student's needs; therefore, it is essential that experienced teachers equipped

with the knowledge on differentiating instruction can work at these specialized schools (Te Riele et al., 2017).

More than 400,000 students are currently attending full-time K-12 online classes, and 2.25 million are attending online supplemental instruction. To better serve students, the need to differentiate instruction is crucial. Teachers believe that they need to differentiate instruction to meet students' learning styles (Beasley & Beck, 2017). Fleming et al. (2017) findings show that for an organization to accept and implement distance learning, three critical issues need to be in place; the interface must be user-friendly, accomplished desire goals, and reliable technical support. Furthermore, that organizational staff age was not a barrier to practical implementation.

Pendergast et al. (2018) study shows that to assist students in creating an effective learning environment, it is essential to develop a sense of belonging at school. Student sense of belonging to school (SOBAS) is a critical component in student engagement in learning. Furthermore, teachers that create a positive student-teacher relationship motivate students. The teacher creates a safe environment where the student feels accepted when the communication with the student is supportive, and when the teacher knows the student as a person. Moreover, they identified three levels of student engagement in the classroom: Behavioral, emotional, and cognitive.

Furthermore, Pendergast et al. (2018) states that the three must be developed to be completely engaged in the learning process. When a student is on task, follows the class rules, and contributes positively to the class, participation is evident. However, when the student can understand the real-life meaning of the learning, make connections, and show interest, student emotions are present. Once the student shows interest in the learning concept, the student moves to cognitive engagement, where the student wants to learn for individual interest (Pendergast et

al., 2018). Griffiths et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of using the whole school to celebrate student's accomplishments. The importance of the whole school is to be involved in creating positive learning activities and allowing the students to be part of the planning of these celebrations (Griffiths et al. 2018). For alternative schools to be successful, supportive administrators must foster an effective curriculum with rigorous learning. Administrators need to be knowledgeable and prepared to assist teachers with intensive student interventions to meet students' needs (Bettini et al., 2020).

Flexible Schedule in an Alternative High School

Ginright (2015) conducted a study in an alternative high school in Massachusetts, where students went back to an alternative setting after struggling in a traditional high school. The method utilized was based on interviews of a group of female students from low socio-economic status and minority groups. This study's findings indicate that due to the students' perseverance and the support of their families and community, they decided to go back to school. The student interviews reflect their negative experiences at their traditional school while experiencing personal struggles. Unfortunately, the traditional school failed to reach and help the students. Due to their poor attendance, lack of participation in school activities, and the teacher's perception of them as lower-skilled individuals, the students stopped attending classes and finally dropped out. Due to a supportive environment of family and community at the alternative high school, the students succeeded due to their perseverance and motivation (Ginright, 2015).

The students decided to go back to an alternative high school where a nontraditional curriculum and a flexible master schedule allowed them to attend school while working or taking care of children, parents, or siblings. The students voiced that their families encouraged them to

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continue school because they did not want them to struggle in life the way they did (Ginright, 2015).

Chapter Summary

Public schools have long sought to solve the problem posed by overage students that fail to graduate in the four years of high school (Bowers & Sprott, 2012). As their numbers grow and negatively impact attrition rates, institutions scramble to find a solution. An alternative school setting that offers a nurturing environment (Pendergast et al., 2018; Te Riele et al., 2017), coupled with distance learning instruction, is a viable solution. Most students prefer this hybrid type of education because of the flexibility that it offers (Mc.A Baker et al., 2020). However, studies show the need to train teachers and administrators in the current technology. The lack of knowledge and best practices of current technology can directly affect the instructional settings. Furthermore, distance learning teachers need to be equipped with the required skills to effectively deliver instruction (Rehn et al., 2018). Furthermore, Basak et al. (2018) state that technology continues to change teacher's roles, however, teacher instructional requirements continue to be the same.

The benefits of this type of setting consists of three critical components: The flexibility of time and place allows students to progress in conjunction with work and/or parenting responsibilities (Anderson, 2018). This provides an opportunity for those students who would otherwise be excluded from attending school. The alternative setting accommodates those overage students who might otherwise feel that the high school setting is not feasible. The third benefit is the teachers whose experience can create a nurturing atmosphere geared toward the nontraditional student (Te Riele et al., 2017). Furthermore, the small class size at an alternative setting allows the teacher to customize instruction to meet the individual student's needs (Toro et

al., 2019). This is of utmost importance because cooperative learning with timely feedback is crucial for student success.

Distance learning has also had a positive impact on the dropout rate. Older students who would otherwise be unable to attend classes now have the ability to attend distance learning courses (Goodman et al., 2019). This has enormous repercussions as it affects earning potential. All this, however, is most successful when backed by family and community support, especially when it fosters community integration (Ginright, 2015).

The theoretical framework for this study was based on Social Constructivism developed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. The learner is an active participant in the development of their own knowledge. Constructivism theory counterparts with classroom instruction with technology access. The student environment is student centered and the teacher acts as an instructional facilitator (Chen et al., 2008). And Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy that suggests that individuals tend to function at their best when their physiological arouses is at the medium stage. Furthermore, reducing negative emotional situations strengthens self-efficacy. Current research demonstrates that learners that possess high efficacy demonstrated more ownership of their learning when they are provided with a student-centered environment with the needed support.

The marriage of the alternative school and distance learning offers a comprehensive plan that addresses the need of nontraditional students in a practical manner. It is truly a viable solution to the decline in attrition and graduation rates. However, according to Statti and Villegas (2020), since distance learning is new to the K-12 educational settings researchers are seeking more studies in the effectiveness of distance learning with younger students.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The research method implemented in this study is a qualitative approach. According to

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) qualitative research is a method that focuses on human and social

sciences. In qualitative research, the plan calls for an inquiry method which is focused on the

understanding of human and social science to determine thoughts and feelings. Qualitative

method research reality using social construction. A qualitative research single instrumental case

study was conducted. This design allowed the researcher to use a case study, a bounded system

by time and place to learn about a specific problem or issue (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Creswell

and Poth (2018) define a single instrumental case study as a design that studies a case to provide

perceptions of a particular issue. In this case the researcher learned about the impact that distance

learning has on high school nontraditional students' attendance rates and graduation rates at an

alternative high school setting.

A qualitative research study that explored how the alternative high school, due to its

nontraditional population, provided the researcher with a viable population to investigate and

learn more about a particular topic of interest. The purpose of this study was to explore the

advantages that distance learning potentially represents for nontraditional high school students.

The research questions of this study attempted to identify how distance learning has the potential

to prevent high school dropout rates and increase attendance rates. Through this case study the researcher focused on finding answers for the following questions:

1. What effect does distance learning have on nontraditional high school attendance rates at an alternative South Texas high school?

2. What impact does distance learning have on nontraditional high school graduation rates at an alternative South Texas high school?

3. How do face-to-face and distance learning compare in nontraditional high school graduation rates at an alternative South Texas high school?

This chapter describes the methodology and the implemented procedures conducted in the study. This chapter contains the following sections: Research design, participants, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, limitations of the study, and summary.

The researcher sought to understand the participants' perceptions of distance learning. In this study the researcher used one-to-one-interviews, focus group interview, learning analytics reports, and the analysis of artifacts such as lesson plans and progress reports to discover participants insights regarding the impact of distance learning in their academic goals.

Research Design

A qualitative research single instrumental case study was conducted. According to Mills and Gay (2016), the case study approach allows you to study a unit such as a school (Mills & Gay, 2016). Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the case study may be implemented to explore more detailed educational strategies, allowing the researcher the opportunity to observe the subject in his/her

environment. The case study may be implemented to explore more detailed educational strategies, allowing the researcher to observe the subject in his/her environment, such as a classroom. Case studies allow the researcher to explore data in a real-life environment, helping him/her to explain the complexities of the real-life situations which would not be able to transpire in an experimental research environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moreover, the researchers argue that a case study, which requires multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, and documents, can be properly conducted at the educational institution. Furthermore, a case study involves a deep understanding of these data sources. There are multiple advantages of implementing case study research, such as good opportunities for innovation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This qualitative single instrumental case study explored how the alternative high school, due to nontraditional student population, provided the researcher with a viable population. Creswell and Poth (2018) define Instrumental Case Study as a study where you utilize a case to investigate and learn more about a particular topic of interest. For example, the effectiveness of cross training employees to better service customer relationships. In this study, the researcher explored a case, an alternative high school to learn about the impact that distance learning has on high school nontraditional students' attendance rates and high school dropout rates. To target the research questions of this study a single instrumental case study was implemented. Qualitative data was collected to explore student insights regarding the success of distance learning courses and the impact they have on high school nontraditional students' attendance and high school dropout.

Participants

This study consisted of students attending or recently graduated an alternative high school in a school district located along the Mexican border. An alternative high school provides individualized instruction while providing counseling services that support all students in completing their secondary education. The students are identified as 100% at-risk for academic failure (TEA 2017-2018 TAPR), 99.6% Hispanic, 34% English Learners, 98% Economically Disadvantaged, with a mobility rate of 57.1% (TEA 2017-2018 Report Card). Milles and Gay (2016) defined qualitative sampling as selecting a small number of individuals to be studies as key informants so that they can provide the researcher the data needed for a clear understanding of the given phenomenon (Milles & Gay, 2016). Based on my experience as a former administrator of three different alternative settings, students that attend alternative school settings are not only considered at-risk but have not experienced the traditional school setting due to personal and family challenges. Therefore, the term nontraditional students best describe this population. Data was compiled from twelve students (males and females) enrolled in the alternative high school or recently graduated at the same alternative high school. Prospective students were invited via email. Once the student accepted consent forms were collected.

A purposive sampling technique was used for this research. The purposive sampling technique allowed the researcher to select the site and individuals due to their knowledge of the phenomena of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher selected twelve individuals in grades 9 through 12 from a particular site so they can purposefully provide information for a depth understanding of the research problem investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This technique was implemented to find students that are representative of the indicated population and answer the researcher's questions (Mills & Gay, 2016). The students who qualify to

participate in the research (nontraditional students attending an alternative high school or have recently graduated from the same alternative high school) were asked to volunteer. A sample size of twelve participants were selected from these students. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the sample size is especially important in the data collection and suggests the guidance of Guest et al. (2012) which findings suggest that six participants on studies with high population homogeneity are adequate to identify themes analysis. According to Yin (2014), the final sample size is not finally decided until the actual study takes place, and the researcher has collected enough data for an in-depth understanding of the study. Moreover, Creswell and Poth (2018), argue that ten participants will allow for a variety of points of view, allowing the researcher to concentrate on final interpretations. Sandelowski (1995) suggests that a sample of ten may be acceptable among a homogeneous population. According to Guest et al., (2006) purposive sampling size relies on saturation. Term that is utilized when no added information is obtained by the data. Depending on the data set, saturation can take place within the first twelve interviews among homogeneous population. For this study twelve participants allowed for a variety of points of view, allowing the researcher to concentrate on final interpretations.

Instrumentation

The instruments used to analyze the impact of distance learning on high school attendance and dropout prevention were one-to-one interview, focus group interviews, learning analytics reports, and the analysis of artifacts such as lesson plans and progress reports. Participants' demographic data was gathered before individual interviews. A well-organized setting was developed to ensure a non-distracting environment for participants with comfort and privacy. Creswell and Poth (2018) define the interview process as a conversation between the researcher and the participant to gather information on a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth,

2018). Individual audio-recorded interviews scheduled to last no more than sixty minutes were conducted. Every effort was made to ensure that the students felt comfortable in answering the questions. Furthermore, their confidentiality was guaranteed.

According to Maxwell (2012), establishing relationships with study participants is an essential component of research. These relationships, however, must be such that they do not invite bias into the study. As social beings, researchers are part of the world that they inhabit. This interaction, or reflexivity, is a necessary component of data collection. It can also, however, threaten the validity of the researcher's conclusions. Two components must be present in a realist research model: research subjectivity and research relationships. Traditionally, subjectivity was viewed as a bias. However, it is now generally held that there is no such thing as immaculate perception (Maxwell, 2012).

