STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF TYPE II ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS THAT
INfluence PERSISTENCE TOWARD GRADUATION

by
Michael J. Barrett III
Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate how high school students described their experiences attending a Type II alternative school (geared toward students with behavioral problems and poor student attendance) in Central Georgia and the factors that motivated them to persist to graduation. The overarching research question was: How do high school graduates describe their experiences attending an alternative school in Central Georgia that motivated them to persist toward graduation? Schein’s organizational culture model, Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs served as the conceptual framework.

Participants included eight students who had previously attended an alternative high school and were on track to graduate. Using the information gathered through interviews, a focus group, archival data, and field notes, the following four significant themes emerged: 1) student perceptions of alternative school climate; 2) structured environment of the alternative school resulted in conformity; 3) students believed that alternative school changed their path; and 4) alternative school changed the students’ dynamic with parents. Further analysis ultimately highlighted 11 subthemes. The benefits of alternative schools are documented and contribute to instilling student intrinsic motivation to graduate and to the ultimate success of its students.

Keywords: motivation, alternative school, extrinsic, intrinsic, self-determination theory, hierarchy of needs, therapism, phenomenology, attendance, academic achievement.
Dedication

To my Mother, my wife, and Dr. Cristie McClendon. My mother was the inspiration to begin my journey into educational leadership. My wife, Diane, encouraged and supported my efforts throughout. And, Dr. McClendon provided the expertise to complete my journey.
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List of Abbreviations

Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB)

Computer Based Instruction (CBI)

Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT)

First Generation Student (FGS)

Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT)

Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)

Self Determination Theory (SDT)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The terms “marginal,” “at-risk,” and “potential dropout” are often used to describe more than one-third of students in United States’ schools who struggle to persist to graduation each year based on numerous risk factors (Greene, 2002; Kominski, Elliott & Clever, 2009). At-risk students often exhibit low engagement and motivation in school, put forth little effort in school work, may not pay attention in class, exhibit frequent discipline problems and have attendance problems, as well (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1986). Steinberg (1996) conducted a study of over 20,000 teens and found that over one-third of students reported they spent most of their school day socializing with friends, rarely focused on academics, and put forth minimal effort to pay attention in classes. Some of these students attended alternative schools for a period of time to complete their high school requirements (Brussow, 2007).

Students who attend alternative programs are removed from their school and are temporarily placed in a setting that provides extra structure and strict discipline. Some alternative schools offer counseling and programs on time management skills and stress management classes to help at-risk students develop strategies for school success (Turner, 2012; Usher & Kober, 2012a). While alternative programs are a popular choice for school systems to offer extra support to students who exhibit behavioral and attendance issues, some educators debate the effectiveness of these schools in helping meet the needs of at-risk students (Brussow, 2007).

Research has shown that students who attended alternative schools attributed student-teacher relationships and the teachers’ perceived care or concern as significant factors in improving their academic achievement, while distractions such as peer pressure to skip class and offering too many course options appeared to be detrimental (Cordell, 2011; Tuner, 2012). Other
studies have shown that attending alternative schools improved the overall attendance and academic achievement of at-risk students (Lehr, Tan & Ysseldyke, 2009, Turner, 2012).

However, most research in this area is quantitative in nature and void of the true underlying perceptions and the voice of the students (Glassett, 2012; Turner, 2012). In addition, when qualitative research was accomplished, it was done with a limited number of students in a specific setting and focused only on the period the students actually attended the alternative schools (Turner, 2012).

Brussow (2007) and Turner (2012) noted that limited research exists that focused on student perceptions of their experiences in alternative schools. Brussow (2007) conducted a qualitative study to investigate student perceptions of the characteristics of alternative school culture that motivated them to continue in school and graduate. Data collection included interviews, and results showed that the small school and class size, flexible structure of the school day, and caring attitudes of teachers and staff were the factors most influential in motivating students to continue in school. Brussow recommended further research be conducted on the topic with a larger sample and with other alternative programs to validate or refute these findings. Therefore, this study built on those results by including a different geographic setting, additional interview questions, artifact analysis (school strategic plan, mission/vision statements, and bell schedule), as well as a different perspective from the alternative school students who have since returned to mainstream high school.

Chapter One of this dissertation covers the background to the problem, situation to self, the problem and purpose statements, and the significance of the study. Covered also are the research questions, research plan, limitations and delimitations of the study, and key definitions. The chapter concludes with a summary.
Background

In an address to Congress on February 24, 2009, President Obama noted that the United States one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation (The White House, 2009). In 2013, the National Center for Educational Statistics indicated that the Current Population Survey, revealed the high school dropout rate actually decreased from 12% in 1990 to 7% in 2013. While fewer students are leaving schools, many educators have the desire to have all students earn their high school diploma. Some educators treat the dropout problem as a retention issue, but others focus on the needs of students, as it is the student who must have the motivation to persevere in school (Turner, 2012).

Over the years, “at-risk” has become a wide-ranging term used to describe students who experience failure during their tenure in K-12 schools (Beken, Williams, Combs, & Slate, 2009). At-risk students may drop out of high school because they believe teachers and school systems are unable to meet their needs. Turner (2012) noted that most studies on the needs of at-risk students have focused on the perspectives of the teacher. Those qualitative studies on the topic were very limited in scope. Therefore, gleaning the perspective of students may provide information that is unique to their view of what motivates them to stay in school, particularly an alternative school.

Alternative schools are most often viewed as institutions focused on helping students identified as at risk of dropping out or failing out of school. However, Lange and Sletten (2002) noted that the term is used differently in education systems. Some alternative schools are schools of choice, where students make the decision to attend, whereas others are schools where students are assigned due to behavior, attendance or other issues. Accordingly, there are various types of schools defined as “alternative.”
Alternative school education has evolved over the last half century. In their infancy dating back to the 1950’s, alternative schools were seen as a response by inner-city schools to give an alternative to those students who were at risk of failing. In rural areas, it was seen as an innovative approach to education (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tolnelson, 2006). The second approach can be viewed as the forebear of programs such as magnet, voucher and charter schools that were to arise several decades later. For the purposes of this research, the type of alternative school that is studied is the first type or one where the students are at risk of failing out or have behavioral problems.

Petrosino and Claire (2014) defined this type of alternative school as an educational setting designed to accommodate adolescents experiencing behavioral and academic problems in the mainstream educational setting, who would generally be considered at-risk for dropping out or expulsion. This includes schools that are providing students with a last chance before expulsion, and those that are attempting to remediate academic or behavioral problems (Petrosino & Claire, 2014, p. 3).

**Situation to Self**

I teach at a Title I school, that receives federal funding and has a student enrollment in which more than half of the students are low-income (NAEYC, 2014). The school has a school-wide title I program. This requires a plan to improve academic achievement of all students in the school using Title I dollars on all of the students (NAEYC, 2014).

Of the 15,000 school districts in the United States, almost 14,000 conduct Title I programs (NAEYC, 2014). As a teacher interacting daily with low socioeconomic level, at-risk students, I am aware of the different perspectives that my students possess regarding education, personal accountability, and academic achievement. Federal and state funding must be allocated
effectively and efficiently to align with Title I student programs proven to improve academic success. The value of this research is an understanding of how students perceive factors related to school climate and relationships with staff that influence their desire to persist in high school to graduation.

I applied axiological assumptions to the research, acknowledging that this is a value-laden study where numerous perspectives and biases are present: however, the final analysis is based on truth, good, justice and human dignity (Dziedziak, 2015). Values of the participants (at-risk students) and myself (a fiscal conservative) are addressed. As a fiscal conservative, I believe in the importance of education, but also realize that it must be cost effective to be sustainable. Through focusing on the best aspects of different programs, successful cost-effective elements may be incorporated into mainstream public schools. Axiological assumptions are joined with a pragmatic paradigm where I thoroughly scrutinized the participants’ data by looking through a realist lens, analyzing consequences and applying them to real-world practices. Data was analyzed in terms of successes and practicality.

Finally, I applied a Christian Worldview, defined as a Christian outlook and actions based on ethical tenets, established scripture and an understanding of one’s purpose in life. In addition, having served in the military for over 2 decades, I embraced the Air Force core values of integrity, service and excellence. These values articulate a code that guides daily activities. As a Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) instructor, I teach core values to cadets with similar backgrounds as the participants.

**Problem Statement**

It was not known how select high school graduates described their experiences attending an alternative school in Central Georgia. Additionally, it was not known what factors, including
those associated with alternative school culture may have motivated them to persist toward graduation. Prior research on alternative schools’ successes ignored the setting, or aspects of school culture that motivated students to engage in school (Turner, 2012). Through structured routines and programs, students may internalize rules and develop intrinsic motivation to learn and engage in academics (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In a comparison of students who attended traditional high schools to those who have attended alternative schools, Miller, Fitch, and Marshall (2003) found that alternative school students considered external influences more controlling of their future successes. Their belief on personal accountability or being in control of their fate was far less than that of their mainstream counterparts (Miller et al., 2003).

Studying students who have recently attended an alternative school in Georgia, and analyzing their experiences and perceptions regarding factors, to include school climate that facilitated their motivation to persist toward graduation, provides information to school educators and administrators regarding programmatic decisions, relational issues and curricular offerings that improve student engagement and motivation.

Since attendance is highly correlated to academic success, just getting students to school regularly may have significant positive effects (Crede, Roch, & Kiesczcynka, 2010; Huitt, 2007). The problem is that one must understand what factors associated with alternative school culture motivate students to attend school regularly and subsequently succeed academically (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Gilens, 2010; Usher & Kober, 2012a; Usher & Kober, 2012b, Voegeli, 2010).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate how high school students described their experiences attending a Type II alternative school (geared toward students with behavioral problems and poor student attendance) in Central Georgia and the
factors that motivated them to persist to graduation. Additionally, this study sought to explore factors, including those associated with alternative school culture that may have motivated students to persist toward graduation. The phenomenon of school culture is described in three ways: the organizational structure of the school, the distinctive attributes of curriculum and instruction, and the attitudes and relationships of staff and students. The term “at-risk” is used to describe a student who has experienced failure in his or her traditional school, who also spent time in an alternative school setting (Brussow, 2007).

Schein’s (1992) theory of organizational culture forms part of conceptual framework of this study. Schein noted that one must understand what culture is in order to understand the way an organization functions. Each school has a unique way of functioning, and there are 10 aspects of culture that must be developed, recognized, and understood. Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs and the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) also inform this study. Maslow (1943) stated that a man is not motivated by rewards or desires, but to meet certain needs. This theory aligns with the concept of this study indicating that the needs of students must be met in order for them to feel there is value in their education (Turner, 2012). According to self-determination theory, individuals must feel competent and in control of their circumstances in order to meet with success. Therefore, studying the perspectives of students who attended an alternative school and continued in their educational journey connects with self-determination theory and school culture.

**Significance of the Study**

Researching the insights of at-risk students who attended an alternative school, but persisted toward graduation, provides understanding of what processes transform student accountability not only at an alternative school, but mainstream schools as well. The theoretical
significance of transforming personal accountability may be seen through a hierarchy of needs:
meeting the safety needs of the students through enrollment in a structured setting may enable
personal growth of wanting to belong in the school environment (Huitt 2007; Maslow, 1943).
Personal accountability may also be seen through the self-determination theory: students may
transform extrinsic motivation to attend school into intrinsic motivation to learn (Deci & Ryan,
2008). The lived experiences of the students provide a rich description of the phenomenon and
may advance the current motivation theories accepted by most school districts.

Empirical significance focuses on the possible transferability of the research. Though
transferability is not the goal of qualitative research and is limited by the sample size, the
specific school used, the school system and even the region studied; this research adds to the
existing body of knowledge and builds on previous studies that investigated the same issue from
different perspectives. Whereas previous studies examined student insights while attending
alternative schools (Brussow, 2007; Camak, 2007; Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012; Johnson,
McMorris & Kubik (2012); Kim & Taylor, 2008; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011; Quinn & Pourier,
2006; Turner, 2012; Watson & Watson, 2011; Wilkins, 2007), this study looked at the lasting
student perceptions gained at an alternative school that helped form student desire and personal
accountability to continue in their education. Previous studies highlighted alternative school
attributes such as safety (Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011; Wilkins, 2007), small school and class size
(Brussow, 2007; Camak, 2007; Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012; Turner, 2012), school-day
structure (Brussow, 2007; Quinn & Pourier, 2006; Watson & Watson, 2011; Wilkins, 2007),
caring attitudes of teachers and staff (Camak, 2007; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011; Turner, 2012;
Wilkins 2007) and collaboration among staff and parents (Brussow, 2007; Camak, 2007; Quinn
& Pourier, 2006), but these components may not transfer with students on their return to
mainstream high schools. What transfers is the essence of the experience they had while attending the alternative school. It is this essence that may provide the school district with insight on whether their alternative school provided the educational experience beneficial to at-risk students. The benefits of transforming personal accountability in at-risk students may be economically feasible to implement to a much larger and diverse population.

The practical significance includes directing limited funds to programs that the students themselves say helped them after their return to mainstream high school. Finally, influencing current students to stay in school prevents later student regret. According to Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006), 74% of high school dropouts regretted dropping out, while 76% said they would return to school if given the opportunity at their current age. Therefore, identifying reasons that facilitated the at-risk student to complete their education may further the knowledge on this topic.

**Research Questions**

Brussow (2007) noted that limited research exists that focused on the organizational climate of alternative schools from the perspectives of the students who attend them. Turner (2012) highlighted the unique academic and social needs of students who attended alternative schools, but also recommended further research on this topic to give a voice to these students, particularly regarding how school climate or culture facilitates student success. To find the essence of what motivates students to persist toward graduation after attending alternative school, several research questions are presented. The overarching or central research question is:

**R1:** How do high school graduates describe their experiences attending an alternative school in Central Georgia that motivated them to persist toward graduation?
Subsequent research questions help refine the central question and “will help to establish the components of the ‘essence’ of the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 141). The subsequent questions are:

RQ2: How do high school students describe the benefits of their experience attending an alternative school?

RQ3: How do high school students describe the challenges associated with their experience in attending an alternative school?

RQ4: What specific learnings, knowledge, or values did high school students acquire in their experience attending an alternative school contributed to their being able to graduate?

RQ5: What attributes associated with alternative school climate (structure of school day, bell schedule, processes, procedures, curriculum, environment, expectations, actions of teachers and staff) do participants identify as having influenced their desire to attend school and engage in classes?

The first question illustrates the central question of the research study. Student personal accountability to attend school may be based on a hierarchy of needs to belong with respect to a particular culture, or to achieve knowledge (Huitt, 2007; Maslow 1943), or on extrinsic and intrinsic motivation presented in the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Subsequent questions divide the central question into components of structure, values, curriculum and staff attitudes. These components are discussed with respect to how each influenced student personal accountability and motivation. For the purposes of this study, school culture was described in three ways. First, the organizational structure of the school such as schedule of classes, structure of the school day, processes and procedures was explored (Brussow, 2007). The attitudes of teachers, staff and administrators and relationships with students also comprised the culture
Finally, distinctive attributes of the curriculum, instructional delivery, and support programs and their influence on student motivation to attend school and engage in classes were used to describe alternative school culture (Brussow, 2007).

**Research Plan**

This study was qualitative and employed a transcendental phenomenological design. The setting was a mainstream school in central Georgia where the participants consisted of students that have previously attended an alternative school nearby. I used a transcendental approach by first examining the phenomenon students’ motivation to attend school in the context of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943; Huitt, 2007). Transcendental phenomenology is descriptive; when its method is taken to be interpretive, it is known as hermeneutical. The researcher seeks to understand a specific human experience and the research sets aside preconceived experiences and knowledge to hear the voices of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Where hermeneutic phenomenology provides in depth comprehension of lived experiences, one cannot be separated from the culture and history surrounding the phenomenon; therefore, bracketing is often impracticable (Laverty, 2003). In this study, the aim was to explore and describe a phenomenon through the lived experiences of the students, separating one’s own biases from the research. Therefore, transcendental phenomenology was appropriate. The focus was on how the experiences were described by the students. Essential themes emerged, and the researcher analyzed the subjective experiences of the participants, acknowledging that there may be numerous interpretations (based on one’s history, background, culture, etc.) and illustrated this through participants’ lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).
Utilizing a focus group and a more thorough interview process, I aspired to explore student perceptions in order to provide rich, thick descriptions to illustrate the underpinning views of the participants who share the common experience of becoming motivated to take personal accountability to regularly attend alternative school and continued once they returned to a mainstream high school. Participants were students 18 years or older who have attended an alternative school in Georgia. The site selected was a mainstream, Title I high school located in central Georgia. Unlike the alternative school where the students recently attended, strict discipline and attendance contracts were not institutionalized.

The aim was to determine what an experience means for the persons who had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings were derived, in other words the essence or structures of the experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The literature review highlighted the need to conduct further research to consider changing the way at-risk students view personal accountability (Usher & Kober, 2010a) and the need for additional studies to further understand underlying motivation (Turner, 2012).

**Delimitations and Limitations**

I implemented purposive decisions regarding the participants, the site and phenomenon to define the scope of the study. Participants were students who have attended an alternative school, who also returned to their home campus and are due to graduate or have graduated. They were at least 18 years of age, old enough to graduate and nearing the age limit of high school students in Georgia. In addition, alternative students were often considered “at risk” (Foley & Pang, 2006). According to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), an at risk student is defined as:
A school-aged individual who is at-risk of academic failure, has a drug or alcohol
problem, is pregnant or is a parent, has previously come into contact with the juvenile
justice system, is at least 1 year behind the expected grade level for the age of the
individual, is a migrant or an immigrant, has limited English proficiency, is a gang
member, has previously dropped out of school, or has a high absenteeism rate at school.
(NCLB, 2006, p. 28)

A phenomenological design was selected based on the shared experiences of participants in
changing their personal accountability to attend school and persist toward graduation after
attending an alternative school. These researcher’s decisions allowed analysis of motivation
transformation through the lived experiences of participants.

Certain limitations of the study were noted. I was forthcoming about my background and
worldview; however, the reader must consider this in a researcher’s data analysis and
conclusions. Also, the information gathered was highly dependent on the descriptions provided
by the participants. Participants reflected on why they were motivated to modify school
attendance and academic performance. Participants’ values, ability to articulate experiences and
home life vary greatly; however, all experiences were unique and share equal importance.
Because all students were referred to an alternative school, the sampling may have extreme
points of view when compared to the other students in the county. In addition, having eight
participants and collecting data from one alternative school in one district were limiting factors
in unravelling the true essence of the phenomenon.

**Definitions**

1. *Alternative school:* An educational setting designed to accommodate adolescents
   experiencing behavioral and academic problems in the mainstream educational setting, who
would generally by considered at-risk for dropping out or expulsion. This includes schools that are providing students with a last chance before expulsion, and those that are attempting to remediate academic or behavioral problems (Petrosino & Claire, 2014, p. 3).

2. *Amotivation:* The lack of intent to act. Individuals feel incompetent and believe their behaviors are controlled by external forces (Vallerand and Ratelle, 2004).

3. *At-risk student:* A school-aged individual who is at-risk of academic failure, has a drug or alcohol problem, is pregnant or is a parent, has previously come into contact with the juvenile justice system, is at least 1 year behind the expected grade level for the age of the individual, is a migrant or an immigrant, has limited English proficiency, is a gang member, has previously dropped out of school, or has a high absenteeism rate at school (NCLB, 2006). In addition, for this study, “at-risk” will be used to describe a student who has experienced failure in his or her traditional school, who also spent time in an alternative school setting (Brussow, 2007).

4. *Extrinsic motivation:* Behavior that is driven by rewards such as money, grades, and praise for showing a desired behavior. And behavior that is driven by the threat of punishment if following misbehavior. This type of motivation arises from outside the individual (Deci & Ryan, 2008)

5. *Hierarchy of needs theory:* Created by Abraham Maslow to explain why people are motivated to achieve certain needs. The model consists of five stages divided into deficiency needs and growth needs. Deficiency needs motivate people when they are unmet. Deficiencies needs, in order, are physiological, safety, social and esteem needs. Growth needs are self-actualization. People move up the pyramid when needs are met; however, progress is disrupted or slowed if lower level needs are not met (Maslow, 1943)
6. **Intrinsic motivation**: Behavior that comes from the satisfaction or pleasure of doing a task. This motivation comes from inside the individual and not from the rewards one may receive in completing the task (Deci & Ryan, 2008)

7. **Self-determination theory**: A theory created by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, where motivation as either autonomous or controlled. People are self-motivated to achieve personal satisfaction through achieving success (Deci & Ryan 2008).

