

A Study of Alternative Education Programs in the State of Missouri

by

Ronald Joshua Ladd

September 2014

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University in

partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

School of Education

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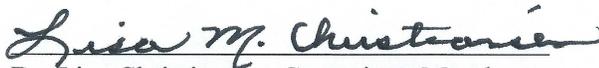
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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree.

Ronald Joshua Ladd

Signature:  Date: 9-12-2019

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Abstract

The focus of this study was to examine the characteristics of alternative programs in the state of Missouri and to determine whether a statistical difference in the persistence to graduation rate existed between the two variations of programs. When identifying the characteristics, several commonalities emerged. These commonalities could be the focus of future studies to determine a list of best-practices among alternative programs. When focusing on the statistical element of this study, the two programs in question were revolving door and one-way programs. For the purpose of this study, a revolving door style program was defined as one that assesses and addresses student needs within an alternative setting. Once they record significant progress, these students return to the regular classroom setting. A one-way program style assigns students to an educational setting once they prove that the regular classroom setting is not an appropriate situation. The at-risk students in this program will either graduate from the alternative school or choose not to complete high school. According to the findings of this study, there was no statistically significant difference between and among the persistence to graduation rate midst the revolving door and one-way styles of alternative programs.

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Chapter One: Introduction

One rising concern among American citizens is that the ability to secure suitable employment is extremely difficult to obtain. Although the need for specialized training or higher education is at an all-time high, the Missouri high school dropout rate rose 15.9% from 2000 to 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). This statistic equates to 61,400 dropouts in the state of Missouri alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Because the employment rate of the dropout population also decreased 24.5% during the period, Missouri is in the midst of an extremely serious economic and social decline (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Consequently, the need for alternative educational programs in Missouri is more critical than ever.

Because alternative educational programs that educate students differently have become a necessary component of the American high school, it is beneficial to know and understand the tenets and philosophy behind these programs (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Components of alternative programming in Missouri were the focus of this research project. The information garnered closely aligns to elements found in a study conducted in Texas focused on achieving academic success with high-risk students (Frishberg, Lee, Fletcher, & Webster, 2010).

According to researchers Frishberg et al. (2010), the structure, climate or culture, and establishment of alternative programs were essential to achieving academic success with the at-risk demographic. Research has indicated that approaching alternative education with less than adequate support will prove insufficient (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Therefore, when creating such support features, curriculum, instructional

methods, class size, and administrative support are areas in which a program must be focused in order to reach the goal of student achievement (Frishberg et al., 2010).

In reviewing this information, stakeholders may gain a better understanding of the methods used to educate the at-risk student population and develop a more holistic view of the current programs within Missouri that directly impact the dropout rate, and subsequently, the financial standing of the state.

Background of Study

From the outset, public education served students who simply did not match the standard definition of successful individuals. The original concept of public education was to allow students access to information with little guidance on how to understand or retain that knowledge (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006). Some students struggled to learn the most basic educational concepts due to mild learning disabilities, poor social skills, or a poor home environment (D'Angelo & Zemanick 2009).

Regardless of the reasons for the students' poor performance, educators labor to help underachieving students, while serving the remaining population in their classroom (Isbell & Cote, 2009). Despite the effort, however, at-risk students fail all too often. This failure results in a negative impact on the student at both the internal and external level (Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011). However, the damage does not stop there. The repercussions of a failing student extend to the surrounding community as well. According to one statistic from the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), the impact of only one cohort dropout class will cost approximately \$337 billion in lost wages alone.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that guided this study surrounded the issue of student retention. The retention of at-risk students has been the focus of many academic studies since, retention at all levels is paramount to students' success. For example, in 2010, 35.5% of high school dropout students were unemployed compared to 22.7% of graduates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). According to Frishberg et al. (2010), the concept of student retention has been addressed on both the K-12 as well as collegiate levels with similar results. Frishberg et al. (2010) found that "improved student graduation rates appear to result from three types of institutional practices that increase student engagement and progress" (p. 18). These practices included strategic structure of the educational experience, careful consideration of the culture of the school community, and programs specifically designed to address the needs of struggling students (Frishberg et al., 2010). Jensen (2011) supported the work of Frishberg et al. (2010) and identified many of the same traits. Among these traits were establishing a connection through clubs or other social networking opportunities as well as ensuring that class size was well managed (Frishberg et al., 2010; Jensen, 2011,).

Frishberg et al. (2010) outlined in detail aspects of the three institutional practices. Elements, such as small class sizes; developing a strong connection between students and teachers; and setting specific, obtainable goals for students, were among these. Frishberg et al. (2010) continued by providing a set of characteristics their research suggested is crucial in order to maximize student retention and by extension, student success. Among these characteristics are "quality equipment, attractive physical facilities, curriculum

matched with the needs of the industry, early interventions, and a good mix of programs” (Frishberg et al., 2010, pp. 20-21).

Based on research, Frishberg et al. (2010) found that when developing a curriculum for at-risk students, a focus should be placed on the level in which students must be able to perform to be successful in work environment. This concept was echoed by Tinto (2007) as he addressed retention at the collegiate level. While the majority of Tinto’s (2007) research was focused at the collegiate level, his ideas are still appropriate guidelines for K-12. Tinto (2007) stated that it is clearly understood that retention ultimately leads to student success, and this is the teacher’s responsibility. However, Tinto (2007) also asserted this issue is part of a much larger educational problem, and educators must “join forces with larger educational movements that seek to restructure the way we go about the task of educating all not just some of our students” (p. 13). Tinto (2007) further noted, “unfortunately too many of our conversations with the faculty are not about student education but about student retention” (p. 9). Tinto (2007) continued by arguing that if more focus is placed on the academic standard and the educational process, then “increased student retention will follow of its own accord” (p. 9). In a separate publication, Tinto and Pusser (2006) stated:

Though research on student attrition is plentiful and debate over theories of student persistence vigorous, less attention has been plaid to the development of a model of institutional action that provides institutions guidelines for effective action to increase student persistence and in turn student success. (p. 1)

Frishberg et al. (2010), Jensen (2011), and Tinto (2007), supported the theory that student retention focuses on the student who is not being successful in the mainstream

academic channel and how the institutions, as well as instructors, have a vested interest in improving this situation. Therefore, the focus of this study was alternative programs, more specifically, class sizes, program structure, and support, and curriculum. Based on research conducted by both Tinto (2007) and Frishberg et al. (2010), the issue of student retention is paramount in successfully altering the course of the at-risk student, and moreover, providing each student the opportunity for academic success.

Statement of the Problem

Each year, the United States falls deeper into debt. According the Congressional Research Service (2013), it is projected that debt in the United States will rise to approximately \$17.2 trillion by 2015 (Austin & Levit, 2013). This declining economic situation affects all aspects of lives. By analyzing and addressing the dropout rate in the United States, educators can make a significant impact on the current economic situation. By extension, each student who earns a high school diploma may have a chance at a much-improved life (“The high cost,” 2008). For example, an individual with a high school diploma could earn as much as \$260,000 more during his or her lifetime than a person without a diploma (“The high cost,” 2008).

Meanwhile, No Child Left Behind, (2002) set educational standards for every school district in the nation in motion. These mandates caused school districts to examine educational practices, such as social and academic support, assessment, and feedback, and institutional commitment (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). School districts face the expectation they must work even harder to ensure all students are receiving the highest education possible (Frishberg et al., 2010).