It is of utmost importance to have a clear understanding of the process, especially the context in which it takes place. It is now believed that the researcher should consider his own beliefs, values, and dispositions and examine what they bring to the study, as well as how they can distort the data. The researcher then adjusts the research to compensate for the negative and take advantage of the positive consequences. One strategy for comprehending the level of influence that the researcher exert on the findings is a reflective analysis and writing, allowing the researcher to evaluate his bias on the subject (Maxwell, 2012). Acknowledging one's own bias is crucial to the validity of the research. Therefore, the researcher followed the strategy for evaluating any personal bias.

The researcher conducted individual interviews in which in-depth qualitative interviewing took place. In-depth detailed information was sought, therefore, the researcher asked open-ended questions in which the interviewee had the opportunity to respond as he/she

wished, agreeing or disagreeing with issues and even developing contemporary issues (Rubin & Rubin, 2016). Participants were prompted to share their stories describing their struggling experiences and challenges through their high school experience through the interview process. This increased the depth of understanding of the dropout phenomenon. The participants were also prompted to share their experiences with distance learning. This increased the depth of understanding of how distance learning courses play a part in their graduation attainment.

The one-to-one interview questions can be found in Appendix B. The goal of these questions was to attempt to understand the struggles that the participants had throughout their secondary experience and their insights into their distance learning experience. The questions were semi-structured to obtain as much data as possible in the proposed amount of time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first four questions were designed to understand the students' struggles and academic challenges during their secondary education. Understanding student's struggles and academic challenges are critical to understanding how they ended in an alternative setting. The fifth question asked the students to describe their experiences with distance learning. This question was designed to allow the students to freely express positive or negative experiences with distance learning. These experiences are important in revisiting distance learning practices and effective curriculum effectiveness. Questions six and seven were designed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of distance learning and face-to-face instruction. The participants had the opportunity to verbalize the pros and cons of both programs. Question eight and nine were designed to understand if distance learning assisted the students in their graduation goals? These questions prompted an explanation of graduation attainment and attendance requirements. Question ten allowed the participants to add any information that they perceived important that the questions didn't target.

The researcher ensured that the students understood the questions. After asking the questions, if the participant displayed confusion the researcher rephrased the question for clarity. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995) probes can be used to clarify the research dialog with the participants.

A video-recorded focus group interview of nine students was also scheduled. The participants consisted of the students that participated in the individual interviews. The focus group lasted no more than sixty minutes and was also organized in a conducive setting. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), focus group interviews are a research technique in which a meticulously designed dialogue transpires to allow participants to express their points of view in a group setting (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The focus group revealed nonverbal responses, such as facial expressions or body language to better capture responses. The focus group interview questions can be found in Appendix C. The first eight questions were designed to corroborate, validate, or reject distance learning and face-to-face instruction pros and cons. Question nine was designed to understand the impact of distance learning on student attendance, and question ten was designed to understand the impact of distance learning on graduation rates. These questions' goal was to understand students' insights on how distance learning impacted their academic goals.

Learning Analytics is a field that has emerged with the need to analyze data to assist educators in the identification of patterns to develop effective personalized instruction. According to Fiaidhi (2014), with the implementation of the learning management systems (LMS) in 1991, the need to analyze data from various sources emerged. Learning analytics allows for the identification of areas that the learner has to improve, as well as areas where instruction needs to improve. This system allows for the early identification of deficiencies, so

the educators can intervene at an early stage to improve academic performance (Fiaidhi, 2014).

Moreover, Radu (2017) argues that learning analytics assist educators with specific educational

goals. Learning analytics provided awareness of the levels of the learner's engagement

throughout the student experience within the learning management system.

To continue with the triangulation process, lesson plans were analyzed including learning

practices, to corroborate or rebutted findings across all collected data to avoid any bias.

The one-to-one interviews, questions 5,6, 8, and 9, and focus group interview question 9,

were designed to answer research question one. Participants' experiences increased their

attendance rates. The one-to-one interview questions 6 and 9, and focus group question 10 were

designed to answer research question two. The one-to-one interview questions 6, and 7, and the

focus group questions 1,3,4,5,6,7, and 8, that target the pros and cons of distance learning and

face-to-face instruction were designed to answer research question three.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher requested IRB approval from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

before collecting data. Once IRB approval was granted, the researcher seeks approval from the

alternative high school campus administrator to seek out participants.

Purposeful sampling was implemented to select twelve students (males and females) that

experience distance learning courses. The participants were nontraditional students that are

attending alternative high school or have recently graduated from the alternative high school.

The recruited participants were asked to fill out an informed consent form, visual release form,

and audio release form, giving the researcher permission to use their data in the study.

Data collection began with individual interviews to gain students' perspectives and

experiences of distance learning courses' role towards their graduation attainment. Interviews

took place via zoom to ensure safety for all the participants. Students emailed the researcher the best day and time for the interview. The researcher emailed participants the zoom meeting invitation. The individual interviews did not exceed sixty minutes. Individual interviews with in-depth interviewing allowed for in-depth detailed information to better understand their perspective with distance learning. Once all the individual interviews were finalized, a focus group interview via zoom took place, allowing the students to express their points of view towards distance learning in a group setting. The researcher obtained nonverbal responses, such as facial expressions and body responses from them, to capture better responses. This technique allowed the researcher to observe and record students' perspectives in a group setting. This technique allowed for meticulously designed dialogue (Creswell and Poth (2018).

Data Analysis Procedures

Creswell and Poth (2018), describe data analysis as a spiral, a process of moving in analytical circles. The researcher followed The Creswell Analysis Spiral to describe how the data was analyzed from the twelve individual interviews, the focus group interviews, the learning analytics reports, and the analysis of artifacts such as lesson plans and progress reports. In between the circles the researcher encounters several aspects of the analysis, entering with data and concluding with a narrative.

The researcher transcribed video files into notes that represent emergent ideas. The researcher read the data several times to have a clear picture of the individual interviews, focus group interviews, learning analytics reports, lesson plans, and progress reports. At this time, the researcher took general notes, short phrases, ideas, or critical concepts. The researcher studied in detail the data, discovering categories, and finding evidence that supported each category so that the researcher was able to create an audit trail as a validity strategy. Creswell and Poth, 2018,

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recommend starting note taking from the first reading of the text, and creating a system to organize your notes for easy retrieval.

Text segmentation was implemented, which allowed the selection and labeling of relevant words, phrases, sentences or sections that apply to objectives. The selection of the most repetitive, relevant data, themes was created by grouping the data that holds the same meaning, allowing for the analysis of relationships and/or similarities. Coding for content was implemented. The basic task when coding for content is "to come up with valid and reliable approaches from grouping content at specified levels of meaning and interpretation" (Guest et al., 2012, p. 64). Responses were grouped by cause-effect relationships and similar events (Guest et al., 2012).

The next step was to describe and classify codes into themes. The researcher read the transcripts to find categories that emerged. These categories or codes are the most important part of qualitative analysis. In these sections, the researcher developed themes according to interpretations of the text. Once all the codes were created, a codebook was developed, an essential instrument for analyzing interview data. The researcher investigated patterns, statements, and examples. The researcher identified connections between the raw data collected and the research objectives to discover if distance learning courses have the potential to increase high school graduation rates and increase high school attendance rates.

Furthermore, the final phase was the representing and visualizing of the data, in which the researcher presented the results of the data. The researcher developed a comparison table to visualize the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness

According to Lincolns and Guba (1985), judging qualitative research has been highly controversial in social studies. Therefore, the need for transparency in qualitative inquiry arose. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define trustworthiness as an act of the inquirer to persuade his audience, including himself, that their findings are worth listening to or considering. Furthermore, they also define credibility as a belief that can be placed in the truth of the research findings. Credibility establishes whether the research finding represents believable data drawn from participants with an accurate interpretation.

Validity and Reliability

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), validity in a qualitative study is achieved when the researcher seeks to merge evidence that releases creditability. Furthermore, Creswell (2014) argues that validity is a synonym of verification of accurate findings. Reliability in a qualitative research ensure that all data sets such recordings, notes, transcripts are coded reflecting stability in the participants responses.

The researcher corroborated evidence through triangulation of multiple data sources. The term triangulation denotes the practice of using multiple sources of data or multiple approaches to analyze data to enhance the credibility of a research study. This approach can impact the credibility of the research because it allows for the collection of data from multiple sources, thereby creating a larger pool of data from which to conclude. Credibility, then, becomes more sustainable when different methods of research lead to the same conclusion. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research is fundamentally multimethod in focus. Therefore, triangulation, the use of multiple methods, investigators, or theories reveals the effort to ensure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Secondly, discovering negative

case analysis or discord firming evidence is a strategy utilized to ensure validity. Furthermore, the researcher clarified researcher bias or engaging in reflexivity. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative researchers recognize that "the writings of a qualitative text cannot be separated from the author" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 344). The way researchers write reflects their interpretations, which are based on their own life experiences. Therefore, the researcher needs to acknowledge his/her preconceptions. The researcher positions himself or herself in the writings in self-understanding about his/her own biases, experiences that he/she brings to the study (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Creswell and Poth (2018), noted that when the researchers write with detailed and thick description, they allow the readers to make decisions concerning transferability. The researcher wrote in detail the participant's experiences and surroundings to empower readers to transfer information to other surroundings or decide if the results can be transferred. Through thick descriptions the reader will be able to evaluate the data more accurately in the form of external validity.

The researcher implemented member checking, seeking participant's feedback. According to Lincoln and Guba (2018), taking the written narrative drafts back to the participants in member checking is "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (Lincoln & Guba, p.134 1985). This strategy allowed the participants to verify the accuracy and credibility of the findings and gave them the opportunity to provide correctives or different interpretations of the findings. It was clear that the researcher was seeking their views.

Moreover, thirdly, collaborating with participants. The researcher generated detailed, thick descriptions in which the researchers wrote with detail and thick description, allowing the readers to make decisions concerning transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher

detailed the participant's experiences and surroundings, empowering readers to transfer information to other surroundings or decide if the results can be transferred.

Responses to the one-to-one interview and focus group interview audio recording are stored in a secure encrypted external device. The device will be secured by the researcher's username and password. After all research data was extracted from the interviews, focus group, and transcripts were completed, all personal identifiers were deleted from the study records. The raw data will be stored for three years. After the three years expire the data will be destroyed.

Ethical Concerns

Ethical issues needed to be considered in all phases of the qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The main concern for the researcher is to keep all participants safe. To ensure the protection of human subjects, all the research documentation was submitted to The Institution Review Board (IRB). The researcher obtained written consent from all the participants and contacted them to ensure a clear understanding of the purpose of the research. During the data analysis phase, the researcher followed Creswell's recommendations to ensure ethical procedures and management of all data (Creswell, 2018). The researcher ensured the family, students, and research site privacy issues. The researcher implemented coding methods to address students and their personal information, to ensure the anonymity of all the participants.

To avoid researcher bias before the collection of the data, all the participants were briefed on the purpose of the study. During the planning phase, the researcher developed simple interview questions avoiding words that could introduce bias. The researcher did not use leading questions to prompt the participant to respond in favor of a particular assumption. Furthermore, the researcher implemented triangulation methods. The researcher developed a case study of individuals representing a composite picture of the findings instead of an individual picture. The

researcher did not falsified findings to arrive at the desire findings. The researcher adhered to the data collection methods, validating, and analyzing the data according to the findings. The last triangulation step was the analysis of learning analytics reports and artifacts such as lesson plans and progress reports to validate findings and protect against bias. A potential ethical concern that was addressed was that the researcher is a former principal at the selected alternative school. Therefore, some of the participants knew the researcher as their formal principal. The researcher implemented dependability and confirmability of the findings to avoid any bias. The researcher implemented the triangulation of all data collection methods. The participants data interpretations were validated and confirmed not only by the researcher but by the participant through member checking (Yin, 2014). The researcher emailed the participants the one-to-one interview transcript to ensure that all data collected was accurate. Participants were giving the opportunity to make changes or/and clarifications.