8. **Type I alternative schools**: This is associated with magnet schools where students choose to participate in a specialized curriculum specifically focused on an area of study such as science, math, performing arts, etc. Students are drawn from across school zones to attend a school focused on their individual interests. Since the selection of students is determined by a screening process specifically concentrated on matching the student to their applicable area of study, academic standards for magnet schools are often quite high (Raywind, 1994).

9. **Type II alternative schools**: Geared toward students with behavioral problems and poor student attendance and is often considered a “crossroads” or “last chance” opportunity for the students to graduate. Students are most often selected by school administrators to attend based on teacher referrals and a thorough review of the students’ records. Behavior modification as well as academic advancement to the next grade level are emphasized (Raywind, 1994).

10. **Type III alternative school**: Geared toward remedial intervention or rehabilitation based on academic, social or emotional needs. These schools are predominantly non-punitive, compassionate and positive. Most students are considered “at-risk” and the curriculum and academics is centered on problem-solving (Caroleo, 2014).
Summary

Motivation to take personal accountability to attend school is unique across cultures with American students being no exception. One program that has shown success is an alternative school where attendance, grades and behavior can be positively modified (Petrosino & Claire, 2014). A student who internalizes personal accountability to align to the rules of the academic institution may evolve from external motivation to attend school to intrinsic motivation to achieve academically. Once the students leave alternative school, do they internalize motivation to attend mainstream school and achieve academically?

This study was a qualitative, phenomenological study to understand how previous alternative school students perceived their self-determination and/or intrinsic motivation to persist toward graduation from high school. The researcher aspired to find rich, thick descriptions that illustrate the underpinning views of the participants. However, it must be acknowledged that this was a value-laden study using at-risk students. In addition, the researcher was a fiscal conservative who understood the importance of education, but also realized that it must be cost effective to be sustainable. Axiological assumptions were therefore joined with a pragmatic paradigm. Data were analyzed in terms of successes and practicality, looking for themes that may be applied over a wider spectrum.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The literature review serves to examine existing information framing how previous alternative how high school students explain and describe the experiences they had while attending an alternative school and factors associated with alternative school culture that motivated them to stay in high school. This is done by first examining Schein’s theory of organizational culture (1992) and the historical and conceptual theories situating associated research within a useable context. Through the theories of hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943; Huitt, 2007) and the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) motivation are further discussed and defined. Most current literature on student motivation focuses on tangible rewards, parental skill development and teacher accommodations (Usher & Kober, 2012b). In addition, research on alternative schools appears to overlook the structured environment that is often missing in these students’ home school setting (Brussow, 2007). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the factors and experiences alternative school students attribute to their desire to continue in high school and persist toward graduation.

To better explore all aspects of this research, the Liberty University Online Library was the predominant source for professional journals. Specific search words included: motivation, alternative school, extrinsic, intrinsic, self-determination theory, hierarchy of needs, therapism, phenomenology, attendance, academic achievement and truancy. The literature review is organized by first outlining a conceptual framework from which to begin the study. This framework highlights the need for understanding organizational culture and the motivational theories that lay the foundation for the research. From there, alternative education history, culture and research is examined. Finally, returning to the macro-level, strategies and programs
to improve the performance of at-risk students as well as factors that influence student persistence in school is discussed.

**Theoretical Framework**

Schein’s theory of organizational culture (1992) will form part of the conceptual framework of this study. Schein noted that one must understand what culture is in order to understand the way an organization functions. Each organization, or school, has its own unique way of functioning. Schein posited that there are 10 aspects of culture that must be developed, recognized and understood.

1. Observable behaviors in terms of the spoken language, customs and traditions of the school.
2. Group norms, which would be the implicit values espoused and taught within and through the school staff.
3. Espoused values that are reflected in the published documents at the school such as the strategic plan, mission and value statements.
4. Formal philosophies (above)
5. Rules of the game (what students have to know and be able to do to function in the alternative school setting)
6. Climate (relationships, ways people treat one another)
7. Embedded skills
8. Habits of thinking and acting
9. Shared meanings
10. Metaphors and symbols
At-risk students’ motivation is examined in congruence with hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 1943; Huit, 2007) and the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Abraham Maslow, as an American psychologist, believed that a man is not motivated by rewards or desires, but to achieve certain needs (Maslow, 1943). Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs puts forth the concept that a hierarchy exists that an individual must progress through to reach higher levels. Thus, Maslow (1943) argued that there are both deficiency needs and growth needs.

At once other (and higher) needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hunger, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied again new (and still ‘higher’) needs emerge and so on. This is what we mean by saying that the basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency. (Maslow, 1943, p. 374)

If an individual is deficient in a lower level, he cannot advance to a higher level. Accordingly, the individual cannot act on his growth needs until the deficiency needs are met. This is foundational for how the United States’ education system expects children to perform. Without basic needs being met, students are often excused from their poor academic performance, attendance, and even behavior. Often lower-income students perform lower academically than their affluent counterparts. This would illustrate that a student’s basic needs must be met before he can be fully capable to succeed in a school experience. In addition, lower-income parents are consumed with meeting basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. This limits the amount of time they spend for themselves or with their children.

Necessities such as food, heat, shelter, clothing and safety (both physically and psychologically) must be present if he is to learn in school. An unsafe setting would be a barrier to learning (Huit, 2007). An important aspect of adolescent psychological safety also includes
having an undisrupted routine to one’s life. Being treated fairly, justly and consistently by parents and teachers may relieve anxiety and feelings of anxiousness.

Young children seem to thrive better under a system, which has at least a skeletal outline on rigidity. In which there is a schedule of a kind, some sort of routine, something that can be counted upon, not only for the present but also into the future. (Maslow, 1943, p. 375). In sum, Maslow pointed out that most students prefer an orderly, safe, and predictable environment.

Expanding on the philosophy and highlighting perceived shortfalls of Maslow, therapism refers to treating people as fragile victims regardless of what obstacles they may face (Sommers & Satel, 2006). Therapism goes directly against the concept of self-reliance that is a major part of the Judeo Christian belief on which this country was founded.

Therapism has its underpinnings with the research of Maslow (high self-regard) and Rogers (nonjudgmentalism) (Sommers & Satel, 2006). Where Maslow was predominantly a theorist, Carl Rogers would be categorized as a therapist. His foundational belief was that the therapist needs to adapt a non-judgmental environment in which the client works through his troubles with the therapist. According to Gibson (2005), the therapist accepts the client for who he is and forms an open bond with them. The therapist is careful not to pass judgment, continually shows compassion towards the client and even shares his own similar personal experiences. The client reciprocates the therapist’s efforts and forms a bond of trust and open communication. The therapist and the client work out a solution to the client’s underlying anxieties (Gibson, 2005).

Sommers and Satel (2006) argued that these concepts put forth by Maslow and Rogers have taken a foothold in America’s schools. According to the philosophy of human potential, self-knowledge and personal salvation were to be attainable not, as the Greeks had taught,
through intellectual and moral discipline; nor as the Judeo-Christian religions had taught, through grace, devotion and the performance of worthy deeds; but rather through a regimen of self-preoccupation, self-expression, and psychic release. (Sommers & Satel, 2006, p. 56).

Using unproven concepts of Maslow, “overprotected children are denied essential life lessons” (as cited in Sommers & Satel, 2006, p. 25). Sommers and Satel (2006) argued that teachers may be focused on problematic, non-existent obstacles that act as distractions to the teachers’ actual mission of preparing their students to be contributing adults to society. Focusing only on high self-regard and encouraging students to achieve self-actualization actually inhibits personal growth. Maslow highlighted a hierarchy of needs and although self-actualization is the culmination of Maslow’s journey, it should not be the sole focus in our education system.

Employing Maslow’s concepts into a self-determination theory (SDT), Deci and Ryan (2008) categorized motivation as either autonomous or controlled. Like Maslow, Deci and Ryan believed that people are self-motivated to achieve personal satisfaction through achieving success.

SDT assumes that people are by nature active and self-motivated, curious and interested, vital and eager to succeed because success itself is personally satisfying and rewarding. The theory recognizes, however, that people can also be attended and mechanized, or passive and disaffected. (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p.2)

In SDT, controlled motivation refers to behavior that is driven by external pressures to achieve results while autonomous motivation, often the focus of education, is doing things by choice and through one’s own volition. Autonomous motivation is divided into intrinsic motivation and well-internalized extrinsic motivation (Deci &Ryan, 2008). Deci and Ryan explained that intrinsic motivation, doing a behavior because it is satisfying and interesting, and blossoms in
environments that foster competence, autonomy and relationships. Extrinsic motivation may morph into intrinsic motivation because “people are inclined to internalize and integrate within themselves the regulation of activities that were initially prompted and/or regulated by external factors” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p.5). Thus, when students understand regulations, accept their importance and responsibility for abiding by them and finally integrate them into their own self-identification, extrinsic motivation may become intrinsically motivated. Identification is the second type of internalization and involves people accepting the importance of their behavior. They see value in activities and accept responsibility for adopting behaviors that lend to successful completion of the activity (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Vallerand and Ratelle (2004) put forth a multidimensional perspective on amotivation, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation. Amotivation refers to individuals who feel incompetent and believe their behaviors are controlled by external forces. These individuals often drop out of school because they cannot see how staying in school will benefit their future. They often quit an activity in which they are amotivated to continue. On the opposite end of the spectrum, intrinsic motivation implies doing an activity for the sheer pleasure of doing it. Extrinsic motivation behaviors bridge the two and “are undertaken to attain an end state that is separate from the actual behavior” (Vallerand & Ratelle, 2004, p. 42). External motivation is further divided into external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation and integrated regulation. These different types of extrinsic motivation are illustrated along a continuum by their degree of self-determination. An example of moving along the extrinsic motivation continuum would be doing something for money or avoidance of punishment (external regulation), to doing something out of a feeling of obligation or an avoidance shame (introjected regulation), to doing it because the activity is valuable to the person doing it
Motivation is self-determined along a continuum, but it does not necessarily need to be linear in its progression. As a result, a student may attend school to due to compulsory attendance laws or to avoid suspension (external regulation). Over time, the student may internalize the obligation to attend school since he begins to perceive that is what a student should do. He feels internally motivated to attend school (introjected regulation). The same student may then get up earlier in the morning on school days to prepare for the day’s lessons. He feels it is personally important to do so and is regulated by identification (identified regulation). Finally, the student may start avoiding late night television or playing video games on school nights so he will be at his best when attending school, the next day. This course of action becomes coherent with other self-structures of the student (integrated regulation) (Vallerand & Ratelle, 2004). The student’s attendance has improved, but for different levels of extrinsic motivation to the point of attending school becomes intrinsically motivated.

Deci and Ryan (2008) pointed to studies that showed family and teachers that emphasize student autonomy as fostering intrinsic motivation and leading to greater gains in learning. What Deci and Ryan (and others) did not thoroughly address are the gains that may be obtained through structured extrinsic motivation that may evolve into intrinsic motivation, especially when no structure was present before. One possible outcome of this study is that students will voice factors and situations that facilitated their transition from a focus on external reinforcements to internal motivation to persist in high school and strive toward graduation.
Related Literature

Alternative School Education Background

With such a divergent approach to alternative education where schools were instituted either as a response to those students at risk of dropping out or as an avenue to be innovative in its approach to academics (Quinn et al., 2006), it is not surprising that court cases helped define how alternative education would be presented. In Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka in 1954, it was determined that segregation (in this case, segregation by race) based on separate but equal, violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and is unconstitutional (Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser & Vavreck, 2014). Thus, the court ruled that all children are entitled to learning together in a public education setting. The unforeseen consequence, however, is that “it creates punitive schools, as they are forced to enforce rules and regulations to ensure that all students are treated fairly and equally, without thinking about whether or not all students have or will experience things the same” (Caroleo, 2014, p. 38). To counter this, some alternative schools institutionalized smaller class sizes to foster relationship building among students with their peers as well as teachers. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act supported alternative education founded on the concept that a small percentage of students may learn better if the teaching process were structured differently than mainstream schools (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Kim and Taylor (2008) emphasized the balance of being fair to all, but also meeting specific needs of the students. They conducted a qualitative study of nine students attending Prairie Alternative School, whose staff focused on building trusting relationships with students. However, their research also highlighted the disequilibrium where “one facet represented a state of caring that existed between students, teachers and administrators. Another facet disclosed an
authoritarian and hegemonic bureaucracy which prevented the school from providing an education beneficial to students” (p. 217). In the end, Prairie Alternative School benefitted more the population of the mainstream school with the belief that removing the problem students enabled the mainstream population to better focus in class (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

According to Quinn and Poirier (2006), there are two main philosophies regarding the need for alternative schools. The first is the “broken child” theory that highlights specific traits that characterize students who attend alternative schools. These common traits are “cynical, suffering academic and behavioral adjustment problems in school, possessing antisocial attitudes and behaviors, lacking educational and/or career goals, and having problematic relationships with both family and peers” (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996, p. 295). The broken child theory would dictate that the child needs to reform to be successful and behavior modification would be a primary goal of the alternative school (Quinn & Poirier, 2006).

Contrarily, there are those that support the “broken system” theory first presented by Nicholas Hobbs (1994) where students’ success is dependent on the ability of the system to provide for them. Advocates of Hobbs’ theory would say that educators and adults have the responsibility for working with a child and to also make changes to the school system in order to facilitate learning and independence. If the child does not learn, then the educator and other adults are accountable for the failure (Quinn & Poirier, 2006 p. 1). Though both philosophies form the foundation for various alternative school systems, the 1980s saw a shift more to the “broken child” philosophy that is still prominent today. According to Raywind (1981), the shift was away from trying to form collective decision making involving both the students and the teachers, to more of a remedial or back to basics teaching philosophy geared toward disruptive or failing students.
In the 1990s, alternative education was emphasized as an encouraging practice to decrease the dropout rate. The main strategy was to address the learning styles of students in order to improve motivation to attend school and engage in learning (Rennie Center, 2014). However, over the last 10 years, organizations across America such as the Youth Transitions Funders Group and America’s Promise Alliance have engaged in conversations concerning the benefits of alternative education to prepare all students for college or careers (Rennie Center, 2014).

**Alternative School Culture**

There are various reasons school districts establish alternative schools. However, more reasons focus on building a structured environment that focuses on academics and establishing appropriate behaviors in a rather controlled environment. Brussow (2007) conducted a qualitative study to investigate student perceptions of the characteristics of alternative school culture that motivated them to continue in school and graduate. Data collection included interviews, and results showed that the small school and class size, flexible structure of the school day, and caring attitudes of teachers and staff were the factors most influential in motivating students to continue in school. Brussow recommended further research be conducted on the topic with a larger sample and with other alternative programs to validate or refute these findings. This study will build on those results. Brussow’s study of alternative school culture focuses on three main elements. These include school structure, curriculum, and the attitudes and characteristics of the students at the alternative schools.

**Structures of Alternative Schools**

Though there are various common characteristics associated with alternative schools, there are three generally accepted alternative school types (Raywind, 1994). Type I alternatives
that are usually associated with magnet schools where students choose to participate in a specialized curriculum specifically focused on an area of study such as science, math, or performing arts. Students are drawn from across school zones to attend a school focused on their individual interests. Since the selection of students is determined by a screening process specifically concentrated on matching the student to their applicable area of study, academic standards for magnet schools are often quite high (Raywind, 1994).

Type II alternative schools are geared toward students with behavioral problems and poor student attendance and is often considered a “crossroads” or “last chance” opportunity for the students to graduate. Students are most often selected by school administrators to attend based on teacher referrals and a thorough review of the students’ records. Behavior modification as well as academic advancement to the next grade level are emphasized (Raywind, 1994).

Type III alternative schools are similar to Type II except instead of behavioral issues the attention is on emotional concerns. Due to the emotional issues present, the students often need remedial courses to advance academically as well as caseworkers to help them heal emotionally (Raywind, 1994). In every case, the most successful alternative schools create school climates that foster respect and encourages learning for all students through employing teachers that know how to build teacher-student relationships and motivate students (Rennie Center, 2014). The Rennie Center (2014) also discussed other areas that have shown to be promising that include developing specific pathway completion routes that aligns with the alternative education instead of considering alternative education just as an add-on to other programs. In addition, there should be support links for individual students and their families to use to connect to multiple agencies outside of school.
Another major aspect that alternative schools provide that is critical to success is the atmosphere of safety. Poutiatine and Veeder (2011) conducted a qualitative study surveying 145 and interviewing 12 students attending an alternative school in Spokane Valley. Students clearly connected school safety with the caring attitude of teacher and administrators. Though physical safety was essential, it was the lack of “drama” or psychological threats at the alternative school that had a significant impact on students. Successful alternative schools have the complete support of the administration to eliminate the psychological stress that often leads to disengagement of the at-risk students.

In another study by Carpenter-Aeby and Aeby (2012) client satisfaction was analyzed through exit surveys of 189 student and parents of students attending alternative school during the 2000 academic year. The school was a Type II alternative school and the students acknowledged the climate as one focused on discipline, and realized they should not want to be there (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012). However, the benefits of having smaller class sizes with a lower teacher-student ratio enabled development of teacher to student and teacher to family relationships. Eighty-four percent of the families praised the supportive community-like environment that contributed to their students’ success, while 82.5% praised the well-defined standards and rules (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012). Though this was a mandatory alternative school for attendees during the 2000 academic year only, many parents wanted their child to stay enrolled in the school the following year.

**Alternative School Curriculum**

Often alternative schools offer programs that feature flexible schedules, a variety of strategies to earn course credits, individualized learning, and even customized options to earn a high school diploma (Rennie Center, 2014). Schools, who offer alternative education may
integrate technology into instruction, provide wide-ranging support programs, and even work-based learning in conjunction with academic classes (Rennie Center, 2014). These schools have transcended the traditional factory model associated with schools, to providing innovative services designed to meet the needs of at-risk students.

Watson and Watson (2011) analyzed new instructional approaches that used digital technology to institutionalize learner-centered education in an alternative school in a Midwestern, metropolitan area. The researchers used critical ethnographic methodology, interviewing eight students, five schoolteachers, and two administrators. The research focused on several key alternative school components including interactive content, immediate feedback, remediation, and diagnoses of student needs. Computer-based instruction (CBI), differentiated and personalized instruction replaced the teacher-centric nature of mainstream schools and put the responsibility back on the students for their own learning (Watson & Watson, 2011). The alternative school was originally founded to provide an avenue for students who were interested in flexible learning environment with project-based learning. However, the school soon evolved into a Type II alternative school that only accepted students expelled from their high school. In fact, the students attending the school would be arrested if they trespassed on the mainstream school or library. Though the population changed the teaching environment and curriculum remained nearly the same (Watson & Watson, 2011). The results remained consistent with four main themes emerging. First, a learner-centered instructional approach was important in establishing a school culture that supported the success of disadvantaged students. Interestingly, the second theme highlighted the role of computers and CBI and technology as important in meeting learner needs. Thirdly, CBI did have positive and negative effects on student learning;
and finally, the school district supported the use of CBI and technology (Watson & Watson, 2008).

In a literature review, Caroleo (2014) concluded that though many alternative schools have an increased focus on vocational or basic skill attainment that enables students to obtain a job after graduation versus an academic focus in preparation for college, many students who attended alternative school have increased self-esteem and academic success. The study stressed the importance of the community environment, relationship building, interpersonal skills development and the increased staff ability to respond to individual student needs. The Rennie Center (2014) pointed to several additional features that support implementation of alternative education. These included: clearly defined student goals that encompass emotional, academic and behavioral growth; low teacher to student ratios, a non-deficit philosophy where teachers adjust the instruction to the student’s needs; and training for teachers in critical areas such as communication and behavior management.