Missouri graduates an average of 80% of its students from high school, which earns Missouri a place in the top third of high school graduation rates in the nation (Burrus & Richard, 2012). Despite this statistic, the financial impact is still substantial (Biddle, 2005). According to Biddle (2005), “Twelve percent of juvenile prison inmates have never graduated from high school or received their GED” (para. 1). Biddle (2005) continued by stating, “America spends \$5.7 billion on incarcerating juveniles, and billions more on the entire juvenile justice system” (para. 2). These financial burdens, accompanied by the earning potential of high school graduates versus high school dropouts, could create a truly lethal combination for the nation. This current study was an effort not only to shed light on this serious academic issue, but also to provide guidance to those wishing to combat this declining situation.

Educators likely agree that too many youth slip through the educational cracks and become negative statistics in society. Unemployment, incarceration, or living well below the poverty line cause many students to be considered at-risk, even though the majority have average intelligence, have properly functioning mental faculties, and speak English fluently (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). What these students lack is the desire to jump the educational hurdles designed to help them grow and develop into successful adults.

Alternative education is an essential part of reaching at-risk youth (Biddle, 2005). Consequently, the objective of the current study was to uncover the best practices available to educators by examining alternative education programs throughout Missouri. Once identified, these best practices could be used to create an effective alternative program.

Purpose of Study

Since its passage in 2001, NCLB added a series of fidelity checks and requirements to the educational system. These requirements fall under the stipulations set by Adequate Yearly Progress or AYP (“Fact,” n.d.). Failure to meet the requirements could result in serious, professional repercussions, either to individual staff or to the school district as a whole (“Fact,” n.d.). Therefore, it becomes essential for every student in Missouri public schools to achieve the highest level possible in areas, such as attendance, continuation to graduation, and the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) and End-of-Course (EOC) assessments. To assure this achievement, various programs have to be in place and functioning at their maximum potential to ensure all student subgroups reach the goals set by local and federal agencies. Programs, such as alternative schools, play a pivotal role in districts meeting AYP, thus protecting them from potential government intervention.

The purpose of the current study was to explore alternative programs throughout Missouri in an effort to identify commonalities. In addition, the data determined if there is a statistically significant difference in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way alternative programs within Missouri. This information may then be used to generate possible academic solutions and identify best practices for working with at-risk students.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following research questions controlled the focus of the current study:

1. What are the characteristics of alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Educational Network?

2. What difference, if any, exists in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Education Network?

The following hypotheses were tested:

H_{2_0} : There is no difference in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Education Network.

H_{2_a} : There is a significant difference in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Education Network.

Definition of Key Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions apply:

A+ software. This computerized, educational process adheres to all federal, state, and local education requirements and allows the participating students to receive a fully credited diploma upon completion. Program lessons are researched-based and available for students from grade school up through adulthood (Fuel Education, 2014).

Adequate yearly progress. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MODESE) describes Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as a means in which to ensure the continual growth of students within the educational system (Understanding AYP, 2011). Due to legislation described within the NCLB, all K-12 educational institutions are obligated to demonstrate progressive growth within their student body based on academic targets (MODESE, 2014). These annual targets include

academic proficiency, graduation as well as persistence to graduation, and a participation rate (Understanding AYP, 2011).

Alternative schools. This type of school "...is an educational setting designed to accommodate educational, behavioral and/or medical needs of children and adolescents that cannot be adequately addressed in a traditional school environment" ("Alternative School," n.d., p. 1).

At-risk. The term at-risk has many different definitions. However, for the purpose of this study, this term describes any student at risk of dropping out of school for educational, medical, or social reason with no intention of re-enrolling or pursuing his or her high school equivalency.

Computer based instruction. Computer based instruction is a learning situation wherein a computer system assumes complete responsibility for instructing a student at any grade level (Lowe, 2004).

Direct instruction. Direct instruction discards the concept that students will automatically learn through basic development ("Direct Instruction," n.d.). Given this position, their research has led them to believe that the most appropriate method for guiding learning is to incorporate a methodology which utilizes a system of steps ("Direct Instruction," n.d.). Within these steps, the learner should be shown the meaning and results of their learning ("Direct Instruction," n.d.). In addition, educators incorporating direct instruction should ensure that all learners have established clear and obtainable goals for themselves. Once these goals have been created, the educator should then, develop and apply a variety of effective teaching strategies with these students until they can demonstrate mastery of the content and therefore, reach their goal ("Direct

Instruction,” n.d.). During this learning time, an effective teacher must continually check for understanding in order to better address the needs of their student(s) (“Direct Instruction,” n.d.). The final element in this process is to allow the student the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of the content at hand (“Direct Instruction,” n.d.).

End-of-course (EOC) exams. According to the MODESE (2014) EOC exams provide a valid and reliable method for assessing student knowledge of Missouri’s Course-Level Expectations (CLEs). The department identified the following purposes for end-of-course testing: “a) Measuring student achievement and progress toward postsecondary readiness; b) Identifying students’ strengths and weaknesses; c) Communicating expectations for all students; d) Meeting state and national accountability requirements; and e) Evaluating programs” (“End of Course,” 2008, p. 1).

Missouri assessment program. The Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) evaluates student progress toward mastery of the Show-Me Standards, which are the educational standards set by the state of Missouri (MODESE, 2011). The grade-level assessment is a yearly standards-based test that measures specific skills defined for each grade (MODESE, 2011). The assessment also includes sections from the TerraNova survey, a national norm-referenced test used to assess how well students are performing compared to their peers across the country (MODESE, 2011).

Negative reinforcement. Negative reinforcement involves strengthening a behavior through the removal of privileges or other positive stimuli. People often confuse negative reinforcement with punishment. Slavin (2009) stated, “One way to avoid this error in terminology is to remember that reinforcers (whether positive or

negative) strengthen behavior, whereas punishment is designed to weaken behavior” (p. 133).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB). According to a White House press release, NCLB, the most current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, was signed into law in 2001 (“Everything You Need,” 2012). This project was designed with two primary elements. One element was to increase schools accountability on the level of academic instruction that takes place daily. The second element added additional fidelity to various subgroups within any given school district. These subgroups are special education students, minority students and any at-risk student

One-way program. A one-way alternative program is one in which an at-risk student may be placed when the regular classroom setting has been deemed ineffective. Once placed in this style of alternative program, the at-risk student will either earn his or her high school diploma from this program or drop out of school.

PLATO software. During the 1960s, the University of Illinois developed a computerized instructional database, which evolved into PLATO Learning (“History of Plato Learning,” 2012). This system utilized state and federal educational standards to develop curriculum for all grades and post-secondary education (“History of Plato Learning,” 2012).

Positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is a behavioral technique in which desired behaviors increase when using rewards (Cuncic, 2012).

READ 180. According to Scholastic, the creators of the program, READ 180 is “designed for any student reading two or more years below grade-level, *READ 180*

leverages adaptive technology to individualize instruction for students and provide powerful data for differentiation to teachers” (“Scholastic,” 2013).

Response to Intervention (RtI). RtI is a multi-tiered approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs (“What is RtI,” n.d.). This course of action provides teachers with a systematic approach to help struggling students. By utilizing three separate tiers, teachers can customize an intervention for a specific student.

Retention. In this study, Tinto’s (2007) definition of retention was used. Retention is the ability to maintain a student’s enrollment until that student has successfully completed his or her high school requirements and earned a high school diploma (Tinto, 2007).