Limitations of the Study

First, single-case research is inherently limited by the nature of study design (Creswell, 2018). This single instrumental case study is bounded to a specific student population, nontraditional students attending an alternative high school in a school district located along the Mexican border, which may not be representative of a broader group of distance learning students.

Furthermore, the selected sample size often may not fully represent nontraditional students at an alternative high school (Creswell, 1998). A larger sample size may create a more refined picture of the overall population.

Researcher bias is another limitation. The analysis of ten to twelve participants depend on the interpretation of the researcher (Yin, 2008). In this case the researcher was a former principal at this alternative high school, therefore researcher bias could influence the findings. The first

strategy implemented to mitigate bias was thick descriptions. Thick description ensured that the researcher describes in detail the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, the researcher implemented member checking to ensure accuracy of transcripts.

Chapter Summary

A qualitative research single instrumental case study was conducted. This design answered the research questions of decisive elements that impacted student attendance and graduation completion rates with the implementation of distance learning curriculum options at an alternative education center. The twelve student participants enrolled or recently graduated from an alternative high school were purposefully selected as key informants of their experiences with distance learning. Individual interviews, focus group interviews, learning analytics reports, and artifacts such as lesson plans and student progress reports were analyzed. The most significant themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, learning analytics reports, and artifact such as lesson plans and student progress reports reflected the impact of distance learning on student attendance and completion of graduation requirements.

The number of high school students who drop out without obtaining a diploma has long been a concern for the educational community. This study purports to identify the underlying causes of student dropouts and to offer a viable solution to this problem. The approach presented here consists of three components: Distance learning benefits, dropout prevention avenues by meeting individual student needs, and access to an alternative school center.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The problem that this study addressed was the high dropout rates that our nation

continues to experience in high schools (Steeg et al., 2012). The purpose of this single

instrumental case study was to explore nontraditional high school students' attitudes regarding

the effectiveness of distance learning courses. These attitudes include distance learning courses'

impact on high school graduation rates and attendance rates. The gap in the literature review

provided the need for this single instrumental case study. Including the voices of nontraditional

students provided valued insights of distance learning experiences. These nontraditional students

experienced at least two grade levels below and adult responsibilities that slowed down their

graduation. This study contributes by hearing from their voices to school administration and

educators to discuss dropout prevention and effective distance learning programs.

The participants selected for this study were students in grades 9th through 12th that are

attending an alternative high school or have recently graduated from the same alternative high

school and have experienced distance learning. The demographic profiles of these participants

can be found in Table 1. Te riele et al. (2017) argue that the students who attend alternative

education centers are the ones with the highest needs. The researcher recruited twelve

homogeneous participants. The participants' age ranged from 18 years old to 22 years old.

Thirty-three percent of the participants were male (4), and sixty-seven percent of the participants were female (8). Based on data from twelve individual interviews, a focus group interview with nine of the participants that also participated in the individual interviews, the study added the voices of nontraditional students' experiences with distance learning. Students' levels of participation can be found in Table 2. Table 2 reflects the students that participated in a one-to-one interview and focus group interview. The participants' experiences in a thick and rich description of events contributed to the scholarly discussion of high school dropout prevention and effective distance learning programs. Table 3 reflects the themes that emerged during this study. Table 4 reflects the organization of themes in relation to the research questions.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant Code	Race/Ethnicity	Grade Level	Gender	Age	Enrollment Status
1	Hispanic	12th	M	20	Graduated
2	Hispanic	12th	F	21	Graduated
3	Hispanic	11th	F	20	Enrolled
4	Hispanic	12th	F	21	Graduated
5	Hispanic	12th	F	19	Graduated
6	Hispanic	12th	M	20	Graduated
7	Hispanic	12th	M	19	Graduated
8	Hispanic	12th	F	22	Graduated
9	Hispanic	9th	F	18	Enrolled
10	Hispanic	12th	F	22	Graduated
11	White	10th	F	19	Enrolled
12	Hispanic	12th	M	20	Graduated

Note: Demographic data was obtained from the participants before the interview process.

Table 2

Participants' Level of Participation

Participant Code	One to One Interview	Focus Group Only	One to One Interview and Focus Group Interview
1	1	0	1
2	1	0	1
3	1	0	1
4	1	0	1
5	1	0	0
6	1	0	1
7	1	0	1
8	1	0	1
9	1	0	1
10	1	0	1
11	1	0	0
12	1	0	0
Total	12	0	9

Note: Not all students participated in both interviews.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What effect did distance learning have on nontraditional high school attendance rates at an alternative South Texas high school?

2. What impact did distance learning have on nontraditional high school graduation rates at an alternative South Texas high school?

3. How did face-to-face and distance learning compare to nontraditional high school graduation rates at an alternative South Texas high school?

Table 3

Emerging Themes

Themes	Predominant / Less predominant
Academic acceleration	Predominant
Flexible scheduling	Predominant
Academic support	Predominant
Transportation	Less Predominant
Safe environment	Less predominant
Socializing	Less predominant
Teacher instructional Pace	Predominant
Classroom interruptions	Less predominant

Table 4

Organization of Themes

Research Questions	Themes
RQ1: What effect did distance learning have on nontraditional high school attendance rates at an alternative South Texas high school?	Flexible scheduling Academic support Safe environment Instructional pace Transportation
RQ2: What impact did distance learning have on nontraditional high school graduation rates at an alternative South Texas high school?	Academic acceleration Flexible Scheduling Teacher instructional pace Classroom interruptions Transportation
RQ3: How did face-to-face and distance learning Compare to nontraditional high school graduation Rates at an alternative South Texas high school?	Academic acceleration Flexible scheduling Academic Support Safe Environment Teacher Instructional Pace Classroom interruptions Transportation Socialization

Results

The data collected for this study were one-to-one semi-structured interviews, one focus group interview, learning analytics reports, and the analysis of artifacts such as student progress reports and lesson plans. The researcher-maintained objectivity avoiding personal bias to ensure the accuracy of the data. During the interview process, the participants responded to open-ended questions designed to capture students' perceptions of how distance learning impacted their credit accrual and attendance rates. The interview format was semi-structured to allow participants to provide any additional input on their experiences with distance learning. The interviews did not exceed sixty minutes.

Research Question 1

The first research question was "What effect did distance learning have on nontraditional high school attendance rates at an alternative South Texas high school?"

The conceptual framework of this study was guided by the constructivism theory which counterpart classroom instruction with technology access. The student environment is centered on the student and where the teacher acts as an instructional facilitator (Chen et al., 2008). This study confirms how technology has changed the way we teach and the new opportunities in the way we learn. Nowadays students are very receptive to technology learning environments (Mgutshini, 2013). Research question one looks at the effects that distance learning had on nontraditional high school attendance rates. Students voiced that at the beginning of the pandemic switching to distance learning was frustrating, however, once they adapted to the online requirements, all the participants voiced that they were able to meet attendance requirements. All the participants shared how they had to organize their day to ensure they meet the attendance requirements and completed assignments. This behavior outlines constructivist

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pedagogy where the learner uses their cognitive skills and are active participants in their learning. The participants had to organize their day and execute a plan to complete their coursework. Participants actively construct their knowledge from their own experiences utilizing a technological environment. Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy suggests that believing in one's capabilities to organize and perform needed action to reach goals is essential. All the participants shared how supportive teachers, counselor, and school staff were, and how motivated they were to complete their courses.

Five themes emerged from the coded data concerning this research question. The first theme was flexible scheduling. The alternative settings are characterized by the flexibility of time and place which allows the student to progress in conjunction with work and/or parenting responsibilities (Anderson, 2018). Distance learning extends this flexibility allowing the students to have access to school coursework twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week.

All participants shared that they liked the fact that they could work on their schoolwork at their convenient schedule. Fifty-eight percent of the participants were able to have jobs while completing their high school requirements. Forty-two percent of the participants were able to take care of their children or family health issues while completing high school courses. One of the participants shared that distance learning allowed him to create his school schedule and provided him with an opportunity to get a job. "I like to do my school work at night, so I would stay late every night completing my schoolwork, so I could go to work on the weekends" (Participant 1). Distance learning allowed a student to continue attending school even though she was experiencing health issues.

> Distance learning allowed me to do my work on my own time. I have health issues, therefore even when I was sick, I was able to continue working on my courses. Distance

learning help me attend school even when I was unable to leave my house due to my

illness. (Participant 3)

Other participant shared that due to her risk pregnancy she experienced attendance issues.

Distance learning allowed the student to continue her school work from her bed.

Due to my risk pregnancy, the doctor placed me on bed rest. Distance learning allowed

me to work on my coursework from my bed. It was very convenient, and I was able to

finish my coursework faster than I would of at school and without missing any days.

(Participant 5)

Distance learning allow a participant to take care of his father and attend school:

Distance learning allowed me to take care of my father during the day and complete my

course work at night or early in the morning. Sometimes I would start at 6:00 in the

morning. (Participant 6)

Fifty-eight percent of the participants had issues with attendance with face-to-face classes due to

parenting responsibilities, health issues, or family responsibilities. Distance learning allowed

students to reach their attendance requirements preventing the loss of course credit.

During the focus group interview, students expressed positive feelings about distance

learning, however, they expressed some concerns that distance learning helped to solve.

Participants shared that attendance was not an issue, since they could log in at any time of the

day to get credit for the day. Participants also agreed that it was very convenient to have access

to their schoolwork at any time. However, some concerns were expressed. One student expressed

not having internet access. A student shared "I didn't have internet, so I had to go to the library

every day to do my schoolwork" (Participant 4). Another participant shared that the device that

was assigned to him by the school did not work properly, therefore, he experienced some

technical difficulties. Another concern that a participant shared was not having the needed device. The participant did not receive a device from the school, so she had to buy a laptop (Participant 11). A student shared that even though he appreciated the flexible schedule so he can take care of a family member due to health issues, family members took advantage of his flexible schedule. "Because my family knew that I could do my school work at any time, they would ask me to help with more chores during the day" (Participant 6).

Additional data collection from progress report artifacts was used to analyze students signing in to the school website to work on their course work. Reports supported that participants were logging in at various times of the day to work on their assignments with a variety of times and duration.

The second theme that emerged concerning this research question was academic support. All the participants shared that because they felt supported, they were able to complete their course assignments. Students shared how teachers called them daily to ensure a full understanding of the academic coursework.

As discussed in the review of literature, alternative school settings are intended to provide individualized instruction for students who need intensive academic support (Griffiths et al., 2019). Moreover, according to Davis and Warner (2018), the school environment is a determent factor in the school's academic success. The school climate has a direct impact on academics. The participants shared that during their experience with distance learning, teachers were contacting them daily to ensure that they were progressing accordingly. Teachers utilized the Google Class web-based application to post pre-recorded lessons on difficult concepts. Students had access to the pre-recorded lessons at their convenience. If they needed more help students were able to contact teachers via email, text, or phone. Students shared that they utilized the

Internet to access more resources. Students expressed that with internet resources and teacher pre-recorded lessons they were able to complete their course work quicker. One of the participants shared "When I needed help I would email my teacher and she would call me the same day, or I would call other students for ideas or resources" (Participant 1). Participant 4 shared "My teacher emailed me daily and checked my progress. I was able to complete my work with little help. I was able to utilize internet resources at my convenience" (Participant 4). Participant 7 shared:

> My teacher contacted me daily via email, and the counselor contacted me once a week to make sure that I was working on all my graduation requirements. I truly feel that all the staff at school helped me reach my goals faster during this difficult time. (Participant 7)

Other participants shared similar experiences:

> All my teachers were very supportive. The teacher was monitoring my progress by emailing me daily. The counselor would called me once a week to make sure that I was doing fine. If I needed assistance from another teacher, the counselor would help me arrange a google meeting or a phone call. (Participant 5)

A couple of participants shared that some teachers took longer to respond to their emails. One participant shared:

> My teacher sometimes would take more than a couple of days to respond. Another issue that I had was that sometimes the pre-recorded lessons were difficult to hear because they were recorded at a low volume. However, I was able to find resources on the internet to continue my progress on my courses. (Participant 6)

During the focus group interview, eight three percent of the participants shared that the teachers responded to them promptly, however, two participants expressed a delay in teacher response. Participant 6 shared:

> I would email my teacher and sometimes I would get a response four days later. However, since I didn't want to wait, I would Google videos and find the answers before her response. (Participant 6)

Additional lesson plans artifacts were utilized to corroborate participant statements. As previously mentioned, alternative schools are known for students receiving individualized instruction. Lesson plans reflected asynchronous pre-recorded lessons targeting student needs. Lesson plans offered more in-depth explanations. The teachers utilized different instructional strategies to reach the participants' needs with the extra help provided. Progress reports showed the communication that took place between the student and the teacher, and the student and the counselor.