**Characteristics of Students Attending Alternative Schools**

Over the years, “at-risk” has become a wide-ranging term used to describe students who experience failure during their tenure in K-12 schools (Beken, Williams, Combs, & Slate, 2009). At-risk students may drop out of high school because they believe teachers and school systems are unable to meet their needs. At-risk students often exhibit low engagement and motivation in school, put forth little effort in school work, may not pay attention in class, exhibit frequent discipline problems, and have attendance problems, as well (Ekstrom et al., 1986).

The Rennie Center (2014) outlined some of the main characteristics of students attending alternative high schools. These included a variety of factors to include high absentee rates, discipline problems, struggles with learning, family problems, stressors outside of the school
environment, social and emotional challenges, and lack of academic progress. The Center also noted that students might be pregnant, parents themselves, more apt to come from a single parent home and more likely to have parents who did not complete high school. Using Massachusetts public mainstream and alternative school’s statistics, the Rennie Center noted that although Black and Hispanic students comprised of only 24% of the state’s public school population, they comprised of 59% of the alternative school attendees. In addition, alternative school demographics showed an increased representation of special education students (29% versus 16% state-wide), limited English proficiency students (13% versus 7% state-wide) and low-income students (71% versus 35% state-wide) (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2013).

Educators teach a much more diverse population and are faced with a different set of challenges. Research conducted by Johnson et al. (2012) comparing the health risk behaviors of Minnesota alternative high school students with those attending traditional high schools, showed significant increases across six categories based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention classifications to include unintentional violence, substance abuse, tobacco use, alcohol use and sexual activity High-risk behaviors. An area that showed a decrease was the lack of physical activity associated with sports team participation, which indicates an increase in health risk behavior. In the study, 2,847 Minnesota alternate high school students and 87,468 traditional high schools were used for cross-sectional analysis comparing prevalence estimates for 28 health-risk behaviors classified into the six classifications listed above listed. Results showed that alternate high school students were significantly more likely to engage in health-risk behaviors than their traditional counterparts. The largest disparities were found to be tobacco use and sexual activity. Cigarette use for alternate school students was 40%, while traditional students was 5%, ($p \leq .0001$, ES: 1.3). Sexual activity was 72% versus 38% ($p \leq .0001$, ES: .73).
MorForum (Johnson et al., 2012). With the sexual activity, so too increases the health risk of sexually
transmitted diseases and pregnancy.

**Additional Research Studies on Alternative Schools**

Numerous research articles provide evidence of specific characteristics of the various
programs supporting alternative schools; however, certain characteristics are most commonly
cited by experts as foundational to successful programs. Quinn and Pourier (2006) conducted
research on the characteristics of effective alternative school programs. The characteristics
include small classes and a more personalized climate where students are included in making
decisions. The schedule is flexible; there are high expectations for students, high levels of parent
involvement, and collaboration among staff and parents (Quinn & Pourier, 2006). Other areas
that the researchers mentioned espouse consideration, and include “community support, targeted
to a specific population, administrative leadership and transition support” (Quinn & Pourier,
2006, p. 45). The benefit of these programs, as noted by Quinn and Pourier, is that students felt
they were more likely to regularly attend the alternative school that implemented these practices.
Students voiced preference for these alternative schools over their home campuses. Common
themes that contributed to this were a sense of belonging in the school environment and a very
positive opinion of student academic achievement (Quinn & Pourier, 2006). Additionally,
results of this study showed that at-risk, or marginal students positively responded to this type of
environment that combined caring relationships with personalized instruction. The programs
were highly structured and students were provided with “clear, demanding, but attainable

Research by Quinn and Pourier (2006) showed that student responses to future program
improvement considerations included even more structure in the curriculum. The data cited
involved two students who expressed their desire for even longer school days or less break-time during the school day:

If I could change one thing about this school, I would have more hours in the school day because I just go home and watch TV. If the school day were longer, I would add more history, because I like it, math and physical education, like [in the] district; as well as activities after school. (Quinn & Pourier, 2006, p.45)

Quinn and Pourier (2006) found that students often did not want to return to their mainstream public school upon completion of attending alternative school for a semester. Many noted that they felt safer while attending the alternative school based on the teacher to student ratio, security at the school and the more structured environment. The structured environment also appeared to contribute to their ability to concentrate, as stated by several students (Quinn & Pourier, 2006).

At-risk students often lack the relationship support found in more successful students’ homes. Camak (2007) conducted a research study using over-18-year-old males that were attending an alternative school in California. Results of the study showed that the students attributed their success to the one-on-one time of the teachers that they often lacked in their mainstream schools. They viewed the teachers as caring, accessible, and showing a real concern toward student goal attainment (Camak, 2007).

Additional research conducted by Turner (2012) using 9th through 12th graders who willingly attended an alternative school, showed similar results. According to the students, the need for compassionate teachers who provided one-on-one time was the major contributing factor towards student success. Turner (2012) admitted, however, that additional research in the field is needed incorporating larger samples and in more settings. Alternative schools may also
turn into dumping grounds for troubled students where administrators lose sight of correcting poor habits and supporting students achieving their academic goals (Petrosino & Claire, 2014).

Wilkins (2007) conducted research on an alternative school in the Northeast. Four students, one female and three males, in Grades 8-11 participated in the study. They were all part of the school avoidance program that addressed school related anxiety and fearfulness. At their previous schools, these students had a high rate of absenteeism. Students participated in interviews for data collection. Interview questions focused on the aspects of the school students did not like, what made them not want to attend school and what they liked about school. Specific themes emerged in the results. First, students valued a climate, where they felt comfortable and safe. This aligns with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs where safety needs must be met before learning can take place. Second, the academic environment was often self-paced, with students held accountable for their individual learning. Third, discipline never included group punishment. Students received punishment based on their own individual actions. Since students conformed to standards, there were few episodes where punishment was needed. The school had an atmosphere of fairness. Lastly, students reported that they valued a relationship with teachers, as the teachers showed concern for the students’ wellbeing.

Teachers were not busy stopping fights in the hallway and had more time to focus on the “good” students’ needs (Wilkins, 2007). When students spoke about the schools they attended previously, “they found these schools to be violent and unsafe, with classrooms too disruptive to work in. In addition, discipline was unfairly enforced, and teachers were consumed with yelling and punishing students” (Wilkins, 2007, p.14). At their new school, students mentioned there was little need for discipline as the students conformed to the expected behavior standards (Wilkins, 2007).
Research has shown that successful alternative schools display increases in both graduation rates as well as high attendance rates. This is coupled with a decrease in at-risk behaviors of the students attending (Petrosino & Claire, 2014). Though alternative schools appear to have positive influence on students, the motivation to change attendance and academic behavior may be due to a variety of factors. These include strict discipline, behavior contracts, more one-on-one interaction with the teachers, identifying with a smaller student body, or merely the threat of expulsion.

**Strategies and Programs to Improve the Performance of At-risk Students**

**Support programs.** Some programs that support at-risk students appear to be effective, but are often difficult to implement due to a myriad of reasons. Community advocacy programs show statistical success, however, it may be expensive to begin such programs. “Building this bridge between community-based organizations and school was proven to be a powerful lesson and provided possibilities when relationships, resources and will are capitalized through partnership” (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009, p. 243). At the high school level, schools need to weigh the pros and cons of these support programs.

**Welfare support programs.** Some countries, such as Mexico, Australia, and Brazil have implemented programs that tie receipt of welfare to traceable performance standards (Parker & McGinnis, 2007; Behrendt & McCausland, 2008; Soares, Osorio, & Ribas et al., 2007). These standards include recipients’ minimum school attendance for their dependents, family vaccinations, and prenatal care. Recipients receive the financial support only if they comply with the government’s guidelines, and are thus held accountable for their dependents’ education. Forty U.S. states have already initiated programs under the Federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 to require school attendance as a condition of
welfare support. Campbell (2005) found that while sanctions alone had limited results; combining recipient accountability through sanctions with supportive services and financial incentives had measurable positive effects.

**Cash support programs.** Numerous countries, including Australia, Mexico, and Brazil have implemented similar federal programs using conditional cash transfers (CCTs). Preliminary results showed short-term successes in attendance, academic achievement and the overall improved health of the children. Government cash transfers work in other countries but appear not to in the U.S. where welfare is already being received (De sa e Silva, 2010).

In September of 2007, Opportunity NYC-Family Rewards was introduced to give CCTs to students to provide incentives for academic achievement. Not only was emphasis on attendance, but also on graduating and passing the state’s standardized tests. Students were given $25 to $50 a month for earning a 95% attendance rate, $600 to graduate on time, and $300 - $600 if they passed the standardized tests. (Fawley & Juvenal, 2010) The NYC program achieved desired results in terms of attendance; however, it did not meet expectations when analyzing graduation rates and test scores. Most students were not academically prepared to succeed despite the cash incentives to do so.

Additional analysis showed that CCT recipients that entered ninth grade academically prepared (based on eighth grade test scores) had 8.9% more students earning graduate credits than those academically prepared but not in the program (Fawley & Juvenal, 2010). This same group had 7.5% more passing standardized tests over their academically prepared peers. However, those that were not academically prepared, though they attempted more than their peers, failed at a higher rate (Fawley & Juvenal, 2010). This shows that the CCTs were an incentive to those that were both academically prepared and unprepared, but without the
necessary educational foundation and previous classroom instruction students were unsuccessful. One of the major disconnects in the NYC plan was tying CCTs with education policies and long-term execution. The policy makers need to “think of ways of coordinating education policies and CCTs so as to take advantages of their synergies” (De sa Silva, 2010, p. 187). CCTs are successful in getting students to attend school; however, the motivation to succeed can be met with roadblocks of recipients being foundationally unprepared and not intrinsically focused to learn. There needs to be a profound shift in how education is perceived by at-risk families and by the governments that provide public education.

**Reward systems.** Educational achievement is usually associated with delayed rewards that a student may not grasp and therefore, may have limited value. Therefore, some schools offer rewards as a form of extrinsic reinforcement to motivate students to perform. However, these rewards may foster an extrinsically motivated compliance mentality among students. For example, Usher and Kober (2012b) found paying students to increase test scores resulted in no improvement in test scores; however, paying students to read books did (Usher & Kober, 2012b).

Studies have shown that tangible rewards may inhibit intrinsic motivation. Therefore, some schools have used negative reinforcements to motivate students to perform. These included focusing on use of punishment (Deci & Cascio, 1972), use of imposed goals (Mossholder, 1980) and evaluations (Harackiewicz, Manderlink & Sansone, 1984). However, results of these studies showed these strategies did not consistently motivate students.

Deci and Cascio (1972) utilized a threat environment by implementing a noxious buzzer response to subjects that were unable to solve a puzzle. The subjects that experienced the threat of punishment with the buzzer showed less intrinsic motivation than the control group. Participants who were initially intrinsically motivated to perform a task began to receive threats
of punishment for not performing the task adequately became dependent on the external reinforcement. In other words, they began to perform in order to avoid being punished by the sound of the buzzer. Therefore, their initial desire to perform the task purely for enjoyment dramatically decreased. Therefore, the threat of punishment (in a physical nature, or through other measures such as receiving low grades, may be an extrinsic motivator or de-motivator.

Mussholder (1980) conducted a laboratory experiment with 80 college males as subjects. Task interests were defined in a relative sense from interesting to boring. His conclusions showed that “assigning specific difficult goals on an interesting task may reduce subsequent intrinsic motivation with respect to the task” (Mussholder, 1980, p. 208). However, Mussholder also found that giving precise and challenging goals on boring tasks could heighten intrinsic motivation to perform. Thus, when learning is perceived as interesting, imposed goals restrict intrinsic motivation; but when learning is perceived as having little value or is boring, specific goals may improve intrinsic motivation. In a classroom environment, the students need to perceive the material as interesting so they may internalize learning goals. If the educational material is perceived as boring, then a structured environment with defined goals may be more beneficial.

Successful motivation programs reward specific, controllable actions of students, contain detailed guidelines, and address the internal and external dimensions of motivation. If poorly implemented, programs can actually be detrimental and hamper intrinsic motivation (Usher & Kober, 2012b). Reward systems must focus on behavior the student can control, increase mastering skills versus performance to a defined level, have attainable but challenging tasks, avoid conditioning students to rewards, and provide rewards promptly (Usher & Kober, 2012a).
Employing interventions using token economies, tangible rewards, behavioral contracting, group guidance and parental notification all appeared to be effective (Sutphen, Ford & Flaherty, 2010).

**Accountability.** Sirotnik (2004) discussed the four main systems in public education that come under the rubric of accountability. The first is at the level of the individual student and the student’s promotion to higher grades, passing standardized testing and attainment of a high school diploma. The second is at the school district level and is labeled institutional, which is controlled primarily by laws regulating school funding. The next is the professional level and deals with the certification of schoolteachers and administrators. Finally, at the political level, accountability is controlled by elections of the school board, superintendents, and other politicians. The two levels that are discussed here are the student and the institutional levels.

Though rewards programs have shown mixed results with some success, researchers should consider changing the way at-risk students view accountability (Usher & Kober, 2012a). Current national efforts to correct imbalances through reforming schools, raising academic standards, and holding teachers accountable overlooks student intrinsic motivation in the learning process (Usher & Kober, 2012a).

If students aren’t motivated it is difficult, if not impossible, to improve their academic achievement, no matter how good the teacher, curriculum or school is. Moreover, unmotivated students can disengage other students from academics, which can affect the environment of an entire classroom. (Usher & Kober, 2012b, p. 2)

In an examination of 16 studies on truancy, the interventions that appeared to have the most promise were those that combined positive and negative reinforcement. Students are rewarded for good attendance (such as exemption from taking final exams), but are held accountable if they become truant (such as penalizing public assistance to families whose high school children
continually show poor attendance) (Usher & Kober, 2012b). Holding the students accountable for their own success, but giving them the tools to succeed through discipline and structure shows promising results.

In a study using qualitative research design and multilevel computer analysis of parent problems (depression, relationship frustration, low confidence and poor parenting practices), family functioning problems (low income and lack of family cohesion) and the experience and education of implementers in an early risers conduct problems program; results showed that “family advocates who are highly agreeable may be less inclined to exert a reasonable amount of assertiveness and persistence that is often required to engage parents, especially in a preventive context where parents may not be actively seeking help” (Bloomquist et al., 2009, p. 716). In other words, programs where family advocates are too agreeable and do not hold students and families accountable often fall short. In addition, results showed that when these family advocates were able to form relationships and were accessible to both students and guardians, at-risk students and their families actually participated more than their counterparts (Bloomquist et al., 2009). The most successful family advocates were accessible, but also instilled structure and accountability at the same time.

In a research study, 20 ninth grade students enrolled in a prevention program in a midwestern high school where all participants had poor attendance, “a focus on academic achievement outcomes may neglect learning processes (e.g., academic motivation, student engagement) and contexts (e.g., safety, sense of belongingness, social support)” (Scheel, Madabhushi, & Backhaus 2009, p. 1149). The key is getting students involved. When involvement increases, so does motivation. There are diverse views of why students attend high school. For some, it is a pathway to college, the military or personal growth. For others, it is
just a waste of time and it did not prepare them for life outside of high school. Without meaning, students are disengaged.

Rodriquez and Conchas (2009) developed a study of six habitually truant juveniles of the Boston Urban Youth Foundation, an organization seeking to prepare socially and academically disadvantaged Black and Latino yours for college and a successful future used interviews, observations and document analysis over a 2-year period. Analysis and open coding was then done using a constructivist theory approach looking at the larger community. Using constructivist theory and inductive analysis running code lists were developed. From this began categorizing of four emergent themes: The first theme is the importance of space that allows peer relations. This refers to a place where students feel comfortable to interact with peers in a safe, accessible location. The next theme is incentive structures within programs. This often meant meals that would entice student attendance. Additional incentives included field trips and college tours. Students had to first earn the right to attend these through improved attendance and academic achievement. The third theme was the need for social networks. This includes family, school and community partnerships that nurtured social networking. Finally, the last theme is youth advocacy as a tool for system accountability. Because many at-risk students are often marginalized and appear to not have a voice in any school processes, the program gave the students a system in which they could advocate student concerns. In addition, caseworkers were given to each student. Having a caring, concerned adult that encouraged school attendance and followed up on student performance motivated students to attend class more (Rodriquez & Conchas, 2009).

Though the sample only focused on six individuals that represented a cross section of the most common truant students, their transformation was quite dramatic.
In their own words, program participants began to discuss how they changed the way they behaved in school and transformed their disposition toward school, their family, and community. The process of change places students as agents in transforming their lives by becoming healthy and productive members of their community. (Rodriquez & Conchas, 2009, p. 240)

At the institutional level, before the 1960s, institutional efforts in accountability focused on effective distribution of funding to provide the preeminent education for all American students. Since then, institutional accountability has shifted to tying school funding to student achievement. Schools are held responsible for how well their students perform. “Another way of looking at this historical shift, however, is that students are being made an instrument of school accountability” (Sirotnik, 2004, pg. 36). If students fail, schools are held accountable and will be forced to be more productive and successful in academic achievement.

Factors that Influence Student Persistence in School

Attendance. Research supported the idea that at-risk students have a great deal to gain from consistent attendance in school (Ready, 2010). Numerous studies have shown that regular attendance is positively correlated to higher grade point averages and academic achievement (Crede, Koch, & Kiezczynka, 2010; Gottfried, 2010; Schmulian & Coetzee, 2011, Stanca, 2006). At the same time, regular attendance has been shown to reduce high-risk behaviors such as drug use, violence, dietary habits, alcohol, smoking, sexual behaviors, and unintentional injuries. These health risk habits contribute to a multitude of additional reasons to miss school. “Students who are absent from school for any reason, whether or without permission, are more likely to engage in health risk behaviors than students who have no absences” (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008, p.19). Just getting students to attend school regularly may pay dividends not only in
academic achievement, but also in the prevention of unhealthy habits, regardless of the motivation behind why they are attending school. Furthermore, at-risk students are those who tend to display these high-risk behaviors, fail to attend school on a regular basis and therefore, also fail to demonstrate acceptable academic achievement.

Crede et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of research on the relationship between attendance and grades. Results showed that attendance had a significant relationship with both grade point average and academic achievement. Crede further noted that many of these studies focused on college students, but noted that when students consistently attended class, their retention of material increased and students were more apt to complete assignments on time. The most significant data showed that those who need to attend school the most are also the ones that have the greatest absenteeism rates (Crede et al., 2010).

Kay (2010) conducted a study to determine if a relationship existed between student scores on the social studies section of the Georgia High School Graduation Test and various types of absences (cumulative, excused, and unexcused absences). Data were accumulated from Gwinnett County schools in Georgia for 9th-12th grade social studies students. Results showed that absenteeism affected academic achievement. In addition, the types of absenteeism must be taken into consideration such as illness, work, skipping school and legal issues.

Preventing students from developing problematic attendance, positively impacting student grades, raising graduation rates, and reducing delinquency-related crimes these improvements can create a positive social change for students, parents, and particularly school personnel who are held responsible for academic achievement. (Kay, 2010, p. 2) Kay (2010) concluded that using a multi-systemic intervention model based on six pillars: the school, parents, the neighborhood, peers, government agencies, and teachers, the likelihood of
problematic attendance is reduced. This model gives leaders not only the data they needed to make an informed decision but also a list of effective policy changes that have already been proven successful in other school districts.

In conclusion, regular attendance in school is a clear factor that impacts student learning and academic achievement. Attendance is critical to the development of essential learning skills for students in early grades and creates gaps in learning if attendance is not maintained through the school years. Cumulatively, these factors can contribute to a student becoming “at-risk” for learning, high-risk behaviors, and potentially dropping out of school.