Revolving door program. A revolving door program is style of program in which a student is assessed to determine what needs must be addressed within an alternative educational setting. Once sufficient progress has been made by the student, he or she is allowed to return to the regular classroom setting.

Limitations and Assumptions

The present study contained various limitations and assumptions. The first limitation arose in drafting the survey questions. For example, the purpose of the survey was to gather objective data; however, subjectivity was difficult to avoid based on personal and or professional bias (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Pannucci and Wilkins (2011) stated when addressing personal and or professional bias, a researcher cannot simplify this process by asking whether or not bias is present; instead, a researcher must analyze the degree of bias within the study. Pannucci and Wilkins (2011) offered

solutions to minimize the impact of bias on any given study. One of these solutions is to standardize data and data collection (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2011). In an attempt to create a more standardized vernacular within this study, various definitions of alternative programs and industry specific terminology was generated to increase participant consistency in responses.

Another limitation involved obtaining the completed surveys from the randomly selected school districts. Given the level of expectations placed on educators, it was understandable that not every district selected would complete the survey in a timely manner. An additional limitation to this particular study was that the focus was confined to Missouri alternative programs. Only school districts that were members of the Missouri Alternative Education Network (MAEN) were asked to participate in the study. This was done as a means of establishing a consistent base for the survey.

One assumption to this study was that all participants answered the survey questions in an honest and open fashion. It was also assumed that the person who was trusted to answer each question had access to the pertinent information for this study and applied that information. Another assumption in this study was that the individuals invested the time to familiarize themselves with the definitions provided by the researcher, which were written in an effort to provide consistency for terms that could be misunderstood or misused during the survey (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

An additional assumption within this study may have emerged from the perspective of the researcher. The researcher of this particular study has served as the administrator over alternative programs in one rural school district for the past eight years. Prior to time spent as an administrator, he served as an at-risk teacher for two

years. Due to the researcher's professional obligations and experience, a bias toward specific elements within alternative programs may have occurred. To avoid researcher bias, two instructors reviewed all data and findings.

Significance of the Study

As mentioned earlier, the factors surrounding NCLB generated a strong need for various educational programs (Frishberg et al., 2010). Based on these needs, the focus of the current study was alternative education programs in Missouri. However, NCLB was not the only driving force behind this particular study. A growing drop-out population as well as a declining national economic situation also provided inspiration ("Facing the School," 2011). These two facts, coupled with the inherent responsibility of the educational system, which is to reach every student, combined to create the driving force behind this study. The importance of establishing an alternative education program is paramount in the current society.

Summary

The original outlook on education served as the starting point of this chapter. This outlook included the mindset that a public school's primary obligation was to simply provide necessary information to students (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006). Many critics would suggest the public educational system has changed very little in the past 200 years (Gable et al., 2006). Over time, this educational mindset has proven to be ineffective with the at-risk portion of the student population ("The High Cost," 2008). Aspects of the economy, such as the welfare assistance program and the juvenile justice system, continue to drain billions of dollars from local and federal budgets (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

Based on this information, the concept of student retention has become a focal point of many studies (Tinto, 2007). This concept has been analyzed at the K-12 and collegiate level with very similar results (Tinto, 2007). The results have suggested that there are common themes that should be addressed when combatting the issue of educating the at-risk student. Pertinent themes, resources, and main points of this project, including the effects of drop-outs on the economy were presented in this chapter. The purpose and significance, the research questions in the current study, and definitions employed in the study were detailed.

In Chapter Two, a variety of professional literature specifically targeting elements, such as the impact that high school drop-out students have on the economy, government influence on at risk education, program elements and other essential components, curriculum and instructional practices, and behavioral and academic intervention strategies will be explored. Also contained in these articles is research which served as a means of establishing credibility for specific interventions or programs or information that renders an intervention or program insufficient in achieving a desired result. The focus of Chapter Two was to identify research that allows educators to identify a program that may address a specific need, while establishing credibility for this particular study. In an effort to maintain the credibility of this study, sources were limited to those published within the last five years; although, some exceptions were granted based on the need to provide a clearer understanding of alternative programs.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to explore alternative programs and schools throughout Missouri. The central points of this study determined the literature review selections. To aid in the understanding of how each selection pertains to alternative schools/programs or the at-risk student, the literature review falls into five main categories, including: a) the impact of dropouts; b) government influence; c) program structure and essential elements; d) curriculum and instructional practices; and e) academic and behavioral interventions.

When selecting appropriate literary artifacts, qualifying questions were applied, such as: Does the article offer new ideas on this topic.... Does the article explore data that were unknown (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005)? Unless the article pertained to a foundational principle or law, the sources included those published within the five years previous to the current study. Even though the focus of this project was to examine alternative schools and/or programs within Missouri, the other state alternative laws and programs as were explored as a means of analyzing and comparing programs.

The Impact of Dropouts

According to national data produced in 2010, by the Alliance for Excellent Education, approximately 1.3 million students failed to successfully complete the requirements for high school graduation in 2009. Students from families in the lowest economic quartile were seven times more likely to drop out of high school than were students from the highest quartile (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). Over one-third of all dropouts were lost in the ninth grade due to an overwhelming academic workload accompanied by insufficient family or academic support (Alliance for Excellent

Education, 2010). Meanwhile, the economic impact of these students grew. On average, high school dropouts would earn about \$260,000 less than a graduate over the course of their lifetime, which equated to \$377 billion in lost wages from the class of 2010 alone (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) estimated that if the class of 2006 dropouts had graduated, the United States could have saved \$17 billion in Medicaid and other health related expenses (Alliance for Excellent Education). In addition:

If U.S. high schools and colleges were to raise the graduate rates of Hispanic, African American, and Native American students to the levels of white students by 2020, the potential increase in personal income would add more than \$310 billion to the U.S. economy. (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010, p. 3)

Education Week (2011) cited the 2011 U.S. Census Bureau's estimation that male high school dropouts earned \$21,629, while female dropouts earned \$13,943 (*Dropouts*, 2011, para. 2). This statistic was consistent with the 2011 findings of the American Psychological Association that stated students who do not successfully complete high school have a much lower employability rate, which in turn reduces their income potential ("Facing the School," 2011). Other attributes consistent with high school dropouts are incarceration and a reliance on government financial aid ("Facing the School," 2011).

Meanwhile, Padron (2009), the president of Miami Dade College, noted that 7,000 students drop out of high school each school day or one every 26 seconds. Padron (2009) alleged that the current educational system was broken. Padron (2009) justified this statement by citing the *Nation's Report Card* from the National Center for Education

Statistics, which reported that in 2008, “only 35% of high school students were proficient in reading and just 23% of 12th graders were proficient in math” (p. 20).

Government Influence

Alternative schools first emerged in the 1960s as a result of bureaucracy and the departmentalization of public education (*What Can We Learn*, 2008). The article reported two separate versions of alternative schools/programs which emerged during the period; those outside the public school system and those inside. An example of an outside public school or program discussed in this article were the Freedom Schools and Free Schools Movement. Both programs provided quality education for primarily minority students (*What Can We Learn*, 2008).

Since that period, both federal and state mandates have governed alternative programs. One example is the Graduation Promise Act or GPA (2009). According to the 2011 revisions to the Graduation Promise Act, “[it] established an appropriate federal role in the secondary school reform” (S. Res. S. 1698, 2009). This document targeted issues, such as creating school reform focused on the lowest performing districts in the nation and supporting researched-based interventions. Then, in 2001, the federal government enacted NCLB in an effort to ensure that all students would achieve the same academic standards regardless of race, economic background, or disability (NCLB Act, 2002). This single act had a tremendous impact on education throughout the country.