Distance learning allows the student to implement self-regulated learning and monitor their progress. Moreover, the feedback provided by the teachers and counselor allowed the students to make changes and adjustments in their goal settings (Callan & Shim, 2019). Ninety percent of the participants mentioned that the teachers and the counselor were monitoring their progress and that they received external feedback to increase their self-regulated skills.

The third theme that emerged concerning this research question was transportation. Other participants shared that they were experiencing transportation issues, therefore their attendance was affected. One participant shared:

> Since I live far from school, I had to wake up early to get a ride to school and I was the last one to get picked up from school. With distance learning I was able to get more sleep

and work on my modules at all hours of the day. I was able to complete my modules

faster. (Participant 4)

Some of the participants shared that because family members had health issues, they had

transportation issues. Participant 6 shared that because his father had health issues, sometimes he

was not able to take him to school. He also shared, that sometimes he needed to accompany his

father to doctor's appointments therefore he was not able to attend school. "Sometimes I missed

school because, due to my father' illness he was not able to drive, and I couldn't find a ride to

school" (Participant 6). Some of the participants had jobs therefore they needed transportation to

report to work on time. One participant shared "I had to relied on friends or family members to

picked me up at school and take me to work on time" (Participant 12).

Some of the participants shared that because family members had health issues they had

transportation issues. One participant shared:

Distance learning allowed me to take care of my father during the day and complete my

course work at night or early in the morning. Sometimes I would start at 6:00 in the

morning. (Participant 6)

Fifty-eight percent of the participants had issues with attendance. Due to parenting

responsibilities, health issues, or family responsibilities.

The fourth theme that emerged concerning this research question was a safe environment.

Some of the participants shared negative experiences at their regular home campuses, therefore

they experienced poor attendance. Among some of these experiences were mistreatment from

other students, rejection from peers, bullying, not receiving the assistance needed from the

teacher, and negative comments from teachers. Seventy percent of the participants shared that

they had issues socializing with other students. Wilkerson et al. (2015) suggested that students

attending alternative high school settings showed improved outcomes in credit accrual earnings towards graduation with a reduction of discipline referrals.

Participants shared that at the alternative high school all teachers and staff were supportive, and they felt welcome. One of the participants voiced "I was bullied at my home campus by other students and my teacher told me that I was never going to graduate" (Participant 1). Another negative experience that a participant shared: "Teachers ignored me at my home campus, there were too many students in the classes, and teachers seemed frustrated" (Participant 11).

Another participant shared:

> I didn't want to go to my home campus because even when I would ask for help the teacher wouldn't help me. I was embarrassed because I couldn't finish my science projects. (Participant 3)

Another similar situation concerning teacher's attitudes towards participants:

> The teacher at my home campus didn't help me even when I would raise my hand, they would ask me to put it down and they wouldn't help me, so I started skipping classes. (Participant 4)

All the participants shared that at their alternative high school they felt welcome and received more one-to-one instruction. One student shared:

> I knew I wanted to join the Army but my home campus never guided me as to how. When I decided to enroll at the alternative high school, to graduate faster I was given all the information that I needed. When I arrived at the alternative center the counselor provided me with all the information that I needed. The alternative high school also had

career days. During these activities, I was able to learn about other careers, and the Army

and Navy recruiters were there to answer all my questions. (Participant 7)

Two of the participants share that they suffer from depression, therefore, they had poor school

attendance. Distance learning allowed them to continue their schooling at their home in a safe

environment. One participant shared:

I suffer from depression and sometimes going to school was difficult, because my peers

would notice and they kept asking me questions that made my depression worse.

(Participant 4)

Another student (Participant 11) shared that she lost her six-year-old sister to the pandemic, and

how devasted her entire family was. And after that experience, her parents felt uncomfortable

allowing her to attend school face-to-face.

During the focus group interview, participants shared that they like to attend their

alternative high school. All participants shared how helpful and understanding teachers were and

how welcome they felt in that environment. Students voiced that they would receive one-to-one

instruction when needed. However, due to the pandemic, the students felt that distance learning

helped them keep their families and love ones safe.

The fifth theme that emerged concerning this research question was Instructional pace.

Students shared that during face-to-face instruction they had to participate in all instructional

activities. Some of these instructional activities were not relevant for all students, such as

benchmarks, End of Course (EOC) review sessions, and EOC testing sessions. One of the

students shared that teachers reviewed End of Course testing materials with the entire class.

Some of the students had already passed the EOC exama, therefore they didn't need the review

sessions. However, they had to participate in the review session. Students were not allowed to

continue working on their coursework. Some participants shared the reasons why sometimes they chose not to attend school. "I decided not to attend school during the review EOC sessions because I would get frustrated and bored" (Participant 12). Another student shared a similar situation that affected his attendance.

> I decided not to attend the alternative school during benchmarks or EOC testing when I had already passed the areas tested. I got bored in the holding rooms and we were not able to continue working on our needed course work. (Participant 8)

Attendance is one student behavior that is highly linked with positive student achievement (Darling-Adwana, 2019). Moreover, Popa (2017) notes that distance learning classes continue to increase educational institutions to accommodate student and social demands.

During the focus group interview, students expressed positive feelings about distance learning that positively affected their attendance, however, they expressed some concerns. Participants shared that attendance was not an issue, since they could log in at any time of the day to get credit for the day. Participants also agreed that it was very convenient to have access to their schoolwork at any time. However, some concerns were expressed. One student expressed not having internet access. A student shared "I didn't have internet, so I had to go to the library every day to do my schoolwork" (Participant 4). Another participant shared that the device that was assigned to him by the school did not work effectively, so he experienced some technical difficulties, but he was able to complete his work. Another student shared that she did not receive a device from the school, so she had to buy a laptop. Another participant shared that even though he appreciated the flexible schedule so he can take care of a family member due to health issues, family members took advantage of his flexible schedule. Participant shared "Because my family

knew that I could do my schoolwork at any time, they would ask me to help with more chores during the day" (Participant 6).

Additional data collection from progress report artifacts was used to analyze students signing in to the school website to work on their course work. Reports supported that participants were logging in at different times of the day to work on their assignments with a variety of times and duration.

Research Question 2

The second research question was "What impact does distance learning has on nontraditional high school graduation rates?" Research question two looks at the influence that distance learning had on nontraditional high school graduation rates. Jozwiak (2015) and DelSignore et al., (2016) argue that online instruction showed higher results in test scores. All students agreed that distance learning accelerated their graduation at a faster pace than face-to-face instruction at the alternative center. One hundred percent of the 12th graders (nine participants) graduated. The rest of the participants were promoted to the next grade level.

Five themes emerged from the coded data concerning this research question: Academic acceleration, Flexible scheduling, Teacher instructional pace, Classroom interruptions, and Transportation.

The first theme that emerged concerning this research question was academic acceleration. Eighty-three percent of the participant were at least two grade levels behind. Forty-two percent of the participants were parents or were expecting. Seventeen percent were experiencing health issues, and the rest of the participants were experiencing financial hardship. According to Bowers and Sprott (2012), overage students who cannot graduate in four and a half years are likely to become dropouts. Therefore, the urgency for these participants to accelerate

their graduation. Distance learning allows students to accelerate credit accrual and therefore their graduation.

The participants shared positive statements on how distance learning impacted their graduation outcomes. One of the participants stated:

> I thought about dropping out when I found out that I was going to be a father. I wanted to help the mother of my baby, and I knew that I needed to get a job to pay for pampers and milk. I know that babies get sick a lot, and I wanted to be there for my baby, so I knew that I was going to have problems with school attendance. (Participant 1)

Another student shared how uncomfortable would be to graduate at the same time as her little brother, the participant stated "I need to graduate already, my brother is two years younger than me, and I don't want him to graduate before me" (Participant 3). Other participant shared the urgency of graduating before giving birth. She was aware of all the responsibilities that she was going to confront after giving birth. The participant shared "I wanted to graduate before the birth of my baby. I knew that once my baby was born it would be more difficult for me to finish school" (Participant 5).

Other participants shared the need to take care of children, parents, and other adult responsibilities. One of the participants shared "I wanted to join the Army, but I needed to graduate, therefore I needed to complete my courses faster" (Participant 7). Another participant that had to leave school due to her pregnancy shared:

> I dropped out of school because I was expecting my first baby. After my second baby, I decided to go back to school. However, I needed to finish fast because I needed to take care of my children. Distance learning allowed me to graduate faster and at the same time take care of my children. (Participant 8)

A similar situation shared by another participant: "I am a single mother and I need to work, so I needed to finish fast so I could take care of my baby" (Participant 10). A participant shared that he needed to take care of his father that suffered from health issues. All the participants shared that distance learning had accelerated their credit accrual and they were able to graduate earlier than expected. Some students shared that because of distance learning they were able to accelerate to the point to catch up with their peers and graduate with their graduation cohort.

During the focus group interview, ninety percent of the participants agreed that even though adjusting to distance learning, in the beginning, was difficult, and they had to adjust to a different learning environment, it did indeed accelerate their credit accrual therefore their graduation. One participant shared that she regretted not taking advantage of distance learning last year because this year distance learning was not offered at the alternative center.

> I didn't take advantage of distance learning last year when I had the opportunity, and now distance learning is not available anymore, so it is going to take me longer to graduate since I have health issues and I miss school frequently. (Participant 3)

The second theme that emerged concerning this research question was Teacher instructional pace. Distance learning allowed the students to complete their courses at their pace. Students were able to set goals and meet their goals according to their needs. The participants shared that even though they understood when the teacher would spend more time on a concept due to some students not grasping the material, they stated that sometimes they would get frustrated due to their urgency of completing their courses. All the participants shared that they were able to complete the coursework faster with distance learning than in face-to-face classes. One participant shared:

At home, I was able to complete my coursework faster because they were no

interruptions and I was working at my pace. If I had a question I would watch a pre-

recorded lesson or I would use the internet to solve the problem. (Participant 4)

Another participant shared:

During the day you only have forty-five minutes to work on every subject. With distance

learning, I was able to work sometimes two hours consecutively and finish the course

work faster and without interruptions. (Participant 5)

Participants shared frustration when the teacher were spending too much time with other

students.

At the alternative school, we had to wait to move to the next concept until all students

understood the concept. It was frustrating having to wait for the entire class before

moving on. (Participant 6)

A participant was already thinking about dropping out of school due to the frustration of not

moving faster on the coursework.

I was already thinking about dropping out because it was taking me too long to complete

my course work, however, when the pandemic happened and we were completing our

work at our pace, I was able to complete the courses faster. I got excited about

graduating. (Participant 11)

Participants voiced that they took advantage of the pre-recorded lessons. They liked the fact that

they were able to watch the lesson several times until they grasp the content without holding the

class, or worrying about criticism from peers for asking questions.

The third theme that emerged concerning this research question was Flexible scheduling.