**Socioeconomic status.** Students from low socioeconomic homes students are more dependent on their time in school than their middle class counterparts. Therefore, attendance for lower-income students is even more important. Ready (2010) noted that lower socioeconomic students who demonstrated consistently high attendance rates gained more literacy skills than their middle class peers, while in school (Ready, 2010). Low-income students with high attendance gain roughly 8% in literary skills per month during kindergarten and 7% during first grade. School exposure has significantly stronger effects on lower income students, of which some or many are considered to be at-risk. “Thus, if public schools are charged with narrowing socioeconomic disparities in academic outcomes, one potential solution is to increase attendance rates among lower socioeconomic class children” (Ready, 2010, p. 282). This should apply as well for those students identified as at-risk, many of whom are from low socioeconomic homes.

**Cultural differences.** As noted earlier, minority students are often overrepresented in alternative schools. Defining oneself with a distinct cultural identity may inhibit academic motivation (Fryer and Torelli, 2010). For example, high achieving Black students are sometimes accused of their peers as “acting White,” when they demonstrated the desire to be fully engaged
at school. On the other hand, discrimination may damage the confidence of minority students, leading to a lack of motivation. The minority student may perceive that behaviors such as studying and completing homework are not meant for students like them (Oyserman & Destin, 2010).

Students attending alternative schools are more likely to come from single parent homes and have parents who did not graduate from high schools. Research of 313 first generation students (FGS), neither parent before them had graduated from college) attending high school or college, showed that intrinsically motivated students appear to have higher GPAs and are more likely to stay in school (college) (Propsero, Russell & Vohra-Gupta, 2012). Of the participants, 78% of the FGS were Hispanic. Ethnic comparisons of means showed that “significant differences in intrinsic motivation, t(313) = 2.918, p < .01m with Hispanic students reporting higher intrinsic motivation (M = 5.20, SD = 1.16) than non-Hispanic students (M = 4.80, SD = 1.23). Significant differences were not found in the extrinsic or amotivation dimensions” (Prospero et al., 2012, p.110). Several reasons for the greater intrinsic motivation for these students is the perception of the importance of education by this culture, the amount of time this group had assimilated to United States culture, or the value placed on family advancement. Therefore, identifying how culture impacts the motivation of students in alternative settings may improve persistence to graduation as well as internal motivation. Prospero et al. (2012) noted:

First-generation students have additional stressors that may inhibit motivation. Educators working with FGS should be aware that students who are extrinsically motivated or amotivated are not only less likely to achieve their academic goals but are also facing additional social and cultural stressors that may affect their academic motivation. (p.113)
Cultural differences may contribute significantly on how students are motivated. Cultures that emphasize the importance of education appear to contribute to higher intrinsic motivation and thus improve attendance and academic achievement of students.

**Summary**

Student motivation is grounded in the contextual theories of Maslow and Deci and Ryan. Research shows that attendance and academic achievement are positively correlated. Intrinsic motivation to attend school can evolve from extrinsic motivation and the literature review shows there is a gap in understanding student intrinsic motivation and personal accountability. Attempts to increase attendance and motivation have proven to be culturally influenced where a program in one community may be highly successful, but fail in another. Using positive and negative reinforcement appears to be most successful. Rewards need to be focused and address what the student can control. Students must be held accountable and negative reinforcement should be applied when students stray from school and educational policies and goals. Research needs to focus on expanding the settings and participants to better illuminate the essence of the alternative school attendance phenomenon and how this may continue once returning to mainstream high schools.

Though alternative schools may differ on the types of students that attend and what foundational philosophy it is built upon, certain characteristics are prevalent in most successful alternative school systems (Quinn & Poirier, 2006). However, where school environment is a common theme, what is not thoroughly examined are the structured curriculum, safety and student accountability associated with Type II alternative schools. Research supported that not attaining a high school diploma has severe negative impacts to future earnings (Sirotnik, 2004).
However, this does not appear to be a significant motivator for many at risk and lower-income students to perform. The study focused on this gap in the research.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate how high school students described their experiences attending a Type II alternative school (geared toward students with behavioral problems and poor student attendance) in Central Georgia and the factors that motivated them to persist to graduation. Additionally, this study sought to explore factors, including those associated with alternative school culture that may have motivated students to persist toward graduation. For the purposes of this study, school culture was described in three ways: the organizational structure of the school, the attitudes of school staff and relationships with students, and the distinctive attributes of curriculum and instruction. The term “at-risk” was used to describe a student who has experienced failure in his or her traditional school, who also spent time in an alternative school setting (Brussow, 2007).

Schein’s (1992) theory of organizational culture, Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs and Deci and Ryan’s (2008) self-determination theory formed the conceptual framework of this study. Each school has a unique way of functioning, with aspects of culture that must be developed, recognized and understood. Maslow (1943) believed that a man is not motivated by rewards or desires, but to achieve certain needs. According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008), individuals must feel competent and in control of their situation in order to meet with success. Therefore, studying the needs and perspectives of students who attended an alternative school and continued in their educational journey connects with self-determination theory and school culture will provide additional research to add to this growing body of knowledge. This chapter presents the procedures, research design, and analysis for this
phenomenological study in order to describe at-risk students’ personal accountability to regularly attend high school after attending an alternative high school in central Georgia.

**Design**

This research was a qualitative study using a phenomenological research design. Qualitative researchers try to build thick, rich descriptions of the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the shared phenomenon is needs and perspectives of students who attended alternative school. The alternative high school where students previously attended is best defined as a Type II, or “crossroads” school where students are enrolled primarily due to poor attendance or behavioral problems (Raywind, 1994). Participants included students who previously attended an alternative school that have since returned to their traditional school campus. Transcendental phenomenology is descriptive, whereas hermeneutical phenomenology is interpretive in nature. Where hermeneutic phenomenology provides in depth comprehension of lived experiences, one cannot be separated from the culture and history surrounding the phenomenon and therefore bracketing is often impracticable (Laverty, 2003). In contrast, transcendental phenomenology focuses on the meaning of the experience from the vantage point of the participants and the researcher sets aside his or her own views of the phenomenon under study. Both methodologies seek to understand the human experience (Moustakas, 1994). However the focus of this transcendental phenomenological study was on how the experiences were viewed by the students to describe the phenomenon, bracketing the researcher’s biases, so as to pursue issues important to the participants versus leading the participants on issues deemed important to the researcher. Essential themes emerged, and the researcher analyzed the subjective experiences of the participants, acknowledging that there may
be numerous interpretations (based on one’s history, background, culture, etc.) and illustrated this through participants’ lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

**Research Questions**

**RQ1:** How do future high school graduates describe their experiences attending an alternative school in Central Georgia that motivated them to persist toward graduation?

Subsequent research questions help refine the central question and helped “to establish the components of the ‘essence’ of the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 141). The subsequent questions are:

**RQ2.** How do high school students describe the benefits of their experience attending an alternative school?

**RQ3:** How do high school students describe the challenges associated with their experience in attending an alternative school?

**RQ4:** What specific learnings, knowledge, or values did high school students acquire in their experience attending an alternative school contributed to their being able to graduate?

**RQ5:** What attributes associated with alternative school climate (structure of school day, bell schedule, processes, procedures, curriculum, environment, expectations, actions of teachers and staff) do participants identify as having influenced their desire to attend school and engage in classes?

**Participants**

A purposive, criterion sampling strategy was used because the participants included a group of individuals who have shared the same experience (Creswell, 2013). Specific criteria for participation include students being at least 18 years of age and having previously attended the Central Georgia Alternative High School (pseudonym). The plan was to interact with a
minimum of eight students who had attended the alternative school and have since returned to their home campus and were on the path to successfully graduate. To maximize variation once the specific criteria are met, the researcher recruited both female and male students, “not to generalize the information, but to elucidate the particular” (Creswell, 2013, p. 157). Eight participants allowed maximum variation and diverse perspectives of the shared experience; however, the number is not too large to limit interaction. Ethnicity was a consideration in selecting the sample, again maximizing the variation of the participants. A pseudonym was given to each individual.

Students currently attending the mainstream high school were selected by the administration based on the criteria presented by the researcher, who then asked them to attend an initial focus group. First, I asked the principal of the mainstream high school to provide names of students who had attended the alternative school and had since returned to the home campus. Once these names were obtained, an invitation to each student was made through their homeroom to attend a focus group session after school to determine if they were willing to participate in the study. Before any questions were asked during the focus group, participants’ criteria were verified through the signed consent form. There was one focus group with attendance based on student availability and limiting the number of participants to allow fully engaged discussion.

Setting

The mainstream high school where data collection occurred (and the alternative school) are located in central Georgia; they were selected based on the diverse student population and its large number of at-risk students. For the purposes of this study, Middle Georgia High School (mainstream school) and Central Georgia Alternative School (alternative school) were used as
the pseudonyms when identifying the schools; however, all students were attending Middle Georgia High School at the time of the study. The alternative school has an extremely structured schedule and format, with an 8:1 student to teacher ratio. Its specific demographics vary based on student referrals from the six high schools that it supports. Approximately two hundred students who had demonstrated behavioral and/or academic underperformance are enrolled at any one time. Strict standards are enforced, and students are not allowed to attend any county extracurricular activities while enrolled and could face criminal trespassing charges if they do. After completion of at least one semester, students are evaluated for consideration to re-enter mainstream high schools, to include Middle Georgia High School.

Demographics for Middle Georgia High School include classification as a Title I school where more than 50% of the enrolled students participate in subsidized meal programs. Middle Georgia High School has an equal amount of Black and White students, comprising of 43%, respectively. Other minorities are comprised mostly of Hispanic and Asian students. The school system is diverse where 64.7% of the population is White, 29.4% Black, 6.3% Hispanic and 2.7% are Asian (Ballotpedia, 2012).

**Procedures**

Upon successful defense of the proposal, I submitted my proposal to the Liberty University Internal Review Board (IRB). Approval from the Liberty IRB was given prior to execution of the research plan. Once the IRB approved the plan, written approval from the Office of Professional Learning within the subject school’s school system was received. The process required submission of the approved IRB proposal; class syllabus requiring research; student consent forms; interview questions; interview plan/schedule; written guarantee of school, staff, student and system anonymity; letter of approval from researcher’s principal and written
agreement that all research findings will be available to the Office of Professional Learning upon request. The IRB letter of approval is located in Appendix A.

All subjects and applicable administrators signed the applicable consent forms. Students were all over the age of 18 and signed the informed consent form (Appendix B). The informed consent form lays out the rights of the respondents informing them that they may drop out of the study at any time and may refuse to answer any questions. It stressed that the research is confidential, but also explained how the data will be used and who will have access to it. In addition to the informed consent forms, letters from the mainstream principal and the local board of education and the alternative high school principal were obtained (Appendix C).

High school participants were first selected by the administration based on the criteria presented by the researcher then asked to attend an initial focus group. There was one focus group with attendance based on student availability and limiting the number of participants to allow fully engaged discussions. The focus group was used to provide background information to the participants and give insight to the researcher prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews. Interviews were selected over other instruments due to the ability of the researcher to elicit more complete responses to gain a more thorough understanding of the participants’ perceptions. In addition, interviews allowed the additional time to clarify or expand on the questions to eliminate any question misinterpretation by the interviewee. The focus group and the interviews were conducted in a neutral setting with limited interruptions to elicit honest, unbiased and focused responses (Harrell & Bradely, 2009). To accomplish this, the school’s media center conference room were selected for the focus group while one of the school’s side offices was used for the interviews. The media center and side office are most often used by
students (versus teachers) and are quiet, private locations. Reserving the conference room was accomplished through the media specialist by the researcher.

The focus group and interviews were audio-recorded using two digital recording devices and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist using the audio recordings after the interviews. All audio data and observations collected will be stored in a locked file cabinet. Interviewees were given pseudonyms and data were filed under their pseudonyms. A cross-reference list with names and pseudonyms, as well as the audio recordings, will be kept in a locked safe and will be destroyed when the research is complete.

The Researcher’s Role

I am currently a senior aerospace science instructor teaching the Air Force JROTC course at a local high school. I am Caucasian, male, 55 years of age and am retired from the military having completed 24 years of service. I would classify myself as a fiscal conservative with an emphasis on education while limiting significant government deficits. I apply a Christian worldview, defined as a Christian outlook and actions based on ethical tenants established in the Ten Commandments, spreading the word of Christ, scripture, and an understanding of one’s purpose in life. In addition, I embrace the Air Force Core values of integrity first, service before self and excellence in all we do. These values articulate a code that guides my daily activities. These Core Values, though secular in nature, are derived from Christian principles. Translating Core Values back to the Christian World View in guiding everyday actions is done through principle-centered leadership and leadership by example.

As a JROTC instructor, I teach the Air Force core values to my cadets and personal accountability is part of the curriculum. I currently have a child attending one of the six high schools that refers students to Central Georgia Alternative School. As such, I am a member of
the local school’s community with a vested interest in the school’s success. In addition, there is a possibility that a participant may become, or is already, one of my JROTC cadets in the future after leaving the alternative school.

Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, my interpretations of the lived experiences of the participants was taken into consideration and effort was made to bracket out any biases. Though an extensive literature review was accomplished prior to the research, this was to better understand the current information on the subject and not to further any perceptions or assumptions regarding the subject matter (Burns & Grove, 2003). In addition, bracketing was accomplished by writing down any personal preconceptions, beliefs and opinions of alternative school and its students. By putting these on paper, the researcher was able to better reflect on personal biases and set them aside during the actual research process (Appendix D). Though I teach personal accountability, I must be open to new perspectives. Finally, during data collection, I was also cognizant of being viewed as an outsider by the at-risk participants and need to position myself as a teacher, father, and member of the community to elicit researcher-participant dialogue.

**Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of the focus group, semi-structured interviews, and field notes. Field notes were taken during the interviews recording body language, expressions and any other non-verbal information. Audio recordings were accomplished. First, I asked the principal of the mainstream high school to provide names of students who had attended the alternative school and have since returned to the home campus. Once these names were obtained, invitations to all students were made either through their home room to attend a focus group session after school and to determine if they were willing to participate in the study. Consent forms were part of this
package. In this initial focus group, I validated that the consent forms were completed and shared the purpose of the study. Participants were told they could withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

Focus Group

The use of a focus group prior to conducting interviews provided valuable insight to better and prioritize the interview questioning. This study analyzed both the structure and relationships at the alternative school as well as the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation of the students. This focus group focused on the alternative school culture, while the interview focused on the motivation and needs of students. The focus group consisted of the first six of the eight subjects in the interview process. The objective of the focus group was to provide initial insights to better frame this investigation and allow group discussion for each topic while avoiding embarrassing questions. In addition, it better prepared the researcher to keep an open mind and understand the uniqueness of each individual who experienced the phenomenon when latter conducting the individual interviews. If any discussions became uncomfortable for the participants, they were given an option of writing their responses and keeping their anonymity. Though the answers of the respondents are open ended and subject to personal interpretation, the questions bound the responses into a workable context. The same students complete the focus group and interviews, so informed consent was acquired before any data collection actually occurs. The items on the focus group verbal questionnaire that was used to stimulate conversation was follows:

1. What did a typical day consist of at the alternative school? (classes, bell schedule, before/after school activities, passing period)
2. How was the alternative school similar to or different than the mainstream high school?
3. Can you describe some of the people who helped you in alternative school? (actions, unique attributes, specifically help you?)

4. Can you describe the values in the alternative school? How were they the same or different than your home school? How did these values make you feel?

5. Tell me about traditions or rituals at the alternative school that you remember. How did they make you feel?

6. How would you describe any spoken or unspoken expectations in the alternative school that influenced how you related to other students or teachers?

7. Describe how the teachers, staff or administrators at the alternative school showed they had a sincere interest in your academic success or emotional success.

8. How important do you feel your achievement or success in school is related to your future success?

9. Describe how encouragement or lack of encouragement of alternative school teachers, staff and administrators affected your motivation or how you feel about school.

10. What role did the teachers at the alternative school play in your experience there? How did they motivate you?

11. What are the benefits and challenges of the alternative school?

**Interviews**

Interviews were conducted after the focus group and initial analysis completed by the researcher. Students were interviewed at a time and convenient to them. One of the school’s side offices was the setting. The researcher provided the participants with gift cards for a meal after the interview was completed.
The interview questions were generated from the literature on student motivation and personal growth. An expert panel was convened to review the interview questions for clarity of wording. Additionally, a pilot interview was conducted for practice. The interviews were audio recorded and lasted no more than 40 minutes. During the interview, follow-up questions were anticipated to elicit additional information or to clarify the participants’ experiences and opinions. The interview began with social conversation, a review of the consent form and the plans for using the results.

1. Try to remember your social and home life prior to enrolling at the alternative school and how you felt back then. Please describe this to me.

2. Please describe your academic life prior to enrolling at the alternative school.

3. Please describe both your guardians’ views toward education and their role in your education. Were their views similar or different from the rest of your community where you live, and did their views align with yours?

4. What would you say were your core values, or put another way, what rules do you live by that guide your everyday actions?

5. What challenges did you face trying to get an education in your previous mainstream school? How did you cope when you had setbacks?

6. How would you describe your situation as unique compared to the other students that attended your previous mainstream school (prior to attending alternative school)?

7. Please describe any ways your social and home life changed while you were enrolled in the alternative school.

8. Please describe your academic life while enrolled at the alternative school and since returning to a mainstream high school.
9. Have your parents’ or guardians’ views toward education and their role in your education changed during alternative school? Has it changed since returning to mainstream high school?

10. What are some of the processes that alternative school has that are different than your previous mainstream school? Did these processes aid you in your academic desires? What processes would you change and why?

11. What changes did you make outside of school during alternative school and after returning to mainstream high school?

12. Describe the benefits of attending an alternative school.

13. Describe the challenges of attending an alternative school.

14. What specific things did you learn in the alternative school that will contribute to your being able to graduate?

15. Describe how the structure of the school day (bell schedule) helped you while you were attending the alternative school.

16. Describe how the curriculum and lessons were structured differently at the alternative school that helped you succeed.

17. What rules and procedures were in place at the alternative school that helped you succeed?

18. What values guide your everyday actions now? If they have changed, why?

19. Where do you see yourself in two years, five years, ten years, and twenty years?

20. After the interview nears completion, a set of photographs is presented to let the participant select and discuss what they desire in life, what they feel they are entitled to and what barriers they face.
The purpose of the questions pertaining to pre-enrollment to the alternative school was to gather information about the participants’ educational experiences and motivational foundation prior to enrolling in the alternative school. Therefore, Questions 1 through 3 were developed to account for the possible lack of structure and routine that may have inhibited personal growth (Maslow, 1943) and to get a general picture of the life and educational experiences. Questions 4 and 5 established what extrinsic or intrinsic motivation were present to attend their previous school (Deci & Ryan, 2008). And finally, Questions 6, and 7 examined Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to the extreme where “therapism” may inhibit personal would inhibit personal growth and motivation (Sommers & Satel, 2006).

Post-enrollment questions (8-20) were to gather information about the possible transformation the participants experienced and how that may have affected their intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2008) and personal growth (Maslow, 1943). Similar questions were asked to examine the consistency of the participants’ responses and to expand on previous answers. Subsequent research question 2 (RQ2) is examined through interview questions 8, 9, 10, 12, 19 and 20. Research Question 3 (RQ3) was examined through interview questions 8, 10, 13 and 20. Research Question 4 (RQ4) was examined through questions 10, 14 and 18. Finally, Research Question 5 (RQ5) was examined through questions 10, 11, 15, 16, 17 and 19. The processes that they contribute to their success was examined closely as well as the significance of added structure in their lives and to see if this structure continues after leaving the alternative school. The goal was to get rich, thick descriptions from the participants to develop the essence of what they experienced.
Field Notes

The researcher recorded written field notes during and after interviews, but always maintained primary focus on the interviewee. If this cannot be done because “… it may be distracting for the researcher to record data when he or she is integrated into the activity” (Creswell, 2013, p.167) then the observations ceased. The goal of the field notes was to produce a thick description of interview that may not be apparent in just the oral recording. This includes the physical and social spaces, the facial expressions and other elements that the interviewee employs. In addition, archival data of the alternative and mainstream schools was reviewed. This data included bell schedules, strategic plans, mission and vision statements, stated school core values and student handbooks.