Also in 2009, the United States president placed on the public educational system the goal of obtaining “the highest proportion of college graduates in the world” (Frishberg et al., 2010, p. 4). This proclamation brought student retention to the forefront. Frishberg et al. (2010) outlined a set of requirements that have been proven to

effectively increase the student retention rate in both K-12 and collegiate environments. Among these were establishing a structured learning environment. This environment should consist of experienced and knowledgeable staff who has a vested interest in the process. These educators should demonstrate the ability to maintain their position for multiple years to help create stability (Frishberg et al., 2010).

In addition to longevity, these same educators should be able to foster an atmosphere conducive to high level learning among their students. (Frishberg et al., 2010) Teachers should be willing to invest the time necessary to reach each student and guide him or her to the goal. These goals should be set at a high, yet obtainable level. These educators should also be able and willing to identify any and all obstacles that have inhibited the students from succeeding in the past (Frishberg et al., 2010).

This same outlook on curriculum was also addressed in both Indiana and Oklahoma as both state documents outlined educating the at-risk student. Both state documents identified the need for a customized curriculum (*Alternative Education*, 1996). Meanwhile, Missouri established its own legal precedent, which provided guidelines when educating at-risk students. Among other items, the Missouri document, *Pupils and Special* (2012) clarified the use of various state funds, established the determining factors of identifying the at-risk student, and provided a clear goal for any program of that nature. That goal was to graduate all students. However, it was made clear that all obstacles must be identified before progress can be made (*Pupils and Special*, 2012). Frishberg et al. (2010) articulated, “If these obstacles are identified, a discussion ensues to determine if these obstacles are still an impediment to success, and a

plan is created to lead to success” (pp. 22-23). This process was also supported by research conducted by Tinto (2007) of Syracuse University.

According to an article by Tinto (2007), the concept of student retention is not new. In fact, Tinto (2007) stated that student retention has been part of academic discussions for the past 40 years (Tinto, 2007). However, Tinto (2007) did state the focus of these discussions has shifted over time. In the beginning, it was assumed that a student’s ability to successfully complete his or her academic endeavor was a “reflection of individual attributes, skills, and motivation” (Tinto, 2007, p. 2).

Also identified as common factors for academic success was an individual’s economic status, as well as self-discipline (Jensen, 2011). It has been only recently that researchers have determined that many external factors play a pivotal role in the success of students at all levels (Tinto, 2007). Tinto (2007) explained that in order to successfully combat these external factors, academic programs must be put in place. However, these programs must be supported at the administrative level if positive results are to be observed (Tinto, 2007). Tinto (2007) stated, “after a few years, like other programs before them, they fade away typically with the departure of the originators of the program or of a supportive administrator” (pp. 8-9). However, with the arrival of NCLB, these programs are more likely to endure these hurdles.

Other educationally-centered documents from the states of Indiana and Oklahoma pertaining to at-risk education shared many common threads with Tinto (2007). Both states outlined a clear set of standards. Items, such as student-to-teacher ratio, a clear mission statement, and a tailored curriculum were expectations of their respective department of education offices (*Alternative Education*, 2006). It is documents such as

these that tie into Tinto's (2007) theory of student retention. Tinto (2007) stated that it is assumed that the successful completion of any academic goal is directly tied to the retention of that student. Tinto (2007) also stated that the focus of faculty meetings needs to shift toward academic expectations and away from student retention. Tinto (2007) also hypothesized that student retention will follow positive student achievement.

Based on both the historic path and government influence, several alternative programs and schools emerged. The Associate Chair of the College of Professional Studies at the University of West Florida, Tissington (2006), identified some of the commonalities between the programs in *History: Our Hope for the Future*. Tissington (2006) stated that current at-risk programs were a result of the experimentation that occurred within the Freedom Schools in the 1960s. Tissington (2006) added that legislation, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) and NCLB provided, served to mandate the programs.

Program Structure and Essential Elements

According to the *Encyclopedia of Children's Health*, alternative schools comprise "an educational setting designed to accommodate educational, behavioral, and/or medical needs of children and adolescents that cannot be adequately addressed in a traditional school environment" ("Alternative School," n.d., p. 1). This definition has an inherent ambiguous undertone due to the nature of the students served in alternative schools. Gable, Bullock, and Evans (2006) stated that both political and economic forces influenced the evolution of alternative schools. Gable et al. (2006) further outlined the foundational elements of public education, such as instructional focus and discipline, to determine the unsuccessful nature of public education pertaining to the at-risk student.

Research has indicated that the rote learning of core academic concepts coupled with the corporal punishment and humiliating discipline strategies are not effective when dealing with the population.

In an article, *Before or After the Bell?: School Context and Neighborhood Effects on Student Achievement*, authors Jargowsky and Komi (2009) explored the connection between student achievement and the home environment of at-risk students. Meanwhile, continual conversations between educators focused on various factors which influence the at-risk learner (Jargowsky & Komi, 2009). Among these factors are financial resources allocated to schools, quality instruction, and the student support structure from the home (Jargowsky & Komi, 2009). States, such as Missouri, have identified some of these same factors that impact education and adjusted their financial allocation to better equip school districts in addressing the at-risk population (*Pupils and Special*, 2012).

Jargowsky and Komi (2009) discussed the impact, both positive and negative, that the local populous places on the value of education, including the limitations previous researchers faced when attempting to analyze the issue. One of the major limitations was the consistency between census lines and school district boundaries. To combat this problem, the researchers used “a longitudinal panel dataset including nearly 10 million students from the state of Texas compiled by the Texas School Project (TSP)” (Jargowsky & Komi, 2009, para. 3). According to Jargowsky and Komi (2009), this included “... geocoding all schools in the state, providing a connection to the complete array of neighborhood-level census data, including poverty, employment, family structure, and housing characteristics” (para. 3).

From this new dataset, the researchers (Jargowsky & Komi, 2009) determined that students within a geocode with a low-level of high school graduates might face additional hardships when attempting to complete the primary grades. Obstacles, such as low morale, poor behavior, and a variety of other societal disruptions could have a negative impact on the students' ability to complete the necessary requirements to earn a high school diploma (Jargowsky & Komi, 2009). Jargowsky and Komi (2009) stated that the interaction between those from working families and those children from non-working families does not occur on a regular basis. This disconnect may be partially to blame for at-risk students questioning the validity of obtaining a quality education (Jargowsky & Komi, 2009). Jensen (2011) also explored the impact that a student's living situation can have on his or her educational outlook. Jensen's (2011) findings, similar to Jargowsky and Komi (2009), identified students living in an impoverished area are less likely to successfully complete their educational goals as those from more affluent locations.

Additionally, Jargowsky and Komi (2009) discovered that within certain geocodes, "students with poor discipline or low morale may disrupt the classroom and slow the paces of instruction, resulting in poor achievement that in turn leads to dropping out" (para. 5). On the other side of the coin, Jargowsky and Komi (2009) cited research by Corcoran et al. (1990) that "a \$1,000 increase in the mean income at the zip-code level increased years of schooling by about one tenth of a year" (para. 11). Jargowsky and Komi (2009) concluded that even though it was extremely difficult to determine a direct correlation between low income geographic areas and the success rate of a school within that area with a high level of mathematical certainty, evidence suggested a high

probability that negative influences might be active in those schools. Jargowsky and Komi (2009) suggested that schools investigate means to disintegrate the high concentration of students from low income geographic areas as a means to increase the success rate of schools.