Distance learning extends academic flexibility allowing the students to have access to school coursework twenty-four hours a day. Due to the urgency of these students to graduate, students were able to work longer hours on their coursework to complete their courses quicker. Participant 1 shared "I like to do my school work at night, so I would stay late every night completing my schoolwork". Another participant shared "Distance learning allowed me to complete my coursework faster. I was able to work on my coursework since early in the morning until late at night" (Participant 8). Students increased their credit accrual impacting their graduation date. Distance learning allowed the student to implement self-regulated learning and monitor their progress. Feedback provided by the teachers and counselor allowed students to make changes and adjustments in their goal settings (Callan & Shim, 2019). Ninety percent of the participants mentioned that the teachers and the counselor were monitoring their progress and that they received external feedback to increase their self-regulated skills. Reed and Swanson (2014) argue that in the distance learning environment student inactiveness is a challenge. Therefore, monitoring student engagement is crucial.

The fourth theme that emerged concerning this research question was Classroom interruptions. Regardless of the effectiveness of the teacher's classroom management, interruptions are inevitable such as discipline issues, office interruptions, school activities, exchange of classes, etc. According to Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum (2021), classroom interruptions are regular manifestations in U.S. public schools. They believe that in one-year classes are interrupted more than 2000 times. Furthermore, during these interruptions' instruction is not taking place. In this particular alternative high school, the student had eight periods of forty-five minutes of instruction. Participants voiced that with distance learning they could maximize their instructional time without interruptions. One of the participants shared "I like all my teachers,

but every time we changed classes we waisted about five minutes just moving from one class to another" (Participant 6). Discipline issues also caused frustration to the participants. Another participant shared "Sometimes students misbehave and the teacher has to stop the class to take care of the student. The teacher has to write the referral and wait for the office to remove the student" (Participant 2).

Another class procedure that students perceived as a class interruption that minimized instruction was when the teachers check attendance at the beginning of the class. One participant stated:

We have eight periods and in every period we waisted between five to ten minutes when teachers were checking attendance. Sometimes the teachers would ask students questions about their attendance before starting the class. (Participant 11)

Some of the participants also perceived lunch as an interruption of instruction. One participant shared "I enjoyed lunch at school, however, we spent forty-five minutes at the cafeteria when we could of being working on our modules". Eighty percent of the participants shared that during distance learning they enjoy eating on their own time, eating homemade food, and the advantage of continuing with their coursework even during lunchtime.

Participants voiced that with distance learning they were able to maximize their instructional time without interruptions that interfered with their credit accrual. Participants also shared how they were able to create their own effective learning environment in which they could maximize their instructional time.

The fifth theme that emerged concerning this research question was Transportation. Some participants shared that they were experiencing transportation issues and due to poor attendance, their credit accrual was affected. One participant shared:

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Since I live far from school, I had to wake up early to get a ride to school and I was the last one to get picked up from school. With distance learning I was able to get more sleep and work in my modules at all hours of the day, I was able to complete my modules faster. (Participant 4)

Some of the participants shared that because family members had health issues, they had transportation issues. Participant 6 shared that because his father had health issues, sometimes he was not able to take him to school. He also shared, that sometimes he needed to accompany his father to doctor appointments therefore he was not able to attend school. "Sometimes I missed school because, due to my father illness he was not able to drive, and I couldn't find a ride to school" (Participant 6).

Some of the participants shared that because family members had health issues they had transportation issues. One participant shared:

Distance learning allowed me to take care of my father during the day and complete my course work at night or early in the morning. Sometimes I would start at 6:00 in the morning. (Participant 6)

Fifty-eight percent of the participants had issues with attendance. Due to parenting responsibilities, health issues, or family responsibilities.

The data revealed that the participants who recently graduated from the alternative high school were able to graduate at a faster pace. Forty percent of the participants shared that they were already contemplating dropping out, however, once they had access to distance learning they were able to complete their courses faster and graduated. All the participants agreed that distance learning allowed them to complete their coursework faster than attending face-to-face even at the alternative high school.

Research Question 3

The third research question was "How do face-to-face and distance learning compare in nontraditional high school graduation rates?" Research question three looks at the graduation rate comparison between face-to-face instruction and distance learning. All the participants voiced that they were able to graduate at a faster rate through distance learning instruction.

Eight themes emerged from the coded data concerning this research question: Academic acceleration, Flexible Scheduling, Academic support, Safe environment, Teacher instruction pace, Classroom interruptions, Transportation, and Socialization.

The first theme that emerged concerning this research question was Academic Acceleration. As previously mentioned, eighty-three percent of the participant were at least two grade levels behind. Forty-two percent of the participants were parents or were expecting. Seventeen percent were experiencing health issues, and the rest of the participants were experiencing financial hardship. According to Bowers and Sprott (2012), overage students who cannot graduate in four and a half years are likely to become dropouts. Therefore, the urgency for these participants to accelerate their graduation. Nontraditional students end enrolling in an alternative high school setting due to the need to accelerate their graduation. On the one hand, participants shared that at the alternative high school during their face-to-face courses they were able to complete their courses quicker than at their regular home campuses. The alternative setting offered a curriculum based on modules, therefore students can complete their courses in less than a semester. On the other hand, students shared that with distance learning they can complete their modules even quicker.

Participants shared the need to take care of children, parents, and other adult responsibilities. One of the participants shared:

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I wanted to join the Army, but I needed to graduate, therefore I needed to complete my

courses faster that is the reason I enrolled at the alternative high school. Distant learning

allowed me to finish even faster than expected. I was able to get a job and save some

money before enlisting. (Participant 7)

Another participant that had to leave school due to her pregnancy shared:

I dropped out of school because I was expecting my first baby. After my second baby, I

decided to go back to school. However, I needed to finish fast because I needed to take

care of my children. Distance learning allowed me to graduate faster and at the same time

take care of my children. (Participant 8)

Another participant with a similar situation shared:

I am a single mother and I need to work, so I needed to finish fast so I could take care of

my baby. I took advantage of the distance learning opportunity and I completed all my

courses even faster. (Participant 10)

A participant shared that he needed to take care of his father that suffered from health issues. All

the participants shared that distance learning had accelerated their credit accrual and they were

able to graduate earlier than expected. Some students shared that because of distance learning

they were able to accelerate to the point to catch up with their peers and graduate with their

graduation cohort.

Distance learning allows students to accelerate credit accrual even quicker than attending

face-to-face classes at the alternative campus.

The second theme that emerged concerning this research question was Flexible

scheduling. As previously mentioned the alternative settings are characterized by the flexibility

of time and place which allows the student to progress in conjunction with work and/or parenting

responsibilities (Anderson, 2018). On the one hand, the alternative setting provides a face-to-face module-driven curriculum that allows the students to continue working on their coursework at their own pace with a flexible schedule during their assigned school day. However, students have to assist face-to-face classes during the assigned instructional time. This schedule would not allow students to hold jobs nor take care of family members' responsibilities. On the other hand. Distance learning extends this flexibility allowing the students to have access to school coursework twenty-four hours a day and meet other family responsibilities.

All participants shared that they liked the fact that they could work on their schoolwork at their convenient schedule and not be restricted to the assigned school hours. Fifty-eight percent of the participants were able to have jobs while completing their high school requirements. Forty-two percent of the participants were able to take care of their children or family health issues while completing high school courses. One of the participants shared that distance learning allowed him to create his school schedule and allowed him to get a job. "I like to do my school work at night, so I would stay late every night completing my schoolwork, so I could go to work on the weekends" (Participant 1).

Another participant shared:

> Distance learning allowed me to do my work on my own time. I have health issues, therefore even when I was sick, I was able to continue working on my courses. Distance learning help me attend school even when I was unable to leave my house due to my illness. (Participant 3)

Other participants shared that due to health issues they experience attendance issues. One participant shared:

Due to my risk pregnancy, the doctor placed me on bed rest. Distance learning allowed me to work on my coursework from my bed. It was very convenient, and I was able to finish my coursework faster than I would of at school and without missing any days. (Participant 5)

Another participant shared:

Distance learning allowed me to take care of my father during the day and complete my course work at night or early in the morning. Sometimes I would start at 6:00 in the morning. (Participant 6)

Fifty-eight percent of the participants had issues with attendance attending face-to-face classes due to parenting responsibilities, health issues, or family responsibilities. Distance learning allowed students to reach their attendance requirements preventing the loss of course credit.

The third theme that emerged concerning this research question was Academic Support. As previously discussed, alternative school settings are intended to provide individualized instruction for students who need intensive academic support (Griffiths et al., 2019). Moreover, according to Davis and Warner (2015), the school environment is a determent factor in the school's academic success. The school climate has a direct impact on academics. On the one hand, the participants shared that they received academic support in the alternative setting. However, participants shared that the internet was not allowed in face-to-face instruction. Therefore, they were limited to instructional strategies. On the other hand, the participants shared that during their experience with distance learning, teachers were contacting them daily to ensure that they were progressing accordingly. Teachers utilized the Google Class web-based application to post pre-recorded lessons on difficult concepts. Students had access to the pre-

recorded lessons at their convenience. If they needed more help students were able to contact teachers via email, text, or phone. However, in distance learning, students shared that they utilized the Internet to access more resources. Students expressed that with internet resources and teacher pre-recorded lessons they were able to complete their course work quicker. One of the participants shared "When I needed help I would email my teacher and she will call me the same day, or I would call other students for ideas or resources" (Participant 1). Another participant shared "My teacher emailed me daily and check my progress. I was able to complete my work with little help. I was able to utilize internet resources at my convenience" (Participant 4). Participant 7 shared the support received by the alternative high school.

> My teacher contacted me daily via email, and the counselor contacted me once a week to make sure that I was working on all my graduation requirements. I truly feel that all the staff at school help me reach my goals faster during this difficult time. (Participant 7)

Participant 5 shared a similar positive experience:

> All my teachers were very supportive. The teacher was monitoring my progress by emailing me daily. The counselor will call me once a week to make sure that I was doing fine. If I needed assistance from another teacher, the counselor would help me arrange a google meeting or a phone call. (Participant 5)

A couple of participants shared that some teachers took longer to respond to their emails. One participant shared:

> My teacher sometimes would take more than a couple of days to respond. Another issue that I had was that sometimes the pre-recorded lessons were difficult to hear because they were recorded at a low volume. However, I was able to find resources on the internet to continue my progress on my courses. (Participant 6)

During the focus group interview, eight three percent of the participants shared that the teachers responded to them promptly, however, two participants expressed a delay in teacher response. One participant shared:

> I would email my teacher and sometimes I would get a response four days later. However, since I didn't want to wait, I would Google videos and find the answers before her response. (Participant 6)

Additional lesson plans artifacts were utilized to corroborate participant statements. As previously mentioned, alternative schools are known for students receiving individualized instruction. Lesson plans reflected asynchronous pre-recorded lessons targeting student needs. Lesson plans offered more in-depth explanations. The teachers utilized different instructional strategies to reach the participants' needs with the extra help provided. Progress reports showed the communication that took place between the student and the teacher, and the student and the counselor.

Distance learning allows the student to implement self-regulated learning and monitor their progress, and the feedback provided by the teachers and counselor allowed the students to make changes and adjustments in their goal settings (Callan & Shim, 2019). Ninety percent of the participants mentioned that the teachers and the counselor were monitoring their progress and that they received external feedback to increase their self-regulated skills.

The fourth theme that emerged concerning this research question was Safe Environment. As we previously mentioned, some of the participants shared negative experiences at their regular home campuses. Among some of these experiences were mistreatment from other students, rejection from peers, bullying, not receiving the assistance needed from the teacher, and negative comments from teachers. Seventy percent of the participants shared that they had issues

socializing with other students. Wilkerson et al. (2016) suggested that students attending

alternative high school settings showed improved outcomes in credit accrual earnings towards

graduation with a reduction of discipline referrals. Some of the participants shared that joining a

safe environment was one of the reasons that they enrolled at an alternative high school where

teachers and staff were supportive, and felt welcome. One of the participants shared "I was

bullied at my home campus by other students and my teacher told me that I was never going to

graduate" (Participant 1). Another participant shared "Teachers ignored me at my home campus,

there were too many students in the classes, and teachers seemed frustrated" (Participant 11).