Data Analysis

Personal experiences of the researcher were first addressed through a personal biography and reflection. “The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 17). In order to prepare data for analysis, all focus group responses were formatted into a Word document. Additionally, the interview recordings were transcribed and transferred into individual Word documents. Field notes were typed in Word as well. All Word documents were then read multiple times to get an idea of participant responses, highlighting key words and phrases. Finally, document analysis (if provided by the participant) and observations during the interviews was made. Documents consisted of attendance and academic records.

I used Moustakas’ modified van Kaam approach to analyze data (Moustakas, 1994). This process includes seven steps. First, I read transcripts from the interviews and focus groups
several times. During this process, I bracketed or set aside, my own preconceived ideas. Next, I highlighted key words and phrases and prepared a list of initial codes. Next, I reduced the list of codes and created categories. Two criteria were used to determine if a quote or expression will remain in the data. First, it must have described the experience in sufficient detail that allowed others to understand the phenomenon, and secondly, I must have been able to label it. During this stage, I deleted overlapping or repetitive information. The remaining expressions were the invariant constituents of the experience. Third, I clustered and thematized the invariant constituents. I developed an individual textual description based on each participant’s experience and then developed a description of the collective description of the experience from the three sources of data: the archival documents, focus group transcripts and also the interviews.

**Trustworthiness**

**Credibility**

The primary means of validation of a qualitative study was the prolonged engagement of the researcher with participants and use of multiple sources of data. Trust was enhanced through the validation checks of the interviewee with the researcher after interviews were conducted. Participants provided cultural language and provided valuable insight to the research.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Thus, member checking was employed with interview transcripts whereby each participant reviewed their transcript to ensure their responses were accurately captured. Additional clarifying comments were also made at that time. The researcher incorporated member checking (Creswell, 2013) by taking data, analysis, interpretations and conclusions back to the participants so they may comment and make alternate interpretations of the information. This enhanced the validity of major themes. The researcher consistently looked for
misinformation and distortions using triangulation from several sources to include document checks and observations. Interconnected details were highlighted. This validity increased transferability of the research based on shared characteristics.

In addition, peer review was accomplished by a member of the dissertation committee that is not associated with the school or county board of education. The member was familiar with qualitative research and the software employed in this study. The peer acted as a devil’s advocate “who keeps the researcher honest; asks the hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher’s feelings” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251).

**Transferability**

Triangulation, or the “use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251) was accomplished using coding of specific themes from various sources. Also, if the participants provided documentation of their attendance records or transcripts, this corroborated many comments about their academic accountability. Finally, field notes to corroborate the feelings and emotions of those interviewed.

As a researcher, I clarified any possible bias. I am a senior aerospace science instructor teaching the JROTC course at a local high school. I teach many low-income students, interact with their parents on a weekly basis and teach core values to my students. Integrity and excellence are cornerstones to my beliefs. Integrity guarantees accuracy of what the participants say while excellence provides the framework to analyze the meaning of participants’ experiences. The researcher will strive to bracket out (Creswell, 2013) my own involvement to allow a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ experiences.
Ethical Considerations

To guarantee compliance in meeting certain ethical and operational standards the researcher obtained approval from the appropriate authorities and participants. Prior to conducting study, I submitted proposal to the Liberty University Review Board for approval. Prior to conducting study, I received approval from local administrators in-charge of the school and student participants. Approval included the school’s principal and county board of education. Prior to conducting the study, the researcher received consent from all participants through completion of the consent form.

Due to the possibility of disclosing of certain information that may jeopardize or even harm individuals that provide the information, could have significant impact to the school or have negative results; the researcher used pseudonyms for all participants, identifiable names and the site itself. I keep data collection recordings and transcripts in a locked file cabinet or safe, and use password protected electronic files. In addition, I strived to eliminate possible identification of individuals based on any single illustration.

I consistently checked for personal biases that may skew the actual findings. To help guarantee accuracy, the researcher reports multiple perspectives and contrary findings equally and incorporates bracketing (Creswell, 2013) to limit personal biases. Participants should not feel deceived as to the nature of the study due to the open, however, generalized and nonspecific, discussion of the study by the researcher. The researcher openly discussed purpose of the study that basically stated the search for motivational factors to have at-risk students increase academic achievement. Thus, I avoided any deception by providing general information, not specific information about the study to participants. Additional considerations such as avoiding leading questions and withholding personal impressions to participants were followed. However,
towards the end of the interviews, I often expressed his interpretations, but not his opinions, to possibly facilitate additional discussions. Once the study was completed, copies were available for the participants and school administrators. In the end, the goal was to provide the information in an honest and supported manner. To do this, the researcher needed to establish an open avenue for discussion. An open avenue meant not only is the information free flowing, but the information was not considered “of-the-record” by the participants.

**Summary**

This chapter outlined the procedures, research design, and analysis for this study in order to describe at-risk students’ personal accountability to regularly attend high school after attending an alternative high school in central Georgia. The design used is a qualitative study using phenomenological research. The shared experience was the previous alternative school students’ motivation to take personal accountability to regularly attend mainstream high school.

Using a transcendental approach, the researcher expanded motivation to attend school in the context of self-determination theory and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Essential themes emerged answering the research questions focused findings the essence of what motivated students to regularly attend alternative school and the mainstream high school in which they returned.

The setting was Central Georgia High School with students who had previously attended Central Georgia Alternative School. Participants were eight students who had previously been identified as at-risk students, many who have possessed high absentee rates. Using a focus group, a baseline was established from which focused interview questions was then used. Interviews were conducted with the students using audio and visual recording devices and using a professional for transcription. Interview questions expanded on student motivation and
personal growth before and after attending alternative school. In addition, document analysis and observations during the interviews were made. Documents consisted of attendance and academic records and, provided by the students. Software was utilized to enable data categorizing and identification of themes. The IRB process was followed closely to assure proper procedures are implemented. Multiple validation processes were utilized as well constant scrutiny on possible biases by both the students and the researcher.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter discusses the participants and how their lived experiences highlighted themes and subthemes that addressed the research questions. I used Moustakas’ (1994) modified van Kaam approach to analyze data. First, I read transcripts from the interviews and focus groups several times. One of the main differences separating transcendental phenomenology from hermeneutic phenomenology is during this process I set aside or bracketed my own preconceived ideas. Next, I highlighted key words and phrases and extracted repetitive statements to prepare a list of initial codes. From eight verbatim transcripts of individual interviews, focus group discussions, field notes and archival material, 325 statements were extracted. A sample of these statements and their articulated meaning are illustrated in Appendix E. Next, by analyzing their articulated meaning into specific clusters, four significant themes emerged. An example of this is illustrated in Appendix E. Further analysis ultimately highlighted 11 subthemes. These subthemes were the resulting clusters of the formulated meanings that were obtained from the students’ significant statements. Chapter 4 includes a description of the participants, the themes that were derived from data collection and concludes with a summary.

Participants

Middle Georgia High School has a diverse student population with a near equal percentage of Black and White students. The participants of this study consisted of one Black female, five Black males, and two White males. All students were previous Central Georgia Alternative School students, returned to Middle Georgia High School (a mainstream high school) and were on track to graduate. A short description of the students, using pseudonyms, is listed in Figure 1.
### Demographic Information of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Rashad</th>
<th>Aleisha</th>
<th>Bill</th>
<th>Steve</th>
<th>Jarod</th>
<th>Kyke</th>
<th>Casey</th>
<th>Charles</th>
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| Background information | • Black male  
  • 18 years  
  • Lives with parents  
  • On track to graduate  
  • Has part-time job | • Black female  
  • 18 years  
  • Lives with mother  
  • 50/50 chance to graduate | • White male  
  • 18 years  
  • Lives with mother  
  • On track to graduate  
  • Has part-time job | • White male  
  • 18 years  
  • Lives with father  
  • On track to graduate  
  • Has part-time job | • Black male  
  • 18 years  
  • Lives with parents  
  • On track to graduate  
  • Athlete | • Black male  
  • 18 years  
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  • Athlete | • Black male  
  • 18 years  
  • Lives with parents  
  • On track to graduate  
  • Athlete | • Black male  
  • 18 years  
  • Lives with parents  
  • On track to graduate  
  • Athlete |
| Reason for being sent to alternative school | Record of poor in-class behavior | Record of poor behavior, extensive list of in-school suspensions | Record of poor behavior, numerous in-school suspensions | Poor attitude towards teachers | Fighting | Record of Poor behavior | Record of poor behavior | Poor behavior due to one significant incident |
| Future aspirations | Join the military | Attend college, become a veterinarian | Chef, job in culinary arts | Attend community college then possibly 4-year degree | Join the military, already signed with Army recruiter | Join the military | Attend college on athletic scholarship or ROTC | Attend college on athletic scholarship |

**Figure 1.** Demographic Information of Participants

Rashad is a Black male who is was planning to graduate at the end of the semester. He had aspirations of joining the military after graduation. At the time of the study, he lived with his parents and had a part-time job at a local restaurant. He was sent to alternative school due to behavioral problems in class.

Aleisha is a Black female who lived with her mother at the time of the study. She wanted to be a veterinarian after high school and college. She was on track to graduate due primarily to making up classes while at alternative school. Though her grades had improved, recently a couple of her classes had slipped to just barely passing. She was sent to alternative school for behavioral problems after a long list of in-school suspensions.
Bill is a White male who lived with his mother at the time of the study and was on track to graduate. He wanted to be a chef or do something in the culinary arts field. He was sent to alternative school for poor behavior after previously receiving several in-school suspensions. He had subsequently received one in-school suspension after returning to Middle Georgia High School for violating school code (not an in-class behavior issue). He had a part-time job at a local restaurant.

Steve is a White male who lived with his parents at the time of this study and was on track to graduate. He wanted to attend community college, obtain his associates degree and continue at a four-year college. He stated a passion for the outdoors. He was sent to alternative school for poor behavior and his poor attitude towards teachers. He had not had any in-school suspensions since his return to Middle Georgia High School and his grades were high.

Jarod is a Black male who lived with his father and was on track to graduate at the time of this study. He wanted to join the military after graduation and had already signed with an Army recruiter. He was sent to alternative school for fighting, but had not received any in-school suspensions since his return to Middle Georgia High School. He had a part-time job at a fast food restaurant.

Kyle is a Black male, who at the time of this study, lived with his parents. He was older than the others and was actually working towards his GED when he decided to go back to alternative school. He wanted to join the military after graduation. He was a former athlete who recently started concentrating more on academics. All members of his family attended college. He was sent to alternative school for poor behavior, but had a clean record since his return to Middle Georgia High School.
Casey is a Black male who lived with his parents at the time of this study and was on track to graduate. He was a student athlete who planned to go to college on an athletic scholarship. He was sent to alternative school for poor behavior. He had a clean record since his return to Middle Georgia High School.

Charles is a Black male who at the time of this study lived with his parents. He too was a student athlete. He was sent to alternative school for poor behavior, primarily due to one significant incident. He would like to attend college on an athletic scholarship and possibly go through ROTC to become an officer.

**Results**

Though all students provided their own unique and individual experiences regarding the phenomenon, several recurring themes emerged. These themes described their shared experiences while attending alternative school and how it affected them on their return to mainstream school. Students provided extensive commentary on their perspectives. From their comments, articulated meaning was placed into specific clusters, from which the following four significant themes emerged: 1) student perceptions of alternative school climate; 2) structured environment of the alternative school resulted in conformity; 3) students believed that alternative school changed their path; and 4) alternative school changed the students’ dynamic with parents. Further analysis ultimately highlighted 11 subthemes.

**Theme 1: Student Perceptions of Alternative School Climate**

Data from interviews yielded information related to students’ perceptions of the alternative school climate. Two subthemes were developed based on this information. First, students viewed alternative school as a punishment, similar to a prison sentence to conform. Secondly, although students perceived this climate as punitive, they also viewed the alternative
school curriculum and assignments as easier than their home school, so viewed this as an opportunity to improve their grades. These subthemes are described in more detail below.

**Students viewed alternative school climate as prison-like.** The first subtheme that emerged from the data indicated that students viewed alternative school as punishment, similar to a prison sentence to conform. Students viewed their time at alternative school as punishment for their transgressions committed while attending Middle Georgia High School. The articulated meaning organized into specific clusters included: conformity, punishment, prison-like atmosphere, metal detectors, dress code, no socializing and rushed schedules.

One focus group participant referred to the alternative school attendance as “prison, do your time and return to [mainstream] school.” Another focus group participant also conceded that:

> If I was to go to jail, that’s what Crossroads was like. They treat you like a criminal even if you got there for something small . . . . We were all looked at like criminals. We were there for a reason and we all were looked at like that.

During an interview, Bill noted that “they watch you all the time. You’re just doing time over there.” Kyle described the perceived harsh climate like this:

> You have good students but it is more of trying to be hard over it because they feel like that’s how they got to act around the people that’s in Crossroad because Crossroad supposed to be portrayed as the tough school way down.

Casey added: “They’re getting sent to school just doing time, this is a lot like prison.” Steve said, “kind of like going to prison for only stealing something.” Rashad said,
And you go back– or you can go to stay over there, you feel me? I stayed over there for two years, really two – well a year and a half but it felt like two years because they were long. Man, you’re getting – getting better, there it’s hard.

Though the school was referred to as a prison, students said it served a purpose. Bill affirmed this purpose:

They show you – it’s, you know, they show you how it’s going to be– before you go to jail, they’re showing you what you’re going to be treated like in prison, what you’re going to be – how it’s going to be done. And I didn’t want any of that.

Rashad said, “it was a motivation not to do none of that stuff and keep my head down and clean.” One member of the focus group put it this way:

Everything there was school. You didn’t have sports or friends to hang out with. You didn’t have time to do nothing but work. You were there to change yourself; it made you realize that you were there for a reason – every day.

**Metal detector.** Several specific processes were noted as having an immediate and significant impact on the students. These processes did not necessarily make the students feel safe, but reemphasized the security of the institution and the atmosphere of a prison-like setting. One focus group participant noted that: “What gets your attention quick is the metal detector. Every morning they check you fully. Everyone got to go through it and they check you completely.” The metal detector did not enhance the feeling of safety of the students, but reinforced the feeling of being in a strict institution. As Charles described, “I mean, I wouldn’t say I felt safe or less safe, I just felt like I was kind on a lockdown, like more of a punishment type of thing.” Steve noted:
Every day you come into the school you go through a metal detector, I mean, you have to take your belt off and hand them your backpack and they’ll go through your backpack – no, you don’t even get – you don’t get to bring a backpack into the school.”

Jarod said, “they are checking everywhere. You have to be patted down and searched… Yeah, it’s the wand and they have metal detectors too.”

**Dress code.** A second process that was another topic of discussion was the alternative school’s dress code. Casey summarized the dress code this way:

Either a white or a yellow or green collar shirt, khakis. The shoes you were, if it had a strap, they will warn you because, like, you have to have your shoe strapped and if you didn’t, they’ll warn you, the second time, they make you cut the strap. And shoelaces, if they were black – either it could be black or white, no other color, they’ll make you change it.

Students realized that the dress code was an effort to get them to conform. Aleisha said, “I mean the bad aspect, is just the uniform, like some people wanted to be different.” Rashad described the dress code this way:

Oh boy, they were different. You got to wear like the, you got to wear a collared shirt, like every day you got to wear uniforms. Every day they don’t have no sagging. And you got to really. [If you don’t, the punishment] Like I said. Go home and stay home. They ain’t going to play with you.

However, students understood the reasoning behind the dress code. Aleisha commented, the good thing, is like since we get in trouble since people are in classrooms and making scenes like that it’s hard for us to understand certain things. So they make the outfit more simple and so it should be simple like – like they expect us to come to school.
Casey noted that the dress code, “was going against everything that I usually do. And I wasn’t so used to that. The shoes I wore always have my straps, so I usually had to cut those and put shoestrings and everything else.” Jarod commented that the dress code contributed to the conforming atmosphere for “you couldn’t address and tell the person who you really are.” The students viewed alternative school as punishment, similar to a prison sentence to conform. Students viewed their time at alternative school as punishment for their transgressions committed while attending Middle Georgia High School.

**Alternative school was perceived as easier and an opportunity to improve one’s grades.** Though all students did not want to attend alternative school, all students’ grades improved while they were enrolled there. Initial meaning clusters included smaller classes, easier curriculum, focused learning environment and caring teachers. Several reasons for the improved grades were listed by students. These included easier classes, computer-based learning, less distractions, more caring teachers, smaller classes and the realization that this was possibly their last chance.

Aleisha noted that her grades greatly improved, but she still did little to deserve it. “I didn’t do nothing, like nothing. But I still came. In Econ, before I went to [alternative school], I had like failing, like 30 – a grade of 30. When I came to Crossroads I had all A’s.” Most students said they worked, but the classes were easier. Steve commented, “I feel like they dumb down the whole curriculum just to help out the students over there.” Casey disclosed, “The things that we do is really not the things that we’re supposed to be doing because, all my class, you can really tell the difference – we’re doing like three-digit multiplication. When I was in [mainstream] school, we was doing like big equations and, we’re done with multiplications. So, like, those brought my grades up really.”
Theme 2: Structured Environment of the Alternative School Resulted in Conformity

The second theme that emerged as a result of data collection and analysis process was the unique structure of the alternative school in terms of bell schedules and ability for students to socialize. Students described the structure as hurried, allowing limited time for socialization, and no attendance allowed at district functions. Students were limited to alternative school attendance only. Students began to understand the structured and internalized the regulations presented. A major contributor to this process was the teachers’ interaction with the students. These subthemes are explored in more detail below.

Bell schedule. One significant process that was highlighted was the hurried and structured schedule of the school. There was no time nor place for socializing and students had restrictions that limited social interaction. Everything was done with a purpose to keep the students focused and on track. Casey remarked, “I think we had, like, five minutes you had a class. No, actually, we had less because, like, the school levels were, like, all in one hall. They put everything on one hall.” Kyle noted the condensed schedule of the day and the need to move quickly. “It’s more of a quicker pace because we got out of school, like, 2:00 o’clock over there because they have to get pairing everything back. So it’s like – so you had a quicker pace.” One participant in the focus group noted, “All the classes are on the same hall. You can’t be tardy,” and “everything there was rushed. They don’t want you to hang out with anyone.”

In the students’ view, the quicker pace prevented some negative behavior. Steve remarked:

I understand why they did all of it, so I didn’t really think about it too much because if we have time in the hallways people are going to get into fights. If you get to sit anywhere you want at lunch, people are going to do drugs. I mean, that’s kind how to it was over there.
**No socializing.** Socializing was prohibited throughout the day. There were specific rules for dining. Steve also commented that, “we all had to sit at a specific table with everyone to go eat lunch.” Jarod recalled:

You couldn’t like, you couldn’t even eat breakfast in the cafeteria and eat breakfast in the classrooms. You couldn’t eat lunch with those people you want to, you got to eat with your class and stuff like that. Like, it wasn’t funny at all, like strict.

**No attendance at after-school activities.** Finally, attending after-school activities was forbidden. Aleisha complained:

Now, that was horrible, like I hate it, because like when I always wanted to go to football games. And so like when I go to alternate school, I was upset about that. You know, I missed out on Spirit Week. That was horrible.

One focus group student commented, “You can’t go to football games or dances. You get arrested if you do. You can’t even go to another school. Crossroads is for real. They’re strict.” Another focus group comment was “didn’t hang around at Crossroads. Not allowed. You left and came back the next day.”

**Students internalized the regulations presented at alternative school.** Common to all the students interviewed were their personal accountability to align to the rules of the alternative school and this personal accountability continued in mainstream school upon their return. Students were expected to follow the rules and conform to the school’s standards. Nonconformity meant a quick response from the administration. Initial clusters of meaning included conformity, attendance, punctuality, and focused on school work. Students understood alternate school regulations, why they were implemented, and took the responsibility to abide by them.
Conformity. Rashad commented, “Well, it changed me every day because like over there, you can’t do what you do over here, you know…. So you can’t have you earphones out. You can’t because they’ll send you at home automatically.” Rashad also remarked, “You got to really just be on top. If you ain’t on top they ain’t going to play with you. They’re going to send you home or ISS [In School Suspension].” Aleisha agreed and said, “The punishment was either you get SRC [Student Review Committee] or you get ISS [In School Suspension].” Bill said the main difference from mainstream school was “definitely the discipline. They wasn’t – they didn’t play around [at alternative school].” Kyle summarized it this way: “You’re not just going to go over there and run them over, like, if you’re being bad, they’re going to discipline you and not let you get out of this.”