Other authors have focused extensively on the portions of the public school setting pertaining to the at-risk student. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) “...examine[d] the traditional and alternative school experience of at-risk students currently attending a public alternative school that was designed using the practice methods and philosophy of solution-focused brief therapy” (p. 106). The focus of their questions was to provide a comparison between their traditional academic setting and their new solution-focused alternative setting (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p.107).

Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) noted some unique elements of a solutions-focused alternative school (SFAS), such as “multi-grade classrooms and integrated curriculum that allow new students to learn the culture and expectations of the school from a veteran” (p. 107). This type of academic setting also encourages individual goal-setting, which allows students to proceed at their own learning pace. Wilhelm (2009) also identified various levels of customization as a means of better addressing the needs of the at-risk student. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) characterized a SFAS, by identifying eight primary elements. One of the elements is to invest in positive relationships between the educators and their students. In addition to relationships, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) stated that an effective educational institution should identify and invest in the at-risk students while fostering these students in acceptance of responsibility and making appropriate choices (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). In addition, Lagana-Riordan et al.

(2011) stated that it is important to set goals and commend students on reaching those goals. Meanwhile, the researchers cited four major areas that contributed to the failure of at-risk students in a normal school setting, including poor relationships between the student and teacher, a general lack of security for the student once inside the school building, a rigid rule structure, and difficulty with peer relationships (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

In response to these problematic areas, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) provided six focal points that could increase the effectiveness of the educational process for at-risk students. Areas, such as flexibility, encouragement, and strong student/teacher relationships that were identified by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), were likewise acknowledged through the research of Wilhelm (2009) as well as Isbell and Cote (2009). Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) identified the following areas: a) to enhance the student/teacher relationships ensuring that the student did not feel demeaned or judged; b) to increase the relationship between the home and school as a means of aiding encouragement for the student; c) to improve the school atmosphere or climate; d) to “be flexible with school rules and offer choices when consequences are given” (p. 112); e) to invest in proper professional development designed specifically for the at-risk teacher; and f) to employ a “strength-based” (p. 113) design focused on the student goals and accomplishments.

To address the rising need for educational reform, school districts need improved methods to reach the struggling learners. Flexibility and clear and obtainable goals are only a few items that must be present when attempting to reach the at-risk student (Wilhelm 2009). Isbell and Cote (2009) expressed a high need for flexibility within this

educational environment as well, but continued by identifying the need for individualized contact and personal relationships between the at-risk student and their instructors.

According to Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), tactics utilized included block scheduling, which allows 90 minutes of instructional time as opposed to the typical 60 minutes.

Another scheduling method explored by Canady and Retting (as cited in Bair & Bair, 2010) was the A/B schedule method that alternated courses every other day. Bair and Bair (2010) analyzed a third concept of trimesters to cover the rising expectations of NCLB.

Bair and Bair's (2010) research spanned three years, from 2006-2009. During the study, the researchers observed 22 math and science classrooms, seven administrators, two counselors, and 22 teachers in an undisclosed Michigan high school with an enrollment of 2,800 students (Bair & Bair, 2010). A coding system was applied to the Reform High School (RHS) as a means of maintaining anonymity; the demographic makeup in the undisclosed high school included 57% Caucasian, 28% African American, 7% Hispanic, and 7% Asian, and over 40% of the students qualified for free and reduced lunch program (Bair & Bair, 2010). The qualitative data was derived from observations of 22 classes in algebra I, algebra II, geometry, biology, chemistry, and physics and follow-up interviews (Bair & Bair, 2010). Bair and Bair (2010) reported, "The observations raised questions that we clarified during our interviews and, in turn, the interviews raised issues that we verified during subsequent observations" (p. 82).

Bair and Bair's (2010) rationale for selecting the trimester method was in response to the Michigan Merit Curriculum's (MMC) establishment of graduation credit requirements. According to the MMC guidelines, to graduate, a high school student had

to acquire 16 credits: “four math, and English, three credits each of science and social studies and one credit each of physical education and art” (Bair & Bair, 2010, p. 83). By utilizing the trimester concept, a student who failed a required course would have two additional opportunities within one school year to pass that particular class and remain on graduation track (Bair & Bair, 2010). This level of customization was identified in both the Wilhelm (2009) as well as the Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) research. Each of these researchers found that the ability to provide individualized instruction and remediation greatly increases the chance for a student’s success (Lagana-Riordan et al. 2011; Wilhelm, 2009).

One obstacle discovered by Bair and Bair (2010) when conducting interviews with the instructors was there was less time to deliver the required curriculum. Bair and Bair (2010) reported:

For example, usually a course, such as algebra, would be covered in two parts, over two semesters of 18 weeks each with algebra Ia the first 18 weeks and algebra Ib the second 18 weeks. However, under the trimesters, algebra Ia would need to be covered in 12 weeks instead of 18.

This meant that 30 instructional days were lost each term. (p. 85)

Also, during the interviews, administration addressed the issue of instruction, noting extended class time compensation for the lost instructional days:

However a quick calculation reveals that 57-minute classes provided for 5,130 minutes of instructional time over the course of one semester; a 71-minute class had only 4, 260 minutes during one trimester. This 870-

minute difference amounted to 14.5 hours less instructional time per class per term. (Bair & Bair, 2010, pp. 85-86)

The instructors identified crucial drawbacks to the trimester concept. Due to the decreased instructional time and the rising pressure for rigor, instructors must teach at an increased pace, which limited time for in depth, inquiry based instruction or additional modifications or interventions for the struggling at-risk student (Wilhelm 2009). This decreased time for any remediation could prove detrimental to the at-risk student as the teacher's ability to differentiate instruction could be adversely affected (Wilhelm 2009). At the conclusion of the three-year study, the high school students demonstrated a constant decline in their MME scores (Bair & Bair, 2010). In 2006, lack of proficiency labeled 37% of the student population; in 2007, that number rose to 45%; and by 2008, it rose yet again to 48%; therefore, Bair and Bair (2010) determined the trimester concept was detrimental to the at-risk population.

Meanwhile, in the article, *Come Back Kids*, Wilhelm (2009) identified many key concepts that should be present in any successful alternative program/school. The first element was the correlation between retention of students and the probability of their completing high school (Wilhelm, 2009). According to Wilhelm (2009), "70% of students who were retained drop out of school" (p. 15). Wilhelm (2009) identified the inability of the retained students to catch up with their peer group as the primary reason for their failure to graduate. One of the primary concepts outlined in the article was flexibility. Wilhelm (2009) reinforced the need to remain flexible with scheduling, curriculum, and assessments in creating an effective alternative program.

An alternative school in Pennsylvania, The Twilight Academy, echoed many of Wilhelm's (2009) concepts in their program. D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) detailed the inner workings of this particular program, while citing not only many of the same reasons as previous authors for needing alternative programs, but also including the decline of the family unit, and the rising influence of sex, drugs, and violence among youth. According to D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009), research revealed an effective alternative education program could decrease truancy, academic failure, and poor behavior while increasing graduation rates and overall student performance. Some of the primary elements of this particular program consisted of a later start to the school day, smaller class sizes, and an allowance for students to work an outside job for elective credits (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). One element specifically addressed the importance of obtaining the right personnel.