Participant 3 shared:

> I didn't want to go to my home campus because even when I would ask for help the
>
> teacher wouldn't help me. I was embarrassed because I couldn't finish my science
>
> projects. (Participant 3)

Another participant stated:

> The teacher at my home campus didn't help me even when I would raise my hand, they
>
> would ask me to put it down and they wouldn't help me, so I started skipping classes.
>
> (Participant 4)

All the participants shared that at their alternative high school they felt welcome and received

more one-to-one instruction. One student shared:

> I knew I wanted to join the Army but my home campus never guided me as to how.
>
> When I decided to enroll at the alternative high school, to graduate faster I was given all
>
> the information that I needed. When I arrived at the alternative center the counselor
>
> provided me with all the information that I needed. The alternative high school also had

career days. During these activities, I was able to learn about other careers, and the Army and Navy recruiters were there to answer all my questions. (Participant 7)

On the one hand, the alternative face-to-face instruction provided a safe environment for the students. On the other hand, Distance Learning allowed them to continue their schooling at their home in a safe environment.

One participant shared:

I suffer from depression and sometimes going to school was difficult, because my peers would notice and they kept asking me questions that made my depression worse. (Participant 4).

Another student (Participant 11) shared that she lost her six-year-old sister to the pandemic, and how devasted her entire family was. And after that experience, her parents felt uncomfortable allowing her to attend school face-to-face.

During the focus group interview, participants shared that they like to attend their alternative high school. All participants shared how helpful and understanding teachers were and how welcome they felt in that environment. Students voiced that they would receive one-to-one instruction when needed. However, due to the pandemic, the students felt that distance learning helped them keep their families and love ones safe.

The fifth theme that emerged concerning this research question was Teacher Instructional Pace. On the one hand, students shared that during face-to-face instruction they had to participate in all instructional activities. Some of these instructional activities were not relevant for all students, such as benchmarks, End of Course (EOC) review sessions, and EOC testing sessions. One of the students shared that teachers reviewed End of Course testing materials with the entire class. Some of the students had already passed the EOC, therefore they didn't need the review

sessions. However, they had to participate in the review session. Students were not allowed to continue working on their coursework. "I decided not to attend school during the review EOC sessions because I would get frustrated and bored" (Participant 12).

Another student shared:

> I decided not to attend school during benchmarks or EOC testing when I had already passed the areas tested. I got bored in the holding rooms and we were not able to continue working on our needed coursework. (Participant 8)

On the other hand, participants shared that distance learning allowed them to continue working on their coursework without having to participate in activities not relevant to them.

Also, the participants share that during face-to-face instruction, even though they understood when the teacher would spend more time on a concept due to some students not grasping the material, they stated that sometimes they would get frustrated due to the urgency of completing their courses. All the participants shared that they were able to complete the course work faster with distance learning than in face-to-face classes, because of the teacher's instructional pace. One participant shared:

> At home, I was able to complete my course work faster because they were no interruptions, and I was working at my pace. If I had a question, I would watch a pre-recorded lesson or I would use the internet to solve the problem. (Participant 4)

Another participant shared:

> During the day you only have 45 minutes to work on every subject. With distance learning, I was able to work sometimes two hours consecutively and finish the course work faster and without interruptions. (Participant 5)

Participant 6 shared:

At the alternative school, we had to wait to move to the next concept until all students

understood the concept. It was frustrating having to wait for the entire class before

moving on. (Participant 6)

Participant 11 shared:

I was already thinking about dropping out because it was taking me too long to complete

my course work, however, when the pandemic happened and we were completing our

work at our pace, I was able to complete the courses faster, and I got excited about

graduating. (Participant 11)

Participants voiced that they took advantage of the pre-recorded lessons. They like the fact that

they were able to watch the lesson several times until they grasped the content without holding

the class or worrying about criticism from peers for asking questions.

The sixth theme that emerged concerning this research question was Classroom

Interruptions. As discussed earlier, regardless of the effectiveness of the teacher's classroom

management, interruptions are inevitable such as discipline issues, office interruptions, school

activities, exchange of classes, etc. According to Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum (2021), classroom

interruptions are regular manifestations in U.S. public schools. They believe that in one-year

classes are interrupted more than 2000 times. Furthermore, during these interruptions' instruction

is not taking place. In this particular alternative high school, the student had eight periods of

forty-five minutes of instruction, and interruptions transpired, such as the ones mentioned earlier;

discipline issues, office interruptions, and exchange of classes. On the other hand,

participants voiced that with distance learning they could maximize their instructional time

without interruptions. One of the participants shared "I like all my teachers, but every time we

changed classes we wasted about five minutes just moving from one class to another"

(Participant 6). Another participant shared another situation where instruction was interrupted.

Sometimes students misbehave and the teacher has to stop the class to take care of the

student. The teacher has to write the referral and wait for the office to remove the student.

(Participant 2)

Another class procedure that students perceived as a class interruption that minimized

instruction was when the teachers check attendance at the beginning of the class. One participant

stated:

We have eight periods and in every period we waisted between five to ten minutes when

teachers were checking attendance. Sometimes the teachers would ask students questions

about their attendance before starting the class. (Participant 11)

Some of the participants also perceived lunch as an interruption of instruction. One

participant shared "I enjoyed lunch at school however, we spent forty-five minutes at the

cafeteria when we could of being working on our modules" (Participant 12). Eighty percent of

the participants shared that during distance learning they enjoy eating on their own time, eating

homemade food, and the advantage of continuing with their coursework even during lunchtime.

Participants voiced that with distance learning they were able to maximize their

instructional time without interruptions that interfered with their credit accrual. Participants also

shared how they were able to create their own effective learning environment in which they

could maximize their instructional time.

The seventh theme that emerged concerning this research question was Transportation.

On the one hand, the school district provided transportation to the student attending the

alternative high school. On the other hand, a student shared that it was only one bus assigned to

the alternative high school. Students had to wake up very early and spend a couple of hours on the bus before arriving at school. On the other hand, participants shared that with distance learning transportation was not an issue. Students attended distance learning courses online, therefore at their home convenience. One participant shared:

> Since I live far from school, I had to wake up early to get a ride to school and I was the last one to get picked up from school. With distance learning I was able to get more sleep and work on my modules at all hours of the day, I was able to complete my modules faster. (Participant 4)

Some of the participants shared that because family members had health issues, they had transportation issues. Participant 6 shared that because his father had health issues, sometimes he was not able to take him to school. He also shared, that sometimes he needed to accompany his father to doctor appointments therefore he was not able to attend school.

> Sometimes I missed school because, due to my father's illness he was not able to drive, and I couldn't find a ride to school. Distance learning allows me to continue working on my modules even in the doctor's waiting area. (Participant 6)

> Some of the participants shared that because family members had health issues they had transportation issues. One participant shared:

> Distance learning allowed me to take care of my father during the day and complete my course work at night or early in the morning. Sometimes I would start at 6:00 in the morning. (Participant 6)

Fifty-eight percent of the participants had issues with attendance. Due to parenting responsibilities, health issues, or family responsibilities. Participants shared that with distance learning transportation was not an issue.

The eighth and last theme that emerged concerning this research question was Socialization.

On the one hand, socialization in face-to-face instruction takes place daily during all school activities. According to Javari and Jalili (2014) communication is a way to exchange thoughts and feelings. Communication between students and teachers take place through verbal interaction or through nonverbal communication as well. Eighty percent of the participants shared that they had a challenging time fitting in with their peers on their home campuses. For example, one of the challenges was that some participants experienced a frequent change of address; therefore, it was difficult for them to make friends and adjust to their new teacher's teaching style. Students expressed how frustrating it was to adjust to new teachers, new teacher procedures, and new school procedures. Some of the students shared that they didn't feel comfortable asking questions since the other students were very familiar with the teachers' style and classroom management procedures. One participant shared that when he changed schools he felt rejected by other students who bullied him. Also, students shared how the students felt that the teacher didn't have the patience to work with them. One student shared:

> I was bullied by other students at my home campus. Students called me names and made fun of me when I would ask a question. A student hit me in my stomach in front of the teacher, and the teacher did nothing to stop the other students from bothering me. Students would bother me on the bus too. When I tried to defend myself, I got kicked out of the bus, so I had to walk to school every day. I arrived late every day since I lived far from school and the teacher would get after me for being late. (Participant 1)

Another participant shared:

We moved houses frequently, so it was hard for me to catch up with schoolwork. My

classes were large, so I didn't have a lot of help from the teacher, so I had a hard time

passing my STAAR tests. (Participant 2)

Participant 3 shared:

I like my home campus, but I got embarrassed several times in front of the other students

because I was not able to complete assignments and science projects. I didn't receive the

help that I needed, and I did not want to ask anymore. (Participant 3)

On the other hand, students shared that during distance learning students continue

communicating with peers through social media, texting, or/and videoconferencing. Students

expressed that they didn't miss the face-to-face communication. Students shared that through

social media they were able to communicate with their peers and stay in touch even more than at

school.

According to Cross et al. (2019), friendships have a direct impact on academics as well as

social efficacy. Moreover, Hoffman et al. (2021) argue that adolescents spend more time with

friends than with their parents. Therefore, their social efficacy is predisposed by their

relationships with friends. Nowadays, socialization is not limited to the traditional face-to-face

classroom. With today's technology, students can effectively participate with peers in different

projects and collaborate even from a different location. The challenge that distance learning faces

is teaching students how to collaborate from a distance. Educators need to prepare students for a

global workforce training them to be effective communicators and team players in any setting.

Chapter Summary

This section includes findings of twelve one-to-one interviews, a focus group interview

with nine participants, learning analytics reports, and the analysis of artifacts such as lesson

plans. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore nontraditional high school students' attitudes regarding the effectiveness of distance learning and its impact on high school graduation rates and attendance rates.

The results and evaluation of the findings from the one to one interview, focus group interview, learning analytics reports, and artifacts such as lesson plans provided triangulation of data that answer the three research questions that guided this study: What effect did distance learning have on nontraditional high school attendance rates at an alternative South Texas high school? What impact did distance learning have on nontraditional high school graduation rates at an alternative South Texas high school? How do face-to-face and distance learning compare to nontraditional high school graduation rates at an alternative South Texas high school? Positive insights were shared by participants. Participants agreed that distance learning accelerated their graduation, and allowed them to meet their responsibilities while attending distance learning classes. All the participants agreed that attendance was not an issue since they were able to work on their classwork at any time of the day.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to explore nontraditional high school students' attitudes regarding the effectiveness of distance learning courses and their impact on high school graduation rates and attendance rates. The study employed a qualitative research method to explore students' perceptions on how distance learning impacted their credit accrual and attendance rates. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What effect did distance learning have on nontraditional high school attendance rates at an alternative South Texas high school?

2. What impact did distance learning have on nontraditional high school graduation rates at an alternative South Texas high school?

3. How do face-to-face and distance learning compare in nontraditional high school graduation rates at an alternative South Texas high school?

Discussion

The remainder of this chapter discusses the interpretations of data collection and analysis during this research. The resulting themes substantiate the positive impact that distance learning had on the participants' attendance and graduation rates. This study's goal was to explore the perceptions and experiences of nontraditional students attending an alternative high school

setting of distance learning as a means of dropout prevention. This study provided student insights on how distance learning can help educators design effective distance learning programs that can prevent students from dropping out of school, and at the same time accelerate their graduation.