Archival documents including the Central Georgia Alternative High School’s contract and published student handbook support the concept of strict conformity and discipline. Students and parents alike sign a contract for attending the school: non-signature means non-admittance. The contract states: “Any misconduct or violation of policies/rules of the Board of Education as interpreted by the principal will result in forfeiture of education at the Central Georgia Alternative High School” (Student Handbook, p.1). The stated vision of the school is “to educate our students socially and academically.” Its purpose is “to serve the needs of students who were unsuccessful in a traditional school environment” (Student Handbook, page 3). The Handbook details the strict discipline, possible student violations and consequences of student actions. In addition, the listed school’s beliefs include: “Fairness is not treating students the same, fairness is giving students what they need” and “ownership and control of one’s behavior promotes success” (Student Handbook, page 4). This supports an environment that keeps the students focused on academics and acceptable behavior.
**Attendance.** Another example of conformity includes regular attendance. All students had near perfect attendance while attending alternative school and this improved attendance continued once they returned to Middle Georgia High School. Charles commented: “I never missed days at alternative school and it’s the same as [mainstream school] since I’ve been back.” “It was about two times [missed mainstream school since returning]. I got more focus on my schoolwork since I’ve been back.” “I mean I have pretty good attendance now”. Aleisha stressed that she “had perfect attendance [at alternative school]. It got easy with the thing called Dress Down passes. And if you have perfect attendance for like, a month for November or something, we get Dress Down passes and we can dress down on Fridays. I got a few passes.” She went on to say that she “always had perfect attendance [since returning to mainstream school].”

This need to regularly attend is also highlighted in the alternative school student handbook: Any student having 6 unexcused absences is declared truant by law. Penalties are listed as $25-$100 fine, imprisonment of under 30 days, community service or any combination of the three (Student Handbook, 2015). Parents and students must sign a contract that they understand this.

**Punctuality.** While attending alternate school, students were expected to not only be present, but be on time for each class. This example of punctuality is underscored by the condensed bell schedule that only allows just one minute between classes (Student Handbook, p.13). Students did not have time to socialize in the hallway. They had to quickly move to their next class. The rules for changing classes were; “Walk directly to class, keep voices at a normal tone, and walk on the right side of hall” (Student handbook, 2015, p. 8).
Students conceded that their punctuality improved, they became better organized and this continued once they returned to mainstream school as well. Aleisha said, “Yes, because in ninth grade I was just - skipping class like I should be okay in the class, I think if I was okay it would’ve been a lot better. I have a fine schedule now [referring to organization skills]”. Kyle lamented, “I always have had a tardy issue, but as far as skipping, no I never had. I mean my tardies have gone down, except for first period.” Any unexcused tardies could result in school suspension (Student Handbook, p. 10).

Focus on school work. Students commented that there was no socializing. Rashad remarked, “You just keep your head down.” Casey said, “They put everything on one hall. So you can either going up the hall or you’re going down the hall.” In addition, students commented on the alternative school rule of not going to any school district extracurricular activities and exiting the school no later than 30 minutes after school was over. In accordance with the alternative school’s Student Handbook, if a student attended another school’s after-school activity or remained at alternative school after the 30-minute time period, he or she would be charged with criminal trespassing (Student Handbook, p.15).

The absences and tardies remained low once students returned to mainstream school. Students commented that they were now more “focused.” This focus not only referred to school work, but most often referred to just obtaining their high school diploma. At the same time, disruptive behavior in class and in-school suspensions were nearly non-existent.

Teachers helped. Students praised alternative school teachers for helping, not as much academically, but more for providing life lessons. All but one student (Aleisha) highly praised their alternative school teachers and gave credit to them for their academic support, but more
importantly, for imparting life lessons. Initial clusters of meaning included respect, small
classes, approachable teachers, caring teachers and life lessons.

**Respect.** Students commented about the mutual respect that the teachers and students
demonstrated. Bill conceded that “It’s kind of you get what you give there. If you treated the
teachers how you want to be treated, no lies, respectful, say ‘Sir,’ ‘Ma’am,’ then they’ll be nice
to you back.” Bill also stated, “I treat the teachers with big respect too because they’re here with
me but they’re here to help me out.” Steve noted that “seeing all the other kids and how they
acted towards the teachers kind of made me understand the way I was acting and how someone
else could see that if they were looking at me.” The focus group focused on this aspect of
respect with comments such as “respect -- teachers and principals, everything,” and “I treated
teachers with respect and they treated me good.” Finally, “Some teachers knew who the bad kids
were. Some teachers could tell if you were good and they treated you differently. I treated
teachers with respect and they treated me good.”

**Small classes.** Students commented that the classes were smaller and teachers could
provide more one-on-one interaction. This interaction helped them understand the coursework.
Most students attributed their improved grades not to the curriculum, but to changes in the
learning environment. Charles said,

I say it is smaller classes, better focused. It is easier for you to interact with your teacher
and you can talk about stuff with your teacher more without feeling embarrassed in front
of other students in class and stuff like that.

Charles also recalled, “I mean they [alternative school and mainstream school] are about
the same, but it was just easy for you to learn because there was less people in the class bothering
you.” Jarod said it was easier since “you’re focused and you get more one-on-one in class.”
Steve disclosed that: “It was more of the teachers would take more time to go through the lessons and start out with the very basics and then, build on that.”

Though this is the technique that all mainstream school use as well, teachers were able to go more at the individual student pace at alternative school due to the lower student to teacher ratio. Kyle agreed and put it this way: “I mean, the teachers, they’re pretty good, like, because it’s not that many students in class, so it’s kind of more a – if you can’t understand, you’re going to get one-on-one attention in there.” All students said their grades improved while at alternative school. All students agreed it was easier, with most stating it was because of the learning environment versus just an easier curriculum.

The teachers were mostly friendly, even though students observed that some alternative school students were not receptive to them. Steve also commented that he made an effort to help other students who may not have appreciated the teacher’s help. He said: “Teachers are nice, all the teachers like me over there because I treat them with respect and I got all my work done, my test is high. I try in helping out so many other kids with classes and stuff. So it was more of a – the whole school is more of just a growing experience for me.”

While students observed that other disruptive students failed to take advantage of their situation. Steve noted that others failed because of their attitude: “I don’t think it was them just barely getting by. I think it’s mostly because the teachers were trying to help them and they just weren’t taking it.” Nearly all students praised the alternative school teachers as “caring”, “friendly”, and “respectful.” They also highlighted that the teachers knew the students’ situation and wanted them to succeed in life. Academics was only part of their instruction.

Life lessons. Alternative school teachers also focused on providing life lesson to the students. Charles lamented that “It is easier for you to interact with your teacher and you can
talk about stuff with your teacher more without feeling embarrassed in front of other students in class.” Charles continued and related a short story of a class interaction:

We talked about like, for instance, how – you know, how they have rap videos like the girls back in the day used to act versus how they act now. I mean she just basically talked about how girls nowadays look for attention. They’re into whatever where girls back then just kind of have it for their selves. They did not have to look for anybody else’s personal interests.

Charles expanded on how his view on socializing changed back at Middle Georgia High School based on what the teachers taught him at alternative school. The teacher’s discussion with him centered on relationships:

She has told me that girls are always going to be there and just to focus on the main goal. And, if you got you priorities and everything straight that they always come back, like, females are not going anywhere. So don’t really try to base – put yourself down to make a female smile. Just make sure you set yourself straight first and then you can find you a great beautiful girl that appreciates what you have.

Charles complemented the teachers for expanding their “comfort zone.” The discussion group described it by “learning from their mistakes,” “changing their futures,” “choosing the right crowd”, and “not taking short cuts.” Teachers stressed that this was the students “second and possibly last chance” to change their high school careers around, if not their lives. They said the students should look at their attendance at alternative school as a “privilege.” Charles remarked, “What they always say is being here is a privilege like it was another – it was like a second chance, because you messed up the first time. So it was a second chance to get your life back together.” The discussion group said, “They [the alternative school teachers] talked to you about
life. I knew if I kept the same I would be in prison one day.” Another discussion group comment was “we had some good talks about your future. We are young and have time to change.” Finally, the focus group revealed, “Some teachers cared. They listened to what you wanted, but told you that you had to change to get it.”

Caring. The students also realized that they were held accountable for the way they treated other students, the teachers and the administrators. Though the teachers were caring they still “focused on the kids they see trying” (Charles). Referring to individuals that did not make any attempt to learn, Charles commented “If they see that we’re reading a book or something and you just got your head down, not writing notes or something like that, I mean, of course, they’re not going to acknowledge you.”

Theme 3: Students Believed that Alternative School Changed their Path

While students overall perceived the alternative school climate and structures as punitive, nonetheless, they still believed that their attendance at the school changed their path. They viewed the school as a wake-up call which helped change their non-caring attitudes. Additionally, they felt the experience helped them change their socialization with peers who were a negative influence. Students’ articulated goal was to graduate from high school. They did not perceive themselves as incapable of succeeding due to economic status or being in a unique situation. The subthemes are discussed in this section.

Alternative school was viewed as a wake-up call. As the more common nickname for the alternative school and what all the students referred to it as, is “Crossroads;” this would indicate that this is an opportunity to choose between two separate paths. Students may continue on their current destructive course or change and go a separate track. The students accepted this and made a conscious effort to take the different route. Specific clusters of articulated meanings
included non-caring attitudes, lack of focus, change of perspective, and behavior modification. All of the students acknowledged their actions and poor attitudes prior to alternative school. None commented that they had considered consequences of their conduct or where they were going in their academic careers.

Change in non-caring attitudes. Upon reflection, nearly all students expressed that they lacked the intent to act (amotivated), but none stated that they were controlled by external forces to do so. Rashad reflected, “I would not be paying attention, cutting class, doing stupid stuff—just being hard headed, not listening to nobody, not listening to the teachers and stuff like that.” Aleisha divulged,

I used to lie a lot, I mean a lot. It was to the point where it ain’t making sense, it’s like, I lie – like when I get in trouble I try to lie my way out. And that’s like it was like lie after lie, getting me deep and deeper trouble.

Change in focus. Bill stated that before alternative school, “a couple of classes I was doing decent in. A couple of classes I was failing. I didn’t care.” “Well, you know, just young and dumb and I thought I was on top of the world kind of untouchable.” Finally, Steve summarized his view as this: “I don’t really care for anyone else’s opinion on anything. It was more of a — I’m going to do whatever I want to do because it’s my life. [After going to alternative school] Everything changed.”

Change of perspective. Whether alternative school was an epiphany or a slow realization of the path ahead, it definitely changed the students’ views. Students referred to this change as “maturing” (Jarod), “puberty” (Steve), “self-realization (Steve),” “a reality check” (Bill), “new attitude” (Aleisha) “new perspective on life” (Jarod) or “a brand new education” (Rashad). The alternative school gave few options other than comply or leave. Aleisha commented,
When I had my Crossroads meeting, I was just thinking like deep in the back of my head, I was like, man I’m not this type of person. I’m not this – I’m not this type of person.

Because my mom was like – my mom even said, you’re not this type of person.

Rashad declared,

I’m not doing it for everybody. I’m going to really manage it right, because I just think I’m different because I’m not like the other kids. I’ve got, you know, I got my own mind and sit and do. You know I’m going to make it.”

Additionally, Jarod commented,

It changed my perspective on life. It changed my goals of how things should be done and what shouldn’t be done and how to get around and how to deal with people. Because if I was still doing the same thing I did one way, it’d get me nowhere but probably jail.

The Student Handbook lists as one of its alternative school beliefs: “An education forms a foundation to build a successful life” (Student Handbook, p. 4). The students were on the verge of being expelled from the public school system due to their poor attitudes and behavior. They admittedly lacked respect and accountability for their actions. Alternative school instilled these new concepts. Steve expressed,

If you don’t care that you’re there in the first place and you’re not going to care if you go back to the school, but if you do it as a punishment, something you could grow on and it’s going to make you a better person.”

Accountability. Kyle stated, “I never blame anybody no more, it’s always my fault because I allowed it to happen.” As Casey surmised,

Like they taught me to like – to really just too tongue-in-cheek and, like, I’m going to give, like give them their respect and be the bigger man because at the end of day it ain’t
even worth it because, you know, it don’t have to happen. Thusly, students were introduced to behavior modification and realizing that it was either comply or leave, all students interviewed stated that it changed them.

**Students discarded their poor influence groups.** The third subtheme highlighted the fact that most students did not associate with prior peers with whom they associated prior to alternative school and became more independent. Though students readily accepted credit for turning their academic performance around after enrollment in alternative school, they put a lot of the blame of previous disruptive and negative behavior on the groups they associated with prior to enrollment. Specific initial clusters of meaning included poor influences, peer pressure, independence, reclusive behavior, and gained confidence.

**Poor influences.** Aleisha stated,

Yeah, I changed, like I don’t even hang out with the people I used to hang out with. I mean I tried to fit in a little bit, I tried to be all big and bad but when I realized when I got to Crossroads, it was just horrible.

Bill noted, “like a bunch of people like me who were failing a couple of classes and stuff, they were being jerks to people. They thought they were – they had really high ego and stuff.” Jarod said, “peer pressure. Like – it would be like, ‘Oh, he said this, you know, they’re saying about that.’ Boosting you up and stuff like that.” Students claimed that the other students with whom they associated would pressure them into negative behavior. During the discussion group one student commented: “You had to change who you hung out with,” and “you can’t stay with your group. They make it so you can’t.”

**Peer pressure.** Students were quick to acknowledge the influence of peer pressure prior to their enrollment in alternative school, while at the same time credit themselves for
transforming their own behavior. This transformation consisted of becoming more independent and even sometimes reclusive, especially while attending the alternative school. Kyle noted that “You basically associated yourself with the wrong people, so you go into a school that’s full of bad people you don’t want to really associate yourself.” Steve commented,

I wasn’t friends with the best people, drug addicts, stuff like that. Things really got stressed in my house, no respect for my parents. And then, when I went to Crossroads, it was kind of whenever I was growing up more, so I kind of understand now what they’re going through, and kind of stuff like that.

Kyle agreed and stated: “I got in [alternative school], it was for being with the wrong group though. [At alternative school] I was more of by myself.” One focus group participant included, “I stayed to myself or maybe with one other kid. We watched out for each other.”

*Independence.* Students’ new found independence gave them confidence in their own actions. This aligns with the Student Handbook belief of: “Ownership and control of one’s behavior promotes success” (Student Handbook, p. 4). Rashad commented,

What describes me is I’m a person who would go out there and get it done by any means. I don’t depend on nobody. Well, I used to. But I don’t now. I’m a man now. I think I’m a man.”

Aleisha added: “At the beginning I was quiet and like off because I didn’t know nobody. I’ve never been in this predicament. I’ve never been in alternative school. I never pictured myself being in alternative school.” When students left school for the day, in accordance with alternative school rules, they could not attend any after-school activities. When they arrived home, several students were grounded by their parents. Bill noted, “After school, I’d go home. I couldn’t have a social life after school. I was in trouble.”
Once the students returned to Middle Georgia High School they continued being more independent and less socially oriented during the school day. Steve said, “I guess, whenever I got back to school I was just quieter and I kind of just minding my own business when I walk through the hallways.” Kyle noted,

When you get back over here, you get around with people who’s not as bad but they still pressure you. It’s kind of like easy and like, no, I know not to hang around with you. It’s kind of like you just learned a lot from being around that type of people. It’s just the experience thing with everything, you know.

The students made new friends on their return to Middle Georgia High School. Most began to associate with positive influences. Student athlete, Charles commented that his new friends were all on the region championship football team. They were positive role models and they kind of grew a bond. I already had a bond with them because I was into football, but – I mean, I say nowadays, it is just – it is kind of the same. They give that same bond like I had with the older guys.

Nearly all students commented on not associating with the same group of friends they had prior to alternative school. Several commented that they remained cordial if they saw them in the hallways, but not sociably after school. Kyle commented,

But I was cool – I was cool with a lot of guys but like I know when it’s time – when it’s time to do work, it’s time to do work. So it was more of, like, ain’t that personal but I know what you’re doing, so I ain’t – I won’t associate myself with that.

Rashad stated, “I pick who I hang out with. I limit myself who I hang out with a lot because, you know, you got to quit on people also because they aren’t good for you.” Finally, Rashad
remarked, “I got to hang out with the people that do good rather than just, don’t know, bad. But it was good for me. You feel it.”

**Student motivation was to graduate.** Every student’s main motivation was to “graduate” or “get that diploma.” Initial meaning clusters included high school as necessary for going to college, the military or getting a job. Students viewed high school “as a stepping stone” to the next part of their lives. Students realized that to attend college or to enter the military, they must have a high school degree. Those entering college acknowledged that their grades were a little low so they may have to attend a community college first to get their grade point averages up and then they could receive the HOPE (Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally) Scholarship. Those that said they were going into the military put more emphasis on taking the ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) than they did in learning any particular high school subject or gaining knowledge. As the discussion group discussed, many wanted to join the military and viewed the ASVAB as the most important. “You have to pass the ASVAB and school can help.” Another discussion group comment put it this way: “I mean, you want to learn, but it doesn’t make you any more ready for the Army.”

Students did not put emphasis on the satisfaction or the sheer joy of learning as part of their motivation in attending high school. Most did not relate or in some cases specifically noted contrarily that their future success had anything to do with high school. Communicated goals did not include a better understanding the course material or an interest in certain subjects. The primary focus was to graduate. This emphasis on graduation was reinforced by their parents and teachers alike.

To summarize the previous comments in its entirety, some students appeared to go through three distinct phases with whom they socialized. Before alternative school, students
claimed that they associated with groups that had a negative influence on their behavior. They were part of a crowd that was not focused on academics and often had disruptive or criminal behavior. This crowd was often cited as contributing to the students being sent to alternative school. Once they were enrolled in alternative school, they disassociated themselves from these negative influences. They became more independent, somewhat withdrawn, while attending alternative school. Their social lives changed dramatically. They could not attend after-school functions and many were grounded once they came home in the afternoon by their parents. Finally, once they returned to Middle Georgia High School, students began to search for more positive influences. Their group of friends changed and they did not re-associate with their previous mainstream school group that they deemed as negative influences. The Central Georgia Alternative High School Handbook reinforces this by asserting that students are not allowed to attend any school district extracurricular activities, drive their own vehicles to school, nor stay after school more than 30 minutes (Student Handbook, 2015). Socializing during and after school was prohibited.

**Students did not excuse their actions based on being in a unique situation or population.** All students were asked if their situation was unique. While several students said that their situations were unique, they did not mention that it was because of their ethnicity, financial status, or family life. The specific clustering was based on a lack of responses to the question if they thought their situation was unique, being average, and ownership of one’s actions. As Aleisha commented, “like I’m going to say average teenager going to high school.” Any uniqueness was based on their individuality and their ability to improve in their eyes. Students did not give any stories about their troubled upbringing nor their one-parent homes, though many fit into this category.
At no time did alternative school students considered external influences more controlling of their future successes than the mainstream school population. In fact, most were enthusiastic about taking control of their lives. They accepted that they made some poor decisions in the past, and though they did discuss the negative influences of some of their neighborhood friends, they did not use this as a unique circumstance to explain their situation. Several students explained that they had their “own mind” and the decisions they made were theirs. As Rashad commented, “I got my own mind and sit and do. You know I’m going to make it.” Students took ownership of their situation and did not try to justify that it was anything else but their own personable “mistakes”.

Even when they commented that they had “mixed up with the wrong crowd,” they also maintained that it was their decisions at the time, to do so. Kyle summarized it this way: “I want to blame on people for doing what they did and I was just associated with it, but at the same time I have to tell myself, ‘It was your fault because you’re with them. You allowed yourself to be there.’ So anything – that’s with me, anything that happened wrong, I never blame anybody no more, it’s always my fault because I allowed it to happen.”