As stated by D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009), there are core components which should be identified when seeking personnel. One of the components is to employ educators who have a desire to teach the at-risk student (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Individuals who have worked and lived in a variety of environments can be effective as they may bring a perspective unlike those who are considered traditional teachers (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) also recommend that a counselor with intricate knowledge of the students, as well as families, be placed in this environment if possible. The final personnel element that was discussed dealt with security. According to D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009), the employment of security personnel will increase the sense of safety among the student population which may have a positive impact on the overall environment.

D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) discussed the importance of providing specialized professional development designed specifically for educators in alternative programs and that teachers be allotted time to visit other alternative programs to share ideas and develop a community of at-risk educators. Another element discussed in this article was the physical location of the programs. According to D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009), many positive reasons existed for housing an alternative program on the same campus as the regular school building(s); some of these reasons were economic, such as lower costs; while others involved events, such as assemblies or dances. However, the primary reason extended beyond the budgetary impact. Even though finances were extremely important, the "ability to satisfy the adolescent development need for belonging and feeling a part of a group was of equal importance in the decision" (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009, p. 214).

Benson (2012) addressed additional elements in working with at-risk students. Benson (2012) reported, "There are no magic tricks. Our role as educators, is to align with the healthy potential in each student and hang in while they gradually find shelter in our expectations and caring, in our structures and hopes" (pp. 76-77). Benson (2012) theorized that the struggling student could endure 100 repetitions of various developmental situations on the way to becoming a successful individual. During this difficult time, schools could play a pivotal role for these students. Specifically, Benson (2012) outlined six essential elements that alternative schools and or at-risk teachers must offer for the students to succeed: preserve relationships, to show genuine emotions, to help students accurately understand the consequences of behavior, to highlight their growth, to listen to each student, and to allow them to explain their feelings.

Benson (2012) clearly invested emotionally in his students and commented on the importance of developing a relationship with students not only to empathize with them, but also to help them learn from their mistakes. While discussing a young man in his alternative program, Benson (2012) stated, “You can’t stop him from failing. It’s his right to fail. Your job is to help him have a useful repetition of his failure” (p. 77). As Benson (2012) concluded, he reminded readers that not every educator would see the final repetition, as some teachers are there for repetitions 20-30. These educators experience the frustration of laying a foundation or rebuilding the at-risk student, while others are lucky enough to view repetition number 100 or graduation (Benson, 2012).

Communication was another key mentioned repeatedly in many different articles. Communicating with staff, students, and parents was one of the most important elements in alternative programs/schools. In the article, *Challenging Assumptions*, Easton and Soguro (2011) examined the Colorado based program, Eagle Rock. During this examination, the authors mentioned collaboration and effective communication as two of the primary reasons for the program success. Other programs, such as the GOAL Academy, outlined by Dicksteen (2012), pointed to communication as an essential cog in the alternative program’s wheel. Moreover, “teachers must be especially vigilant in keeping close and frequent contact with the student and his or her family in the beginning stages of transitioning to our student-centered, self-paced learning environment” (Dicksteen, 2012, p. 34).

Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable and Tonelson (2007) explored the issue of school climate in, *An Examination of School Climate in Effective Alternative Programs*. According to these articles, alternative programs can comprise three classifications, type

I, II, and III (Quinn et al., 2007). These include magnet schools, last chance schools, and schools designed to address academic and/or social deficiencies in an effort to return the student to the regular educational environment (Quinn et al., 2007). The characteristics of the type II, or last chance school, closely align to those found in the research of Wilson, Stemp, and McGinty (2011) and D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009). Both of these studies indicated the importance providing the at-risk teacher with appropriate and directed professional development as well as establishing a climate conducive to the at-risk learner (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Wilson et al., 2011). Meanwhile, Quinn et al. (2007) focused their study toward three alternative schools. According to Quinn et al. (2007), "Program A was a county Department of Education Division of Alternative Education that provides programs and services at approximately 140 sites including alternative, correctional and adult correctional education programs" (p. 13).

Much like Benson (2012), these facilities placed an emphasis on developing a positive rapport between student and staff (Quinn et al., 2007). Dicksteen (2012) also described the importance of a strong rapport as it directly impacts a student's outlook on education within the at-risk environment. The second program, program B was "a single day treatment site that is an approved private school funded by its state department of education and operated by a local university" (Quinn et al., 2007, p. 13). The final location was program C. According to this project, "Program C is a nonprofit mental health agency chartered by the state and a special education program operating under the auspice of the local education center" (Quinn et al., 2007, p. 13).

After the researchers determined the programs under study, Quinn et al. (2007) selected 50 students between grades 7 and 12, and then developed the following

exclusion criteria to insure accurate results, to wit: Students who could not speak and read English, students who were significantly developmentally delayed, and students from programs A and C who were in the custody of Child and Family Services. The elements of their study focused on clarity of rules, fairness of rules, planning and action, respect for students, safety, and student influence (Quinn et al., 2007). At the conclusion of the study, Quinn et al. (2007) found no significant difference in four of the six focus areas among the three programs; these areas were fairness of rules, planning and action, respect for students, and student influence. The remaining two focus areas, clarity of rules and safety, displayed significant difference.

In qualitative interviews, the researchers identified three primary focal points among the students (Quinn et al., 2007). The focal points consisted of an educational climate where the student felt structure and enforcement were fair (Quinn et al., 2007). In addition, it was also identified that respect toward the student by both teachers and administrators was also highly regarded (Quinn et al., 2007). Lastly, a teachers ability to remain flexible while addressing daily problems was also identified by students as a valuable element (Quinn et al., 2007).

Wilson et al. (2011) echoed these focal points as they discussed the impact that student engagement had on the likelihood for academic success. Their study analyzed at-risk students from Australia along with the alternative programs that served them. Wilson et al. (2011) stated, “Engagement in schooling is a key factor in producing equitable social and employment outcomes for all young people” (p. 32). Consistent with problems in the United States, Wilson et al. (2011) continued by discussing the ever-growing concern in Australia for the continued rising number of drop-out students.

As part of their research, Wilson et al. (2011) identified many factors behind youth disengagement from the formal school setting. Among these factors were elements such as gender, family background, family history with education, and students' outlook on education (Wilson et al., 2011). Purdie and Buckley (as cited in Wilson et al., 2011) noted "a positive relationship between truancy and crime, as well as between failure to complete high school and criminal activity" (p. 34). Wilson et al. (2011) continued the same line, stating "even in the event of achieving full-time employment, adults who have not completed school earn less than those who have fully completed their formal schooling" (p. 34).

Wilson et al. (2011) also addressed the issue of fidelity among alternative programs. Issues scrutinized in the past offered the notion that alternative programs taught only foundational skills with limited impact on a student's success in the outside world (Wilson et al., 2011). The aspect of a student's preparation for entering either the job market or higher education was identified as a possible future study (Wilson et al., 2011).

When addressing at-risk students, one specific educational program, the Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Learning Center Network (EREAFLCN), identified a set of common characteristics among their student population with the help of the Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA) organization (Wilson et al., 2011). According to the EREA, students who have had numerous negative encounters with the juvenile justice department could be identified as individuals who would benefit from this organization (as cited in Wilson et al., 2011). In addition, individuals who have been placed under the guidance of the Department of Child Safety or who have developed a

history of unexcused absences also may be strong candidates (as cited in Wilson et al., 2011). Those individuals who are considered “indigenous” to Australia or who have established a track record of high mobility may be considered at-risk student (as cited in Wilson et al., 2011). Students who have displayed consistent, negative behavioral traits within the regular school setting; are diagnosed with a mental illness; or have demonstrated the ability to do bodily harm to themselves also fall under the list of common traits among the EREAFLCN student (as cited in Wilson et al., 2011). Individuals who are classified as homeless or have been excluded from school for any reason, along with teenagers who have themselves become parents, conclude the list of customary EREAFLCN students (as cited in Wilson et al., 2011).