Theme 1: Academic Acceleration

The first theme that emerged was academic acceleration. According to Bowers and Sprott (2012), overage students who cannot graduate in four and a half years are likely to become dropouts. Therefore, there is an urgency for these participants to accelerate their graduation. Casey (2008) argues that distance learning continues to expand due to geographical and socio-economic barriers, the students' willingness to reach academic goals, and rapid technological improvements. According to Popa (2017) nontraditional students are able to adapt faster to online platforms. Furthermore, Slover and Mandemarch (2018) and Anderson (2018) argue that nontraditional students are more likely to take distance learning courses than their traditional-age counterparts; nontraditional students scored higher in online academic instruction.

In distance learning constructivism theory impacts classroom instruction which counterparts with technology access. The student environment is centered on the student and the teacher acts as an instructional facilitator (Chen et al., 2008). Participants actively construct their knowledge from their own experiences, utilizing a technological environment. Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy suggests that believing in one's capabilities to organize and perform needed action to reach goal is essential. To be successful in a distance learning environment students need to believe in their capacity to complete their coursework.

All the participants voiced the urgency to graduate. The participants were two grade levels below and ranged from eighteen to twenty-two years old. Throughout the interview

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process, the students voiced the need to graduate fast. The participants shared that they knew their high school diploma would help them pursue a real-life goal. Ninety percent of the participants knew what their next step was after graduation and shared that at their home campus, they felt they didn't receive guidance towards their future goals. Distance learning allows students to accelerate credit accrual and, therefore, their graduation. Participants shared their need to accelerate their graduation to be able to fulfill responsibilities. Some participants shared the need to take care of parents, children, full-time jobs to support their families. Other participants share the need to join the army forces, and the need to continue with higher educational goals.

Theme 2: Flexible Scheduling

The second theme that emerged in this study was flexible scheduling. According to Statti et al. (2020), distance learning has increased at a fast pace since the start of the 21st century to accommodate families that are not content with the traditional education system. Traditional education is not able to accommodate issues such as family illnesses or other social responsibilities. Families that are seeking flexibility in class schedules not limiting the students due to time or geographical space. Mc.A Baker et al. (2020) argue that distance learning has become an important development in the past decade. Students prefer hybrid formats because they offer flexible schedules. The alternative settings are characterized by the flexibility of time and place to accommodate students' needs. This allows the student to progress in conjunction with work and/or parenting responsibilities (Anderson, 2018).

Constructivism theory states that knowledge is constructed by the learner. The student environment is centered on the student and the teacher acts as an instructional facilitator (Chen et al., 2008). Participants actively construct their knowledge from their own experiences utilizing a

technological environment. Moreover, Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy suggests that believing in one's capabilities to organize and perform needed action to reach a goal is essential. Due to the supportive environment during distance learning implementation, students were motivated to complete their courses.

Distance learning facilitates the flexibility that some students need to meet their family and financial activities (Edmond, 2009; Marald & Westerberg, 2006). All participants shared that they liked the fact they could work on their school work at their convenience. Fifty-eight percent of the participants were able to have jobs while completing their high schools' requirements. Forty-two percent of the participants were able to take care of their children or family health issues while completing high school courses. The participant shared that since they had unlimited time to work on their courses, they were able to complete their courses faster. The participants shared that they created their study schedule according to meeting their responsibilities.

Theme 3: Academic Support

The third theme that emerged in this study was Academic Support. As discussed in the review of literature, alternative school settings are intended to provide individualized instruction for students who need intensive academic support (Griffiths et al., 2019). According to Davis and Warner (2015), the school environment is a determinantal factor in the school's academic success and school climate has a direct impact on academics. Therefore, it is important to provide a nurturing, positive school environment.

Teachers in distance learning provide academic support through guidance instead of the traditional lecture. Bandura (1997) argues that self-efficacy and achievement are connected. Moreover, lack of support from teachers during instruction has the potential to deter learner's motivation. Efficacy expectations also determine motivation (Bandura, 1981).

The participants shared that during their experience with distance learning, teachers were contacting them daily to ensure that they had all their support. Teachers utilized google class to post pre-recorded lessons on difficult concepts. Students had access to the pre-recorded lessons at their convenience. If they needed more help, students contacted teachers via email, text, or phone. Students shared that with the internet they had access to more resources and were able to complete their course work faster. The analysis of artifacts reflected how teachers uploaded lessons according to individual student needs.

Distance learning provided the support systems required to reach student success. Borup and Stimson (2019) argue the importance of teachers creating a support system where students received individualized feedback from the teachers. All the participants shared how teachers call them regularly to ensure their full support. The student-teacher relationship plays a significant role in students dropping out of high school (Kim et al., 2015). Moreover, Pendergast et al. (2018) argue that the creation of an effective learning environment is essential to develop a sense of belonging at school. Student sense of belonging at school is a critical component in student engagement in learning. Alqurashi (2018) and Glazier (2016) argue that factors that affect student effective participation in the distance learning environment are self-efficacy and positive teacher/student rapport.

Theme 4: Safe Environment

The fourth theme that emerged was a safe environment. Wilkerson et al. (2016) suggested that students attending alternative high school settings showed improved outcomes in credit accrual earnings towards graduation with a reduction of discipline referrals. Pendergast et al. (2018) argues that to assist students in creating an effective learning environment, it is essential to develop a sense of belonging at school. Student sense of belonging at school is a

critical component in student engagement in learning. Furthermore, teachers that create a positive student-teacher relationship motivate students. The teacher creates a safe environment where the student feels accepted when communication with the student is supportive, and when the teacher knows the student as a person. Moreover, they identify three levels of student engagement in the classroom: Behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Bettini et al. (2020) argue that administrators need to be knowledgeable and prepare to assist teachers with intensive student interventions to meet student's needs.

Distance learning allows students to create a safe learning environment in their own homes. Bandura (1981) argues that high arousal states, which represent a distraction to performance, jeopardizes individual expectations of success. According to Bandura (2001), to harvest student participation in the learning environment, student needs to feel safe. The psychology well-being, safety emotions during communication, and self-efficacy are crucial in the learning environment.

Some of the participants shared negative experiences at their regular home campuses. Among some of these experiences were mistreatment from other students, rejection from peers, bullying, not receiving the assistance needed from the teacher, and negative comments from teachers. Seventy percent of the participants shared that they had issues socializing with other students.

Participants shared that at the alternative high school, all teachers and staff were supportive and they felt welcomed. During their distance learning experience, participants shared that all school staff were very supportive. Nevertheless, participants felt safe in their home environment without being exposed to other individuals that may be carrying the COVID-19 virus.

Theme 5: Transportation

The fifth theme that emerged was transportation. According to Casey (2008), distance learning continues to expand due to geographical and socio-economic barriers, the students' willingness to reach academic goals, and rapid technological improvements. Hissed (2016) argue that distance learning provided opportunities to rural students that, without the flexibility of distance learning education, would not be feasible for them.

Bandura (1981) argues that individual preoccupations, negative thoughts, and high arousal states are distracting to performance and have the potential to jeopardize expectations to success.

Distance learning allows students to get more sleep, eat breakfast at home, and maximized instructional time. According to Yeung and Yeung-Hoang (2020), school travel may negatively affect student achievement. Students that ride the school bus have to get up earlier and experience long bus trips. Some of the participants shared that they experienced transportation issues and due to poor attendance, their credit accrual was affected. Participants shared that the school district provided transportation to students attending the alternative high school; however, it was only one bus. Students had to wake up very early and spend a couple of hours on the bus before arriving to school.

Theme 6: Socializing

The sixth theme that emerged was Socialization. According to Kožuh et al. (2015), social media has impacted the world in all areas, including education. Eighty percent of the participants shared that they had a hard time fitting in with their peers at their home campuses.

According to Vygotsky (1978), learning in social environments include scaffolds such as discussions and reflections. Moreover, Bandura (2001)'s social cognitive theory argues that

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student learning can be impacted by peer interactions which affect students' motivational and affective processes.

Some participants experience a frequent change of address; therefore, it was difficult for them to make friends and adjust to their new teacher's teaching style. Participants shared that at the alternative high school they were able to socialize with peers their age in a more welcome environment. However, a finding not expected was that participants mentioned that during distance learning they didn't miss socializing with peers. Some participants view socializing at the alternative high school as a distraction. Other participants shared that during distance learning they managed to socialize with peers through social media. Kožuh et al. (2015) argue that students continue their social interactions through social media. Furthermore, that students create their own learning environment, integrating individuals of their choice.

Through the implementation of distance learning, students continue to communicate via social media. Nowadays, socialization is not limited to the traditional face-to-face classroom. With today's technology, students can effectively participate with peers in different projects and collaborate even from a different location. The challenge of distance learning is teaching students how to collaborate from a distance. Educators need to prepare students for a global workforce training them to be effective communicators and team players in any setting.

Theme 7: Teacher Instructional Pace

The seventh theme that emerged was Instructional Pace. Due to the small classes in the alternative settings, teachers spend more individualized attention on students, allowing them to assist them as well as get to know them better (Toro et al., 2019). The participants shared that even though they understood when the teacher would spend more time on a concept due to some

students not grasping the material, they would sometimes get frustrated due to the urgency of completing their courses.

Distance learning allows students guided mastery under a simulated learning environment where corrected feedback is provided individually. Students are able to complete assignments at their pace. Bandura (1986) argues that corrective feedback needs to be provided in a safe environment where the student is not afraid of making mistakes.

Distance learning allows students to make progress according to their individual motivation and persistence. Bandura (2001) argues that with increase motivation and self-efficacy, individuals are more persistent when they are confronted with obstacles. All the participants shared that they were able to complete the course work faster with distance learning than in face-to-face classes. An unexpected finding was that students expressed frustration having to learn at their teacher's pace. Participants shared that having full control of their learning allowed them to complete their courses faster.

Theme 8: Classroom Interruptions

The eighth and last theme that emerged was Classroom Interruptions. Regardless of the effectiveness of the teacher's classroom management, interruptions are inevitable. Kraft and Monti-Nussbaum (2021) argue that classroom interruptions are regular manifestations in U.S. public schools; classes are interrupted more than 2000 times in one year. During these interruptions, instruction is not taking place. Daily interruptions as discipline issues, office interruptions, school activities, exchange of classes, etc. Psychological studies suggest that these interruptions not only create loss of instruction but have a detrimental effect such as stress and welfare. These interruptions also affect teachers' instructional practices. After the interruption's

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the teachers have to resume the activities. In this particular alternative high school, the student had eight periods. Each period encompassed forty-five minutes of instruction.

Bandura (1977b) describes behavior as originating from the interactions between interactions of personal behavior and environment influences. Self-regulatory activities may be impacted by the environment affecting motivation and behavior.

Distance learning provides the student the opportunity to maximize instruction without the face-to-face school interruptions. Basak et al. (2018) argue that distance learning allows teachers the implementation of new instructional strategies. Teacher have the opportunity to use different formats and the option to utilize blending learning settings to focus on competency-based learning to allow students for a deeper understanding of the curriculum. Participants voiced that with distance learning, they could maximize their instructional time without interruptions. The participants shared that having to exchange classes was an interruption to their learning. Some of the participants shared that they were able to more effectively comprehend course work of a particular subject if they focused on one subject per day. The participants expressed that with distance learning they were able to work on their course work even during breakfast and lunch without having to stop. The participants shared that they enjoyed creating their own study space without the school's face-to-face interruptions. The participants found that school discipline issues, even peer socializing, were interruptions to their learning.

Implications

Several implications of this study need to be mentioned. The study focused solely on students attending or recently graduated from an alternative high school and the same alternative high school.

Based on the triangulation of data collected, the result of this study indicated that all participants perceived distance learning as a positive experience that allowed them to accelerate their credit accrual in a supportive environment.

This study contributes to student dropout prevention and student retention by increasing the knowledge base on nontraditional students' perspectives on distance learning. The findings from this research study will benefit educators, both teachers and administrators. Administrators could use this information when evaluating student opportunities to participate on distance learning programs to prevent student dropout. School administrators could review these findings to guide them in the development of an effective distance learning programs. Moreover, to develop effective distance learning environments that can accelerate student graduation.