Kyle further summarized, “Because, I mean, you can’t sit down and play the blame game because everything is always your fault because you allowed it to happen.” To them they were just like any other student going to high school. They did not seek sympathy or special consideration due to being in a unique position. It is not only that they said they were not unique, but by not offering excuses for their predicament, they never considered it.

**Theme 4: Alternative School Changed the Students’ Dynamic with Parents**

One interesting finding revealed in the data was that students reported that their attendance at alternative school often changed their relationships with parents. Students reported
that the alternative school assignment was a “wakeup call” to parents as well. Parents changed their level of involvement with their students and became more active in their knowledge of what was going on both at home and at school. Before being sent to alternative school, students commented that their parents were minimally involved, and the students did not take their parents’ criticisms seriously. Initial meaning clusters included changes in level of involvement and better relationships with parents.

Changes in level of parent involvement. Though supportive of their students before alternative school, many students kept much of what they did away from their parents. Kyle confessed that “If you don’t tell the parent, the parent can’t necessarily get involved. So it’s always the student fault of anything bad.” Parent involvement often consisted of short lectures. Jarod’s example was: “He [my father] told me to make sure I’m doing my homework, keep grades, go to school, don’t be late and stuff like that, don’t goof off.” It was not until the student entered alternative school that both the students’ and the parents’ interaction began to change. Most students conceded that their parents were traumatized by the students’ entry into alternative school. Students described their parents’ as “devastated” (Aleisha) “upset” (Casey), “disappointed” (Rashad) and “distraught” (Charles). While at alternative school, parents implemented measures to keep their students on track.

Several parents grounded their students from social activities once school was over for the day. Parents were more involved in school work. Casey divulged that [At alternative school, my mother] “checked up on me every now and then - more than before.” Aleisha conceded, “My mom did not let me go nowhere. She was, like when I come home from Crossroads I was like ‘Mom, how was your day?’ She’d just give me like this stare. ‘Like Mom, I know. I’m sorry.’” Finally, Charles stated, “They [my parents] just made sure I was doing what I had to do
to get back over here. So their main priority was get me out of there and get me back here, so I could get back in here.”

**Changes in relationship with parents.** Students began to feel guilty for their actions and now wanted to make amends with their parents. Both parents and students’ priorities changed and their supportive interaction was enhanced. Students acknowledged that they now keep their parents more informed and the parents in turn, communicated more with them. Students began to put more weight on the importance of their parents’ and families’ welfare. The change did not occur overnight, but it was significant and noted by nearly all students. Charles described the change as “I thought she treated me a little different, but it got better. We talked it over. We talked about it. It got better.” Aleisha admitted that:

People would be like, we got to listen to our parents, like me. I didn’t get it. But I never listened to her, like I was bad like I didn’t believe her half the time. She’s like because when I was taking it like, they can’t flunk you when you are in high school.

Students stated they wanted to make their parents proud of them. They declared that family was a top priority. Aleisha said, “I mean family, I just – all I need is my mom. Because when you look at family, family sometimes we were trading. I don’t need that; all I need is my mom.” Casey summarized it this way: “[Family] that’s before anything. Family before anything.” Charles remarked, “The coach wanted me, but I told him that I told my folks I wanted to get school right this year.” Parents stressed the importance of getting a high school diploma and discussed how that was a stepping stone for the next step in their students’ lives. The importance of graduating was mentioned by all students and reinforced by their parents.
Addressing the Research Questions

Four themes and 11 subthemes emerged as a result of the study. These offered insight to better understand and answer the research questions. How do high school students describe the benefits of their experience attending an alternative school? How do high school students describe the challenges associated with their experience in attending an alternative school? What specific learnings, knowledge, or values did high school students acquire in their experience attending an alternative school contributed to their being able to graduate? What attributes associated with alternative school climate (structure of school day, bell schedule, processes, procedures, curriculum, environment, expectations, actions of teachers and staff) do participants identify as having influenced their desire to attend school and engage in classes?

Interview analysis addressed how future high school graduates described their experiences while attending an alternative school in Central Georgia that motivated them to persist toward graduation. Students thought the alternative school climate was prison-like with metal detectors and a strict dress code. The school curriculum was easier and many students took advantage of this to improve their grades. The second theme centered on the structured environment of the alternative school: a hurried bell schedule, no time for socializing and no attendance allowed at after-school events. Students internalized these regulations and learned that attendance, punctuality and focus on school work were important. Most all students felt the teachers helped with their success, focusing on more than just instruction, but teaching life lessons, respect and caring. Students additionally felt the small classes help with their interactions with teachers. A third theme revealed that students believed that alternative school changed their path. Students discarded poor influence groups, focused more on graduation, became more independent and less susceptible to peer pressure. Finally, students felt the
alternative school experience changed their relationships with parents and level of parental involvement. Parents viewed this experience as a wake-up call in addition to their student.

Students viewed their time at alternative school similar to serving time in prison. They did not enjoy their time there and said they often felt like they were treated as “criminals. Their social lives were greatly diminished since they were unable to attend any extra-curricular activities and there was no time at alternative school for socializing. The school schedule was condensed to minimize hallway interaction. The organizational culture of the school was one of strict conformity emphasized by dress codes, condensed schedules, limited in-school socializing, no after school activities, and teacher/administrator enforcement. However, the successful students knew, followed and understood the reasoning behind the strict regulations of the school. Upon reflection, they acknowledged that this time served benefited them by instilling discipline, punctuality and personal responsibility into their academic careers.

High school students benefited from their experience attending an alternative school which acted as a “wakeup call” for the students to turn their lives around. The students acknowledged that they were on a destructive path and associated themselves with negative influences. The lessons they learned at alternative school enabled them to change course. Alternative school was viewed as an opportunity to improve one’s grades, either through a perceived easier curriculum or because of more one-on-one interaction with the teachers. More importantly, teachers provided invaluable life lessons. These lessons focused on the students’ current behaviors, futures, and topics that they felt they could not discuss at mainstream school. Students began to internalize the alternative school regulations and this began a transformation of their personal self-structure. The extrinsic motivation to conform to the alternative school rules and discipline, either due to fear of punishment, a feeling of obligation, a sense of
importance or an eventual congruence to one’s own personal constructs; resulted in improved behavior and academic achievement.

Alternative school brought several challenges to the students. Those that accepted the unique organizational structure and followed the guidelines presented by the school were successful not only while attending alternative school but also upon their return to mainstream school. The disciplined environment of the school that limited social interaction and stressed personal accountability guided the students toward graduation. Though viewed as challenges when the students entered alternative school, upon reflection after reentering mainstream, these challenges were deemed beneficial.

Students applied personal accountability to attend school regularly, to arrive on time for classes and to demonstrate proper behavior while in the classroom. The parents became more involved and the students accepted this new interaction. They realized that respect was often a reciprocated action. They treated the teachers in the same manner that they wanted to be treated. Most importantly they adopted the goal of obtaining their degree. This goal drove the students.

Students began to value graduation as the ultimate goal of high school. They viewed this as a significant stepping stone to their future and this goal was motivation to persist to graduation. This was reinforced by teachers and parents alike. However, intrinsic motivation to learn for the sheer pleasure of it was not a theme. Alternative school was structured to give students what they needed to graduate. Students needed the regulated school environment, to be held accountable for their actions and an understanding of what their futures may entail. The climate and culture of alternative school prepared the students for reentry into mainstream school and an avenue toward graduation.
Summary

Using the information gathered through interviews, focus groups, archival data and field notes, the research ultimately highlighted four significant themes with 11 subthemes. These were the resulting clusters of the formulated meanings that were obtained from the students’ significant statements. The themes and subthemes included:

Theme 1: Student perceptions of alternative school climate.

Subthemes: Students viewed alternative school climate as prison-like and alternative school was perceived as easier and an opportunity to improve one’s grades.

Theme 2: Structured environment of the alternative school resulted in conformity

Subthemes: Bell schedules, no socializing, no attendance at after school activities, and students internalized the regulations presented at alternative school.

Theme 3: Students believed that alternative school changed their path

Subthemes: Alternative school was viewed as a wake-up call, students discarded their poor influence groups, students’ motivation was to graduate, and students did not excuse their activities based on being in a unique situation or population.

Theme 4: Alternative school changed the students’ dynamic with parents.

Subthemes: Changes in level of parent involvement and changes in relationship with parents.

These themes describe the essence of what the students experienced while attending alternative school and their recent return to Middle Georgia High School. These themes also provided data to answer the research questions:

How do high school students describe the benefits of their experience attending an alternative school? How do high school students describe the challenges associated with their
experience in attending an alternative school? What specific learnings, knowledge, or values did high school students acquire in their experience attending an alternative school contributed to their being able to graduate? What attributes associated with alternative school climate (structure of school day, bell schedule, processes, procedures, curriculum, environment, expectations, actions of teachers and staff) do participants identify as having influenced their desire to attend school and engage in classes? The next chapter discusses logical conclusions and provides recommendations for future applications.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate how high school students described their experiences attending a Type II alternative school (geared toward students with behavioral problems and poor student attendance) in Central Georgia and the factors that motivated them to persist to graduation. Additionally, this study sought to explore factors, including those associated with alternative school culture that may have motivated students to persist toward graduation. This chapter discusses alternative school culture by looking at the major themes presented by the alternative school students and its congruence with the published institutional directives of the alternative school. These themes gave insight to the organizational structure of the school, the distinctive attributes of curriculum and instruction, and the attitudes and relationships of staff and students that contributed to student success.

This chapter provides a summary of the findings. It then addresses both the theoretical and empirical literature presented in Chapter Two and its congruence with previous research. Next, the implications of the study are addressed and recommendations given for various stakeholders to include the Central Georgia Alternative High School, county school administrators and both mainstream and alternative school teachers. Limitations or weaknesses that may be inherent this kind of study will be addressed. Finally, recommendations for future research are given for other researchers’ consideration.

Summary of Findings

Using the information gathered through interviews, focus groups, archival data and field notes, the research ultimately highlighted four significant themes with 11 subthemes. These were the resulting clusters of the formulated meanings that were obtained from the students’
significant statements and were used to address the following research questions: How do high school students describe the benefits of their experience attending an alternative school? How do high school students describe the challenges associated with their experience in attending an alternative school? What specific learnings, knowledge, or values did high school students acquire in their experience attending an alternative school contributed to their being able to graduate? What attributes associated with alternative school climate (structure of school day, bell schedule, processes, procedures, curriculum, environment, expectations, actions of teachers and staff) do participants identify as having influenced their desire to attend school and engage in classes?

Though students viewed their time at alternative school similar to serving time in prison; they acknowledged that it ultimately had a positive effect on their academic careers. Alternative school acted as a “wakeup call.” This aligns exactly to what the Central Georgia Alternative High School’s published purpose of “to serve the needs of students who were unsuccessful in a traditional school environment,” as well as its core belief that “fairness is not treating students the same, fairness is giving students what they need.” (Student Handbook, 2015, p. 4). The alternative school infused discipline into students’ lives, held students accountable, promoted parental involvement and taught valuable life lessons. Though students did not want to be sent to alternative school and they did not enjoy the time they were there, but upon reflection they said it was something from which they benefited. These findings aligned with those of Carpenter-Aeby and Aeby (2012) whose research in aType II alternative school showed that students acknowledged the climate as one focused on discipline and realized they should not want to be there (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012). However, students realized benefits from attending the school.
The alternative school students faced several challenges, both socially and academically. Socially, they were prohibited from all after-school activity and often grounded by their parents. This, however, allowed them to focus more on their academics and the personal goal of graduating. Academically, they were given more one-on-one time in class with their teachers. The students that enthusiastically used this time benefitted the most. Teachers not only offered academic tutorials, but more importantly for most students, lessons in life. These lessons infused the desire to graduate from high school. These findings were similar to those of other researchers. Brussow (2007) found that student perceived the alternative school culture as one that motivated them to continue in school and graduate. Additional results showed that caring attitudes of teachers and staff were the factors most influential in motivating students to continue in school. Camak (2007) found that students attributed their success in alternative school to the one-on-one time of the teachers that they often lacked in their mainstream schools. Students viewed the teachers as caring, accessible, and showing a real concern toward student goal attainment (Camak, 2007). As Usher and Kober (2012a) pointed out, students must be motivated to achieve academically. Without some motivation, regardless of the ability of the faculty and the allure of the curriculum, it is impossible for students to succeed.

Students did not put much emphasis on not being able to control their own future, though they did state that they socialized with negative influences prior to enrolling at alternative school. The students may have given a different perspective when they first were admitted to alternative school; however, they have since had time to reflect on their experience. To them, these negative influences may have contributed to the negative behavior that resulted in them being sent to alternative school. Once they were enrolled, they broke away from these associations and began to be more independent. This independence accentuated their ability to adapt to the new
rules placed upon them and began to excel in the new learning environment. Students internalized the processes of conformity of dress, punctuality, attendance, classroom behavior and socializing that contributed to reaching their goal of returning to main stream school and high school graduation. These results were in alignment with those of other studies. Quinn and Pourier (2006) found that at-risk, or marginal students positively responded to a highly structured environment combined caring relationships with personalized instruction. The programs were highly structured and students were provided with “clear, demanding, but attainable expectations (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987, p. 86-87). According to Kay (2010), just attending school regularly can improve academic achievement. Getting the students, parents and teachers engaged in a multi-systematic intervention forms a foundation to this success.

Schein’s theory of organizational culture (1992) underscores that one must understand what culture is in order to understand the way an organization functions. Alternative school has its own unique way of functioning and certain aspects that must be developed, recognized and understood. Aspects such as the school’s Student Handbook and Student/Parent Contract, observable behaviors, group norms, metaphors, and formal philosophies define the school. The alternative school’s Student Handbook and contract puts forth the rules and regulations for the student (and parents) to adhere to before the student is even admitted. The secure, strict environment is bolstered each morning by walking through a metal detector. The controlled atmosphere of the school is reinforced through processes that includes dress code, condensed bell schedule, and limited socializing both during and after school. Conformity is the group norm that is championed by the staff. Even the metaphor of “Crossroads” fosters a culture of choosing to either conform to the accepted norms or fail and be dismissed from the school system. In addition, the school’s stated beliefs include: “Fairness is not treating students the same, fairness
is giving students what they need” and “ownership and control of one’s behavior promotes success” (Student Handbook, page 4).

In accordance with the research conducted by Caroleo (2014) alternative students had an increased focus on vocational or basic skill attainment that may enable students to obtain a job after graduation versus an academic focus in preparation for college. In addition, many students who attended alternative school increased their self-esteem, independence and academic success. Students learn quickly to treat teachers, administrators and the school itself with respect. Teachers reinforce this by showing the students the same respect that they receive. The culture of the school meets the needs of the students that were sent to alternative school for poor behavior. Whereas previous studies have shown that at risk students felt that they had little control of their lives or fate (Miller et al., 2003), the students in this research study took pride in their independence and ability to take personal accountability to persist to graduation. According to Deci’s and Ryan’s (2008), self-determination theory, individuals must feel competent and in control of their situation in order to be successful.

**Discussion**

Using the Vallerand and Ratelle (2004) continuum of motivation, one would argue that the students were not purely intrinsically motivated, or wanting to attend school and learn for the sheer pleasure of it. However, the students did move along the motivation continuum and greatly increased their extrinsic motivation to attend school. Students may have attended alternative school at first, because of truancy laws in Georgia, being referred by the Middle Georgia High School administrators, and told to do so by their parents. Ultimately, this was their only option to avoid a county-level school expulsion. This type of extrinsic motivation would be characterized as external regulation. While attending alternative school the students internalized
the rules and regulations of the institution. At first this was primarily to avoid punishment (introjected regulation), but as the interviews showed, students accepted alternative school as a way of improving their grades. They also improved their attendance and punctuality. Thus the students wanted to attend school (identified regulation). Students internalized many of the rules that the alternative school and accepted the rules as increasing their chance to be successful, not only while attending alternative school, but mainstream school and life in general. Students changed their acquaintances, social activities, and study habits. To them, attending school became valuable and coherent with other self-structures of the students (integrated regulation). Students’ attendance, grades and behavior all improved while at alternative school and continued upon their return to mainstream school.

Structured extrinsic motivation evolved into the beginning stages of intrinsic motivation ultimately based on the desire to obtain a high school diploma. Every student interviewed expressed this desire. Though the alternative school had a strict climate of conformity, it allowed students to be more independent and focused on simple goals. Students focused on earning a diploma which to them, translated to success in high school and the first step to achieving a successful future. This goal was reinforced by their parents and the teachers at the alternative school. What was absent, however, was the principled motivation to learn and further their personal knowledge. Attending school was viewed as a stepping stone versus a learning experience and opportunity. The students stated that a diploma got them into college or the military, the next step in their lives. Students may still be lacking the intrinsic motivation to learn and understand new concepts needed at the next level of education, but instilling this desire was not the purpose of alternative school.
Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory stressed that students do best when there is “at least a skeletal outline of rigidity” (Maslow, 1943, p.375). Alternative school went far beyond a skeletal outline. In addition, students said they did not feel any safer while at alternative school and some even stated they felt less safe. There were measures to make the school more secure (metal detectors), but the aggressive behavior of some non-conforming students jeopardized an overall feeling of being safe. Social needs were also not an important consideration at alternative school as deliberate efforts to limit socializing were part of the alternative school processes. However, when these lower-level needs were not addressed, students were still able to advance to a level of self-actualization. Students received, as alternative school emphasizes, what they needed. They needed structure and discipline in their lives. They needed a sense of accountability to take control of their futures. They did not see themselves as people who were deprived of opportunity based on factors beyond their control, but as students who could overcome their previous transgressions and succeed academically. As Sommers and Satel (2006) pointed out, teachers’ actual mission should be preparing their students to be contributing members of society, not treating them as fragile souls who have problematic, non-existent obstacles that act as distractions to the actual mission. Focusing primarily on high self-regard versus providing extrinsic motivation that lays a foundation to understanding and conforming to societal values may actually inhibit personal growth.

Alternative school students developed autonomous motivation. This autonomous motivation was primarily well-internalized extrinsic motivation where students integrated within themselves the rules and regulations that were introduced by the external factors (at alternative school). In congruence with Mossholder’s lab experiments (1980), when learning is perceived as having little value or is boring, specific goals (such as earning a high school diploma) may
improve intrinsic motivation. If the educational material is perceived as boring, then a structured environment with defined goals may be more beneficial. Though students commented about computer based learning classes, these classes were viewed similarly as mainstream classes. Teacher’s interactions had an effect, but not to the point of making the classes interesting and worth attending for the sheer satisfaction and pleasure of it.

The students accepted the importance of the new rules and assimilated them into their own self-identification. This thereby becomes a form of intrinsic motivation. Though intrinsically motivated, students were not doing behavior because it was deemed satisfying and interesting, but because it was needed to achieve their ultimate goal of graduating high school.

The benefits of alternative school continued after the students returned to mainstream school. To these students, alternative school was life-changing. Though none of them wanted to attend, they all gained from their experiences while at alternative school.

**Implications**

The Central Georgia Alternative High School’s structure is organized to meet the needs of the students. It offers a strict, conforming environment that is meant to get the students’ attention and keep them focused on academics and acceptable behavior. When compared to mainstream school, where students’ individuality and creativity are more nurtured, alternative school focuses on conforming to societal norms to be successful. The students who attend alternative school have shown a lack of adherence to these norms.

The Central Georgia Alternative High School is forthcoming about its vision: “to educate our students socially and academically” (Student Handbook, 2015, p. 4). Though its overarching belief states that it “creates an environment that nurtures students,” the type of nurturing is starkly different than that of mainstream school. Three sub-level organizational beliefs that
stress this difference are: “Fairness is not treating students the same, fairness is giving students what they need,” “Ownership and control of one’s behavior promotes success,” and “An education forms a foundation to build a better life” (Student Handbook, 2015, p. 4). The processes in place that stress discipline, conformity and focus support these beliefs.