Spielhofer et al. (as cited in Wilson et al., 2011) offered a list of best practice concepts to be utilized within the alternative school setting. According to Spielhofer et al. (as cited in Wilson et al., 2011), these characteristics include “offering activities that are meaningful and relevant that they can participate in voluntarily, delivering learning in an environment that is not like a school, and providing one-on-one support for young people, tailored to individual needs and circumstances” (p. 36). In summary, Wilson et al. (2011) offered this advice:

While it is highly concerning that many young people are currently not engaged in either education or training, the creation of a successful alternative program is one that cannot be rushed for the sake of expediency. Successful programs are built on the foundation of a well-defined philosophy that integrates the principles of best-practice

alternative approaches and clearly articulates to both staff and students the nature, purpose and intent of the program. (p. 38)

Curriculum and Instruction Practices

Governmental guidelines, such as NCLB, required districts to achieve certain goals during the course of a school year (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). Various components served as goal measurements across the nation. In Missouri, the MAP test is one of the measurement tools. Due to the level of impact that the MAP scores have on school districts, educators tailor many curricular designs to this one assessment.

Alternative schools/programs in Missouri are not immune to the pressure.

In the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Archer (2010) stated that reading is one of the most important aspects of an at-risk curriculum. This claim was made by providing statistics drawn from high-poverty school systems connecting the relationship between reading and academic success among the at-risk student population (Archer, 2010). These data suggested that 31% of students were four to eight years behind grade level in reading and 38% were one to three years behind (Archer, 2010, p. 282). Archer (2010) posited, “Determining start-of-the year reading level can provide teachers with critical information in evaluating student growth and setting future goals” (p. 281). Archer (2010) favored using Lexile scores to determine the reading level of students, which, in turn, could allow a teacher to tailor the curriculum. This is done by identifying the specific area in which the student is weak. Providing curricular activities to a teacher could reinforce that specific weak area (Archer, 2010). This same concept was reinforced by Saine, Lerkkanen, Ahonen, Tolvanen, and Lyytinen (2011) who also found

that targeted reading interventions could have a positive impact on a student's academic experience.

One difference between Archer (2010) and Saine et al. (2011) was the use of computer-assisted educational tools. Saine et al. (2011) outlined the fundamental strategies of teaching literacy to students who demonstrated the possibility of being at risk for reading disability. Saine et al. (2011) and Archer (2010) identified items, such as word recognition, alphabetic knowledge, and letter-sound relations as pivotal elements in the reading process. The study conducted by Saine et al. (2011) tracked the elements through three different instructional approaches: computer-assisted, regular reading interventions, and mainstreamed classrooms. The data collected measured the number of letters correctly named, reading accuracy, and spelling by a control group of students. Saine et al. (2011) concluded that computer-assisted instruction outperformed regular interventions in all areas, but fell short compared to the mainstream instructional approach.

Authors Tuckwiller, Pullen, and Coyne (2010) examined reading from a slightly different angle by addressing the need for vocabulary development among at-risk students as a means of improving reading comprehension. According to a study by Bender (as cited in Tuckwiller et al., 2010) found approximately 80% of students with a diagnosed learning disability have significant reading deficiency. Based on this figure, "Reading disabilities account for the vast majority of special education identification in this country" (Tuckwiller et al., 2010, p. 138). Whereas Archer (2010) elected to utilize standardized testing to identify a student's reading ability, Tuckwiller et al. (2010) noted vocabulary knowledge could accurately determine a student's ability to comprehend

reading selections. Therefore, Tuckwiller et al. (2010) selected regression discontinuity design (RDD) to analyze and address this issue for implementation of the three tiers with Response-to-Intervention (RtI).

Tuckwiller et al. (2010) conducted a pilot study with a two-fold purpose. The researchers wanted to explore the feasibility of the RDD in RtI research and to expand the limited research on vocabulary instruction for kindergarten students at risk for reading failure due to limited vocabulary (Tuckwiller et al., 2010). Following the pilot study, the research proceeded along the same path as a standard RtI tiered approach, and students participated in class-wide instruction consistent with a tier one intervention; however, any student who was identified as being deficient in reading skills would be subjected to tier two interventions (Tuckwiller et al., 2010). This process closely mirrored the research by Saine et al. (2011), whereas targeted interventions were utilized to address the needs of the students.

Tuckwiller et al. (2010) considered two research questions during the study. The first question asked whether or not simultaneous participation in tiers one and two resulted in higher levels of improvement in a student's area of weakness as opposed to participation in only tier one (Tuckwiller et al., 2010). The second research question addressed the maintenance rates of these students. The question posed by Tuckwiller et al. (2010) asked whether or not these identical students have the same level of learning maintenance when compared to students who have not participated in simultaneous tiered interventions during their four-week evaluations. Study findings revealed that RDD might not be the optimal method to evaluate this academic issue; however, the validity of

reading comprehension and the importance it played in the cognitive development of children remained strong and worthy of additional research. (Tuckwiller et al. 2010)

Myers, Simonsen, and Sugai (2011) from the University of Connecticut, also explored the use of RtI among the at-risk population. Myers et al. (2011) designed a project that examined the use of RtI interventions along with positive praise on teachers. Typically, when teachers failed to perform at a high enough level, they had to enroll in various forms of professional development as a means of rectifying the issue; however, the findings of Myers et al. (2011) determined the use of praise improved both the teachers' and students' performance and behavior.

Another article dealing with curriculum and instruction pointed to the use of kinesthetic lessons within alternative schools/programs (Pullen, 2011). In the publication, *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, Pullen (2011) offered activities, such as shared storybook reading, as examples of establishing a strong vocabulary base for at-risk students. Other activities connected the lesson to everyday experiences, as well as creating a target list of vocabulary words for students to master through various kinesthetic activities (Pullen, 2011).

When examining math skills among this select population, Sparks (2012) suggested that introducing algebra to struggling students could cause more harm than good. One example came from the state of Washington where the school system placed students comprising the lower 20% of math scores in algebra classes (Sparks, 2012). At the conclusion of one year, math scores decreased an average of one full standard deviation on the end-of-course tests, while the students' grade point average (GPA) dropped an average of 7% (Sparks, 2012). Sparks (2012) recommended that struggling

students enter an alternate math track as opposed to educators steering all students into algebra courses.

Doabler et al. (2012) examined a math program which displayed strong, positive results in both the regular classroom setting and the at-risk setting. The authors cited foundational studies reinforcing the concept that educators should address at-risk math students in a different manner if they wished to decrease the learning gap (Doabler et al., 2012). This concept was continued with the statement, “although few would argue with the idea of using high-quality math programs, research suggests that many commercially available programs are not explicit enough to meet the needs of students at-risk for math failure” (Doabler et al., 2012, p. 48).