The implementation of distance learning in K-12 instructional settings is recent and is evolving as we learn more about how to improve the delivery of instruction via online settings. Recent studies show that online courses and online extended day instruction have the potential to increase high school graduation rates and attendance rates (Borup et al., 2019; Goodman et al., 2019; Mc.A Baker et al., 2020; Popa, 2017). Distance learning has the potential to target not only at-risk students but also students that need to accelerate their graduation while providing other services that traditional students are afforded, such as counseling and mentoring. Nation-wide we continue to experience high dropout rates in our high schools. The researcher's goal was to offer insights from the students that have participated in distance learning instruction to improve distance learning programs. Students' experiences and perspectives are valuable information that we can analyze and utilize to improve or redesign distance learning programs.

Recommendations for Educators

The recommendations are based on the themes that emerged during the data analysis. In the development of an effective distance learning program. The recommendation to educators is first to develop a positive relationship with students. Pendergast et al. (2018) argue that in an effective learning environment, it is essential to develop a sense of belonging at school. Student sense of belonging is a critical component on student engagement in learning. Meetings with students, parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators are essential. The student needs to know that the school staff is there to support them and help them achieve their academic goals. Therefore, intake meetings before the program start is highly recommended. The second recommendation is the need for an effective online platform where students can access all the academic support successfully. Participants shared that sometimes the lessons that were uploaded had poor sound therefore students had to look for other avenues to find their answers.

Recommendations for Administrators

The recommendations are based on the themes that emerged during the data analysis. The first recommendation for school administrators is to provide nontraditional students the opportunity to participate in distance learning programs. The second recommendation is that the Learning Management System (LMS) needs to provide a quick lesson delivery with a faster and more reliable communication process. The third recommendation is based on the individualized instruction that this population requires. Experienced teachers can provide the academic support that this population needs to be successful. Also, a mentoring program guided by experienced counselors is needed. And the last recommendation is to provide professional development to all distance learning staff. This training needs to be provided to establish clear expectations as well as effective knowledge and management of required online learning environments. Technology

changes every day; therefore, teacher readiness to support this change is crucial (Bakir, 2016).

These clear expectations need to include teacher response time to student questions and support.

Student motivation is a key factor for student success; therefore, progress reports with

student/teacher communication logs need to be included during the distance learning course. The

development of a student/teacher handbook to ensure knowledge of student/teacher expectations

should also be included.

Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative single instrumental case study explored nontraditional high school

students' attitudes regarding the effectiveness of distance learning courses and their impact on

high school graduation rates and attendance rates. The distinctiveness of this study is that it

explored alternative high school students' attitudes regarding the effectiveness of distance

learning. This study was limited to a small number of students in an alternative high school.

Future research could include more students and expand to all students in a school setting to

determine the impact of distance learning on student graduation and attendance rates. Future

research studies may also include other alternative high schools to expand the scope of the

findings comparing different experiences and populations. Studies may include different

instructional methodologies utilized by the different alternative centers.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of this qualitative study is the small purposive sample. This study was limited

to a small number of students in an alternative high school. The study could be broader and

produce more diverse implications if the study was expanded to include various regions of the

United States to determine other participants' perspectives.

Chapter Summary

Numerous programs have been developed to target high school dropouts (Kyun-Nyum, 2015); however, high school dropouts' rates continue to be high (Steeg et al., 2012). A vast number of studies have been done on the positive outcomes of distance learning in higher education (Borup et al., 2019; Goodman et al., 2019; McA Baker et al., 2020; Popa,2017), but limited studies have been conducted at the K-12 level. For this study, the criteria used to identify nontraditional was based on choices and behaviors that contribute to risks of attrition. This population, therefore, are responsive to change or interventions if these take place at strategic points in the students' school experience. This study explored the perceptions and experiences of nontraditional students attending an alternative high school setting of distance learning as a means of dropout prevention. This study is important because although research exists in the positive outcomes of distance learning in higher education, few know which prevention practices are the most effective in improving dropout rate conditions. The resulting themes substantiate the positive impact that distance learning had on the participants' attendance and graduation rates. The participants shared how distance learning attendance was not an issue and they were able to meet attendance requirements. Moreover, distance learning allowed them to graduate at a faster rate than face-to-face instruction.

The COVID-19 pandemic opened the door for distance learning to all students; however, that is not the case anymore. Educational institutions returned to face to face instruction offering the limited capacity to distance learning and imposing rigid qualifications to be eligible to participate in these programs. During the initial distance learning implementation, educators encountered difficulties when offering distance learning to all students such as providing devices and internet to all students, transitioning face-to-face curriculum into an online setting, and

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communicating with students and parents. However, once the school staff and students adjust to requirements, some students completed courses.

Conclusion

This study explored the perceptions and experiences of nontraditional students attending an alternative high school setting of distance learning as a means of dropout prevention. The data collected through this study indicated positive attendance and graduation outcomes. Findings provided evidence on how students were able to meet attendance requirements through the flexible distance learning platform, and how students were able to accelerate their graduation by completing their courses at a faster rate due to unlimited access to the course work. This study serves as a model to educators to realize that nontraditional students can benefit from distance learning opportunities. These opportunities not only prevent them from dropping out of school but to provide them with the ability to effectively performed on an online platform. Distance learning allow them to continue their education at a higher educational setting utilizing distance learning platforms.

According to Stattie et al. (2020), K-12 distance learning has increased at a fast pace since the start of the 21st century to accommodate families that are not content with the traditional educational system. Traditional education is not able to accommodate issues such as family illnesses or other social responsibilities. Some families are seeking flexibility in class schedules not limiting the student due to geographical space. Distance learning platforms have a positive effect on nontraditional students that need the flexibility of these platforms. Tinger et al. (2017) state that studies show a positive achievement effect in all subjects at the K-12 level. This school year, South Texas Independent School District has opened a Virtual Academy. This academy is servicing students in grades 6-9. Students have the opportunity to take their courses

100 percent virtually from home. Soon the Academy will service grades 6-12 and dual enrollment courses will be available. As technology increases in our everyday life and the need for distance learning settings continues to increase, virtual academies will continue to open and provide the opportunities that families are seeking.

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

SCHOOL DISTRICT PERMISSION

█████████████████████████████████

███████████████████

Director

November 19, 2021

Ms. Teresita De Saro
2709 Greenhaven Drive
Brownsville, Texas 78521

Re: Application for Research Study

Ms. De Saro,

Please be advised that your application for a Research Study has been reviewed and has been approved. The research ID number assigned to your request is 2021-11-19.

Your request titled "The Impact of Distance Learning on High School Attendance and Dropout Prevention" will begin January 2022 and conclude at the end of January 2022. One ██████████ campus will be asked to participate, ███████████████. If any of this changes please let us know.

Good luck with your endeavor and thank you for your interest in ██████████████████████ and its students.

Should you have any questions or require further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me at ████████ ███

Sincerely, ████████

██████████████

Assessment, Research & Evaluation

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study Title: The Impact of Distance Learning on High School Attendance and Dropout
Prevention

Principal Investigator: Teresita de Saro Telephone: (956) 459-0633

Key points you should know:

- I am inviting you to be in a research study I am conducting. Your participation is
voluntary. This means it is up to you and only you to decide if you want to be in the
study. Even if you decide to join the study, you are free to leave at any time if you
change your mind.
- Take your time and ask to have any words or information that you do not understand
explained to you.
- I am doing this study because I want to explore student attitudes regarding the
effectiveness of distance learning and their impact on high school graduation rates and
attendance rates.
- Why are you being asked to be in this study?
  - You are over the age of 18. You are attending ███████████████
██████ High School or you have graduated from ███████████████
██████ high school within the past year, and you have experienced
distance learning.
- What will you do if you agree to be in the study?
  - You will participate in an individual interview via Zoom (audio/video
recording) that will not be longer than 60 minutes, and then a focus group
interview via Zoom (audio/video recording) that will not be longer than 60
minutes.
- Participation in this study requires videotaping and audiotape of the individual interview
and the focus group interview. By signing this consent form, you are giving us
permission to make and use these recordings. Audio and video recordings will be kept
for approximately 3 years and will be securely stored in the doctoral program office at

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- UTRGV. No one other than the investigator will have access to the data. After the 3 years have passed, audio and video recordings will be destroyed.
- Can you be harmed by being in this study?
    - Being in this study involves no greater risk than what you ordinarily encounter in daily life.
    - Risks to your personal privacy and confidentiality: Your participation in this research will be held strictly confidential and only a code number will be used to identify your stored data. However, because there will be a link between the code and your identity, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. The researcher cannot control personal privacy and confidentiality breaching caused by other focus group participants outside of the study. Confidentiality in a focus group setting cannot be guaranteed, however all participants will be asked not to share the discussion outside of the group setting.
- If I learn something new and important while doing this study that would likely affect whether you would want to be in the study, I will contact you to let you know what I have learned.
- Will you get anything for being in this study?
    - You will not receive any payments for taking part in this study.
- Could you be taken out of the study?
    - You could be removed from the study if there is evidence that you have been dishonest or misleading during your interview or data sharing process.

What happens if I say no or change my mind?
- You can say you do not want to be in the study now or if you change your mind later, you can stop participating at any time.
- No one will treat you differently and you will not be penalized.

How will my privacy be protected?
- Your information will be stored with a code instead of identifiers (such as name, date of birth, email address, etc.).

Who to contact for research related questions
For questions about this study or to report any problems you experience as a result of being in this study contact Dr. Alejandro Garcia at (956) 665-3478 or alejandro.garcia@utrgv.edu.

Who to contact regarding your rights as a participant
This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Protections (IRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel that your rights as a participant were not adequately met by the researcher, please contact the IRB at (956) 665-3598 or irb@utrgv.edu.

Signatures

By signing below, you indicate that you are voluntarily agreeing to participate in this study and that the procedures involved have been described to your satisfaction. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this form for your own reference. To participate, you must be at least 18 years of age. If you are under 18, please inform the researcher.

_____   ____/_____/_____

Participant's Signature   Date

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX C

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The Impact of Distance Learning on High School Attendance and Dropout
Prevention Researcher: Teresita de Saro

1) Tell me about your high school experience at your home campus.
2) Why did you select to enroll in an alternative high school?
3) Describe when did you lose enthusiasm for school and explain the reasons why.
4) Describe the events that were most difficult during high school.
5) Describe your experience with distance learning courses.
6) What are the advantages of distance learning compared to face to face courses?
7) What are the disadvantages of distance learning compared to face to face courses?
8) How do you believe distance learning has help you achieve your academic goals?
9) What do you believe is the most important factor that motivates students to take online courses?
10) Are there any other comments that you would like to share regarding your experience with online courses?

APPENDIX D

APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

The Impact of Distance Learning on High School Attendance and Dropout

Prevention Researcher: Teresita de Saro

1) What are your feelings about distance learning?
2) When, how, and where do you use distance learning?
3) What are your problems or concerns about distance learning?
4) What is something that has discouraged you or would discourage you from distance learning?
5) What do you believe are key strengths of distance learning?
6) What positive experiences have you had with distance learning?
7) What are your favorite aspects of distance learning and why?
8) Would you recommend distance learning to your friends?
9) What impact has distance learning had in your school attendance?
10) What impact has distance learning had in your graduation goals?
11) Is there anything else you want to add to the conversation about distance learning?

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Teresita de Saro was awarded her Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in July 2022. Additional degrees for this author include a Master of Arts in Spanish Literature from The University of Texas at Brownsville in Partnership with Texas Southmost College in 1997, a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish with a minor in Computer Information Systems from The University of Texas Pan American in August 1992, and an Associate in Applied Science in Business Data Processing from Texas Southmost College in August 1987. She has served as an educator in a public school since 1992. Six years as a Computer Literacy teacher, and twenty-four years as a school administrator. Contact information for Teresita de Saro is tdesaro@msn.com