The Central Georgia Alternative High School provided the extrinsic motivation for the students to conform to accepted behavioral norms. Students understood this and adapted them as their own. This transformation enabled them to persist toward graduation and return to mainstream high school. Alternative school did not convert students’ motivation to attend school for the sheer desire to learn, but did teach the students the benefits of having a high school diploma in obtaining a successful future. It also got the parents more involved in their children’s academic careers. Alternative school benefited these students not only while they were enrolled, but also instilled lessons that benefitted them long after leaving alternative school.

The teachers that offered the most to the students were not the ones that simplified the courses, but those that interacted with the students and formed relationships where life-lessons could be discussed. Teachers made connections with students and emphasized a more positive outlook on education and their graduating high school. Having smaller classes with smaller student-to-teacher ratios definitely augmented this ability. The Central Georgia Alternative High School provides an avenue for students that are on a pathway for dropping out or being expelled from school, to follow a new direction to graduate. The students interviewed accepted this new direction; however, not all are as fortunate.

The Central Georgia Alternative High School meets a critical need for students who have demonstrated non-compliance with accepted in-school behavior. Mainstream administrators are sometime reluctant to recommend alternative school for their students whether it’s perceived as
an admission of their own school’s failure, a belief that mainstream school is more in tune with the student’s needs, or a belief that alternative school is for those that are beyond behavior modification. The Central Georgia Alternative High School should be explicitly viewed as an early option for disruptive, non-caring students. These students often lack discipline, personal goals and motivation. Alternative school may provide these assets in a short period and allow the students to then return to mainstream school. This would benefit the student and the mainstream school alike.

Though the alternative school provided what their students needed, it is not necessarily for everyone. Most mainstream school students have the discipline and intrinsic motivation to be successful. Mainstream school’s focus is more on creativity and offering a curriculum that inspires the pursuit of knowledge. Those that are intrinsically motivated may be inhibited by the strict, conforming climate of alternative school. However, mainstream teachers need to hold students accountable and if students lack the discipline to be successful in their classes, alternative school should be viewed as a viable option that is beneficial to all stakeholders. Alternative school should be viewed as a viable second chance for students who lack the discipline to succeed in mainstream school. Mainstream school teachers should incorporate both a nurturing experience to learn while also enforcing of published rules of the institution. Ignoring one will negatively affect a part of the school’s population.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this research. First, the students interviewed were all successful in returning to Middle Georgia High School and were on track to graduate. Therefore, reflection on alternative school contributions came from a focused, successful population of previous alternative school students. The research shows how alternative school
met the needs of these students and the school district, but this is only for a certain part of the school’s population. Those that were not successful may have a different perspective.

Students interviewed were often hesitant in expanding their opinions and getting out of their comfort zone. Responses were often one word answers that the researcher was forced to summarize for the student to either get a concurrence or non-concurrence response. The students were limited in their ability to express their feelings and often used jargon that had unclear meanings. Clarification again required summation and concurrence or non-concurrence from the students. Students often found it difficult to articulate what they felt, but they were able to tell what they experienced.

This research was limited in scope due to the size of the population, exclusive setting and even geographic location. Central Georgia may offer different results than an inner-city school system or one from a very rural location. Several of the students knew each other well having attended alternative school together and then returning to mainstream school. Though their responses were not coordinated in advance, they were quite similar. In addition, due to a new offering by the local school system, students may enroll in a credit recovery program where student may take classes on line and retake courses they may have previously failed. Teachers work on an individual basis with the students. This limits the number of alternative school students returning to mainstream high school since many are attending this new program.

Finally, though this research was open to all previous attendees of the Central Georgia Alternative High School, there was only one female student that decided to participate. Others were enrolled in the new credit recovery program or did not want to participate. The one female participant’s responses were often more negative than that of the rest of the respondents.
concerning her experience with alternative school teachers. However, this was the only area in which her responses were outliers compared to the rest of the group.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Expanding the population and setting of the existing research would help corroborate the findings of this study. Interviewing students that were not successful attending alternative school should also be explored. These students, who either voluntarily left or were expelled from alternative school, would provide valuable insight on their inability to conform to the school norms. Interviewing the teachers that interacted with the unsuccessful students is also an area that should be explored.

Finally, interviewing students that attended alternative school, graduated high school, and are now attending college would expand the understanding of their current motivation. Have these students become intrinsically motivated to learn and gain knowledge? Or, are they just attending school to get their college degree so they can get a job? If their motivation evolved and their goals changed what were the circumstances for these changes?

**Summary**

The experiences of select graduating high school seniors illustrate the benefits of alternative schools for those that have previously demonstrated poor behavior and an inability to progress in conventional schools. These benefits do not cease when the students eventually leave alternative school, but continue after their return to their conventional schools. Previous studies have shown that alternative schools have had a positive effect on students while they were attending the schools. The same benefits noted in this study, such as caring teachers, personal accountability, and smaller class sizes were positive influences on the students while at alternative school. However, it was the discipline and acceptance of group norms, reinforced
through the strict climate of the institution, which had a lasting effect. Students internalized the rules on the alternative school into their own self-identity. They accepted that they had to earn a high school diploma to be successful. This goal drove them to attend school regularly, be on time for class, divest themselves from negative social influences, and focus on their academics. Their in-class behavior and grades improved, not only at alternative school but on their return to conventional school as well.

Theories put forth by Deci and Ryan (2008) on self-determination and intrinsic motivation supported the research. Whereas Maslow’s theory of hierarchy of needs (1943) were questioned. Students need to be held accountable to academia’s norms. Nurturing students to achieve self-actualization should not take priority over accountability and discipline in schools. The intrinsic motivation that the students internalized was not based on a passion to learn or understand new concepts. Earning a diploma was the underlying motivation. The lessons highlighted in this research may be applied to other school districts in implementing its own alternative school. The benefits of alternative schools are documented and contribute to both the success of its students and the mainstream schools in which they return.

**Epilogue**

This study examined the motivation of at-risk high school students attending a Type II alternative school. The evolution of the students’ motivation was discussed using the Vallerand and Ratelle (2004) continuum of motivation. Students’ motivation progressed from the beginning stages of extrinsic motivation to what may be perceived as the initial stages of intrinsic motivation. With this evolution the students were successful in achieving their goal of graduating high school. Their progression led me to view my own journey through obtaining my doctorate degree.
I began my doctoral journey primarily due to the government’s Veterans Educational Assistance Program (VEAP) that pays veterans to be full time students to earn their advanced degrees. The amount offered paid for my tuition as well as supplementing my son’s college tuition at the same time. My enrollment at Liberty University was definitely extrinsically motivated based on earning additional funds for my and my son’s college. However, there came a point over half way through the doctoral process, when the VEAP money ran out and I had to make a decision whether to continue.

As I conducted the research, I realized that this was something that I cared about and wanted to complete. Thus, my efforts became intrinsically motivated. It was no longer a chore to earn the VEAP supplement, but a desire to conduct the study. Just as the students moved along the motivation continuum, so did I. Without the intrinsic motivation, however, I don’t think this study would have come to fruition. I experienced an evolution in motivation similar to what the alternative students described.
REFERENCES


Lange, C. M., & Sletten, J. S. (2002). Alternative Education: A brief history and research synthesis. *Project FORUM, National Association of State Directors of Special Education: 3(2.2b).*


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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

March 16, 2016

Michael J. Barrett, III
IRB Approval 2366.031616: Student Perceptions of Alternative School Climate: A Phenomenological Investigation of Motivational Factors Related to Structure, Staff and Instruction That Influence Persistence toward Graduation

Dear Michael,

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

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

Sincerely,

[Signature]

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1971 University Blvd. Lynchburg, VA 24515  IRB@LIBERTY.EDU  FAX (434) 522-0506  WWW.LIBERTY.EDU
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Student Perceptions of Alternative School Climate: A Phenomenological Investigation of Motivational Factors Related to Structure, Staff and Instruction that Influence Persistence Toward Graduation

Michael J. Barrett III
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of students’ perceptions regarding their attendance at an alternative school in central Georgia. You were selected as a possible participant because of your prior attendance in the alternative school, your re-admittance back into a mainstream high school, and your persistence toward high school graduation. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. This study is being conducted by Michael J. Barrett as a requirement for the researcher’s dissertation in pursuit of an Ed. D. in Educational Leadership through Liberty University.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to investigate how high school students explain the experiences they had while attending an alternative school and factors associated with alternative school culture that motivated them to persist to graduation. The overarching question is: How do former students explain and describe their experiences and perceptions regarding the characteristics of an alternative school culture that motivated them to persist to graduation?

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group, personal interview, or both. The focus group will be audio recorded, and will take about an hour of your time. The interviews will be conducted after school, audio recorded and will also take about an hour. This study will only take one hour of your time, or two hours if you choose to participate in both the interview and focus group. You have the right to get a summary of this research if you would like to have it.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

No perceivable risks are associated with this study. This study may provide information to school educators and administrators that improve student engagement and motivation.

**Compensation:**

There will be no payments associated with your participation in the study; however, a meal or meal voucher will be provided.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of publication, there will be no inclusion of any information or words that could link you with the study or that will make it possible to identify a subject. This study is confidential, your name will not be disclosed in any manner, and a number will be assigned versus name identification for any recordings. All records will be secured in appropriate storage by the researcher, Michael Barrett, and he alone will have access to the records.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

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

**How to Withdraw from the Study:**

Anytime during the focus group or interview process, the participant may withdraw from the study. Simple verbal notification is required. The recordings will then be erased, both audio and video. All notes and artifacts pertaining to the individual will be destroyed.
Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Michael J. Barrett III. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at 478-973-1383 or email at mjbarrett@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s advisor, Dr. Cristi McClendon, Ed.D., email at cjmcclendon@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

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

☐ (Initial box) The participant agrees to audio-recording an interview and completing a survey.

Signature: ________________________________ Date: _______________

Signature of Investigator: __________________________ Date: _______________
Appendix C: Letters of Permission to Conduct the Study

31 August, 2015

Liberty University
Institutional Review Board

Dear IRB Members:

This letter serves to certify that Michael Barrett (Liberty University student ID [redacted]) has permission to use and publish data pertaining to [redacted] High School students who volunteer to participate in research focusing on the experiences they had while attending alternative school. In addition, it is understood that:

- Research must be conducted during employee's personal time.
- Research cannot interrupt instructional time in any way.
- Researcher must do all research required for their project, cannot delegate any aspect to other system employees.
- System employees (including school personnel) will not collect data for researcher.
- System technology cannot be used by researcher by way of global email, use of the school “pony mail,” etc.

If you have any questions concerning this approval, I may be reached at the above phone number.

Respectfully,

Principal,
December 11, 2015

Liberty University

Institutional Review Board

Dear IRB members,

I hereby approve of Lt Col Michael Barrett, Senior Aerospace Science Instructor, High School (Liberty University student ID: [redacted]) to conduct research using [redacted] artifacts such as meeting minutes, the strategic plan (campus improvement plan), mission/vision statement, bell schedule and other applicable documentation that may benefit the study. The title of Lt Col Barrett’s research is: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PERSISTENCE TOWARD GRADUATION. The archival information will lack any identifiable information linking the research to this institution.

Please contact me at [redacted] if you have any questions or concerns.

Date: December 11, 2015
DATE: December 11, 2015

TO: Lt Col Michael Barrett
    High School

FROM: 

SUBJECT: RESEARCH APPROVAL REQUEST

Your request to conduct research for your graduate program at Liberty University is approved. The purpose of your study, "STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS RELATED TO STRUCTURE, STAFF AND INSTRUCTION THAT INFLUENCE PERSISTENCE TOWARD GRADUATION", will be to investigate how high school students describe their experiences attending alternative school in Central Georgia. Additionally, this study seeks to explore what, if any, factors associated with alternative school culture may have motivated them to persist toward graduation. The timeframe for this research study is one year from the date of system approval.

Thank you for submitting your IRB form, research proposal, consent form, interview questions, and the principal approval letters.

Please keep in mind that you will be responsible for compiling the data for your research. The staff at [blank] High School, [blank], and the Department of Testing and Information Technology is unable to compile data for your research. Board policy also prohibits the use of system email for personal research. Please also remember student and teacher anonymity is of utmost priority for this research project.

I have attached to this approval e-mail the [blank] Schools Requirements for Conducting Research.

I wish you the best as you work toward earning your graduate degree. Please let me know if I may be of any assistance to you again in the future.

cc: 

Appendix D: Bracketing

Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, my interpretations of the lived experiences of the participants were taken into consideration and effort was made to bracket out any biases. Though an extensive literature review was accomplished prior to the research, this was to better understand the current information on the subject and not to further any perceptions or assumptions regarding the subject matter (Burns & Grove, 2003). In addition, bracketing was accomplished by writing down any personal preconceptions, beliefs and opinions of alternative school and its students. By putting these on paper, the researcher was able to better reflect on personal biases and set them aside during the actual research process.

Though I teach personal accountability, I must be open to new perspectives. My views towards alternative school and its students before I began the research are discussed below.

Alternative school benefits mainstream school by offering a viable avenue for removing students who habitually disrupt the learning environment. I believe the vast majority of students who are sent to alternative school have a record of repeat classroom disruption, excessive absences or failure to abide by the Board of Education’s rules. Rarely is someone sent to alternative school for a first time, minor offense.

As a teacher, I often see student apathy towards education. In many of the lower socio-economic students this apathy is reinforced by their parents. An example of this is student birthdays. Often students are absent on their birthday because their parents let them celebrate by not going to school. This misguided emphasis on treating school as a negative experience and are rewarded for their absenteeism is passed on to the students.
As a teacher who teaches the Air Force core values of integrity first, service before self and excellence in all we do; I see many students completely void of a personal moral code. At the same time, however, many students seek out guidance for how to live their lives. They crave the simplicity of knowing what they should do without going through the torment of trying to decide what they can do without negative consequences. I believe many of the students sent to alternative school may fit into this category.

Self-control is a cornerstone in the military and in JROTC. My top cadets always demonstrate it. The students sent to alternative school obviously lacked a level of self-control that would allow them to stay at mainstream school. Most teachers, including myself, have a negative connotation towards returning alternative school students. When we hear that a student is enrolling in our class after returning from alternative school, we are apprehensive and anticipate classroom disruption from the student. Our expectations for student performance are lowered. I do not get many alternative school students in JROTC, nor do I keep track of the students that were sent to alternative school. I am not aware of how alternative school completion affected their academic careers.

I have the utmost respect for the teachers and administrators at alternative school. They have a difficult, and mostly unrewarding job to do. They have to keep a positive outlook and present a strict but approachable demeanor every day. That is difficult to do.

Finally, during data collection, I was also cognizant of being viewed as an outsider by the at-risk participants and positioned myself as a teacher, father, and member of the community to elicit researcher-participant dialogue.
Appendix E: Selected Quotes

Table 1  Selected examples of Significant Statements of Students Who returned from Alternative School back to Mainstream High School and Related Formulated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statement</th>
<th>Formulated Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What gets your attention quick is the metal detector. Every morning they check you</td>
<td>Security Process included metal detectors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and they check you completely.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They watch you all the time. You’re just doing your time over there.</td>
<td>Constantly being watched.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I was to go to jail, that’s what Crossroads was like. They treat you like a</td>
<td>Treated like a criminal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>criminal even if you got there for something small. Some kids need to be there for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what they did.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeah, it was like prison. Do your time and return to [Mainstream] School</td>
<td>Doing time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well, it changed me everyday because like over there, you can’t do what you do over</td>
<td>Disciplined/strict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>here, you know. So you can’t have you earphones out. You can’t because they’ll send</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you at home automatically. And over there, it is much -- it isn’t harder. It is</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>really easy. But, you know what I’m saying, like --.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See when you walk in there in the morning time they just own you like that. You got</td>
<td>Hard to endure and goes slowly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to go through a checkout. You got to really just be on top. If you ain’t on top</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they aren’t going to play with you. They’re going to send you home or ISS [In School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension].</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeah, you don’t come back. And I’ve seen -- you will be surprised if you bring like</td>
<td>Strict and swift in punishment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anything to school that’s not supposed to be there, they’ll send you home for the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rest of the semester.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, it was a motivation not to do none of that stuff and keep my head down and clean</td>
<td>Alternative school was conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You got to wear like the, you got to wear a collared shirt, like every day you got to</td>
<td>Alternative school was conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wear uniforms. Every day they don’t have no saging. And you got to really.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go home and stay home. They ain’t going to play with you.</td>
<td>Swift enforcement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You’ll probably go to ISS. You’ll probably go to ISS or they ask you to pull them up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all the way over here. They ain’t going to do the same.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like it better here because it’s like people accept you for who you are. But at</td>
<td>Alternative school was for criminals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossroads it is just like if you ain’t done nothing bad, you still get blamed for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>something. And if you do do bad stuff there, you’re popular in Crossroads.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The punishment was either you get SRC [Student Review Committee] or you get ISS [In</td>
<td>Punishment was swift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Suspension].</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had perfect attendance. It got easy with the thing called Dress Down passes. And</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if you have perfect attendance for like, a month for November or something, we get</td>
<td>Time off for good conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress Down passes and we can dress down on Fridays</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bad aspects is just like we can’t leave out of class without asking. We can’t</td>
<td>Alternative school was for criminals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like basically do whatever we want. But the only, I mean the bad aspect, is just the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uniform like some people want to be different, but you probably got to have a belt,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khakis and white collared shirt. People came to school with no belt, no shirt like</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they wore gym shorts. You can’t wear gym shorts at Crossroads.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They got ISS for two days. – I mean it’s good and bad because as people – this is a</td>
<td>Alternative school was conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>simple outfit. And people still come to school with violations.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeah, and but the good thing is like since we get in trouble since people are in</td>
<td>Alternative school was conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classrooms and making scenes like that it’s hard for us to understand certain things.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So they make the outfit more simple and so it should be simple like – like they</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expect us to come to school. Did they come to school every day in the right dress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>code? Not always.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They [the teachers] don’t care about anything. All they care about is dress code.</td>
<td>Simple rules to follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have a belt, you got to have collared shirt with buttons, no T-shirts, no tank</td>
<td>Alternative school was for criminals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tops.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now, that was horrible, like I hate it, because like when I always wanted to go to</td>
<td>You were confined from attending outside of alternative school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>football games. And so like when I go to Crossroad, I was upset about that. You</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>know, I missed out on Spirit Week. That was horrible. I was like – yeah, I missed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>out on pep rally. And I like going to the pep rallies and stuff.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And in alternative school, it’s – the people were different. Everybody was just</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean. They were worse than everybody. Just acting they’re criminals and stuff.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And the teachers treat you like you’re just like everybody else even if you’re in</td>
<td>Treated like criminals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there for something else not a crime.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was – it depends on how severe it was. If it was something like talking out of</td>
<td>Rules were simple, the punishment was swift.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turn or like talking in class while the teacher is talking and stuff like that, you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>get signed out from lunch, this is where you sit up from the stage and eat in this</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cubicle. You have to write down what you did and why you did it and you can’t talk to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anybody.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely the discipline. They weren’t – they didn’t play around.</td>
<td>Discipline enforced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The discipline system. I mean, you know what I mean? They didn’t give people slack</td>
<td>Students held accountable for their actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or anything. It was if you mess up twice, you’re gone; – they’ll kick you out. – I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saw people get out– they obviously left and right to because they were cut down</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>too much.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2: Students' articulated meaning arranged into specific clusters

**Theme 1: Alternative school was viewed as punishment, similar to a prison sentence to conform.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Security Process included metal detectors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constantly being watched.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treated like a criminal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplined/strict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard to endure and goes slowly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict in punishment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative school was conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swift enforcement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment was swift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time off for good conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative school was conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple rules to follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You were confined from attending outside of alternative school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative school was for criminals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students held accountable for their actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative school was like a prison.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline enforced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security was tight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even lunch had strict rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scary serving time with bad kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No time to socialize/ Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative school was conforming with high security / Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad kids who need discipline enforced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students act like criminals at Alternative school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faster paced, focused, no time to socialize / Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faster paced, no time to socialize / Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple rules to follow. Alternative school was conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal detector, security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict with simple rules to follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>condensed schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prison, criminal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dress code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dress code, good conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no socializing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment was swift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal detector, security</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>