Research conducted by Baker, Fien, and Baker (as cited in Doabler et al., 2012) found that “math programs influence the ease and manner in which teachers deliver effective core instruction. They provide teachers with an instructional foundation when modifications are needed in increase instructional intensity for struggling learners” (p. 48). One such program was Early Learning in Mathematics (ELM). Davis and Jungjohann (as cited in Doabler et al., 2012) tested the program in 2009:

Results suggest the ELM was beneficial for all students in general and students at risk for MD (mathematics disability) in particular. Students who were typically achieving remained on track (i.e., made expected gains across the year) and at-risk students in ELM classrooms reduced the achievement gap with their typically achieving peers. (p. 51)

Based on these findings, Doabler et al. (2012) provided eight guidelines for effective use of the ELM program. These eight guidelines were: prioritize instruction

around critical content; pre-teach requisite skills to ensure success with new material; carefully select and sequence instructional examples; scaffold instruction to promote learner independence; model and demonstrate instructional tasks that students will learn; provide frequent and meaningful practice and review opportunities; use visual representation of math ideas; and deliver timely academic feedback, both corrective and confirmatory (Doabler et al., 2012).

In addition to these eight guidelines for the use of ELM, Doabler et al. (2012) also provided three suggestions that instructors could apply to their teaching to improve the effectiveness of their efforts. These three suggestions were a) use clear and concise language which helps clarify the target skill or concept; b) provide several models, but not so many so that instruction gets bogged down with a lot of teacher talk; and c) allow students to actively participate in the models, such as answering questions (Doabler et al., 2012).

Academic and Behavioral Interventions

One of the most widely spread intervention approaches in schools is RtI. According to the RtI Action Network, “Response to intervention is a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs” (“What is RtI,” n.d., p. 1). Greenwood, Bradfield, Kaminski, Linas, Carta, and Nylander (2011) outlined the use of RtI strategies with children as young as five or children who qualify for early childhood services. They stated, “Universal access to early education in the U.S. is yet to be achieved, even though it was well known that the early childhood years are the last untapped opportunity to vastly improve the national education product” (Greenwood et al., 2011, p. 3). Even though the study by Greenwood et al. (2011) was

not an exhaustive study, the evidence suggested that RtI had a positive impact on student achievement in areas such as letter recognition and sounds as well as basic counting concepts. When surveyed, teachers stated that RtI was an effective resource for struggling learners, but also voiced some concerns, such as lack of professional development, funding, staffing, and state guidance (Greenwood et al., 2011).

Ball and Trammell (2011) examined RtI from a slightly different perspective by exploring the intervention practice in a preschool setting. During the study, three concerns emerged concerning RtI. According to Ball and Trammell (2011), the first area of concern centered on the data collection system or progress monitoring practice. Ball and Trammell (2011) noted, “Current evidence base and logistical barriers argue against the establishment of a valid and reliable system of progress monitoring to guide data based decision making” (p. 504). Ball and Trammell (2011) as well as Benner, Nelson, Sanders, and Ralston (2012) stated that RtI was a means to identify and address the needs of struggling students more adequately; however, universal screening and progress monitoring tools were essential to the process. Not only do educators rely on these tools to custom-fit their interventions, they can replace the IQ-discrepancy model in the early stages of creating an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

As stated by Ball and Trammell (2011), “without database decision making, there is little evidence to suggest that the continuum of service delivery proposed within RtI could be successfully implemented and sustained” (p. 506). Benner et al. (2012) also cited the use of evidence-based decision making when selecting a targeted invention and evaluating the effectiveness of an intervention.

The second area of concern for Ball and Trammell (2011) dealt with lack of financial resources in preschools. Given the high financial impact of training, computer software for progress monitoring, and the peripheral resources that might accompany RtI, Ball and Trammell (2011) found that most preschools struggle to fund a sound RtI practice. Ball and Trammell (2011) noted, traditionally, the educational institutions that house a high volume of at-risk students seldom have sufficient funding to adequately deploy an effective multi-tiered intervention program. Elements of these programs, such as intervention strategies and progress monitoring tools, are too costly, and therefore, difficult to obtain or maintain (Ball & Trammell, 2011).

Ball and Trammell's (2011) third concern centered on the lack of targeted professional development opportunities and career training for preschool employees compounded by the high turnover rate. According to Gettinger and Stoiber (as cited in Ball & Trammell, 2011), "Only about 40% of preschool teachers participate in one recent student completed a bachelor's degree, and 20% had education below the associate's degree level (p. 508). Barnett et al. (as cited in Ball & Trammell, 2011) determined that only 44 out of 51 states require a preschool educator to have successfully completed the approved training for their position.

Ball and Trammell (2011) further argued that teachers would likely enter into an RtI situation with a wide variety of understanding and training of interventions that could create a low consistency rate. In addition, teachers with little formal training in areas such as early literacy might be ill-equipped to address the needs of struggling learners (Ball and Trammell, 2011). Ball and Trammell (2011) concluded by stating that without

outside financial assistance, effective implementation of an RtI model would be extremely challenging.

Isbell and Cote (2009), from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, investigated the impact of establishing a personal connection with struggling students. Isbell and Cote (2009) randomly selected 162 students who scored 75% or lower on their first exam and divided the students into two groups. To test the impact of personal connections, the course professor emailed one group a personal communication expressing concern about their academic performance, offering words of encouragement and reminding them of all available resources (Isbell & Cote, 2009). The other group received no communication from their professor (Isbell & Cote, 2009). At the conclusion of the study, findings indicated a significant difference between the two groups (Isbell & Cote, 2009). The group receiving positive correspondence from their professor showed improvement between exams, while the scores of the group that did not receive any communication digressed in their academic scores between exams (Isbell & Cote, 2009).

Rappaport and Minahan (2012) offered another approach to dealing with poor behavior in the classroom known as the FAIR Plan: “ ‘F’ stood for understanding the function, ‘A’ stood for accommodations, ‘I’ stood for interaction strategies, and ‘R’ stood for responses” (p. 19). Rappaport and Minahan (2012) claimed by administering the plan, teachers could modify unacceptable behavior while arriving at the realization that poor behavior was “malleable and temporary” (p. 19).

Benner et al. (2012) found that many educational institutions were utilizing some variation of a multi-tiered intervention system within their student body as a means of addressing either social or academic deficiencies. Benner et al. (2012) published an

article referencing the findings from survey conducted by the American Association of School Administrators in 2009: “71% of schools indicated that they were either piloting, in the process of districtwide implementation, or had multitier or RtI instructional models in district use, as compared to 44% in 2007” (p. 181). Benner et al. (2012) identified an increase in the use of positive behavior interventions and supported current and exploratory services.

Benner et al. (2012) provided six essential elements in successfully completing their analysis of the “efficacy of a primary-level, standard-protocol behavior intervention for students with externalizing behavioral disorders” (p. 183). These elements included: a) a randomized control trial design used to assess the efficacy of the behavior intervention; b) measured treatment fidelity; c) direct behavior-observation procedures to document the effects of the behavior intervention on negative and positive student behaviors, whereas previous research relied on office discipline referrals or teacher reports of the frequency of problem behavior; d) an examination of the effects of the behavior intervention on the academic performance of students; e) an assessment of the extent to which baseline levels of problem behavior moderated the treatment effects; and f) a review of treatment effects in the context of school-level poverty (Benner et al., 2012).

The research questions used to guide their study were to determine the impact that various behavioral as well as academic interventions had on at-risk students (Benner et al., 2012). In addition, Benner et al. (2012) sought to determine if the poverty level of the school had any impact on behavioral interventions. The researchers then selected 13 schools and 70 student participants; seven schools became treatments facilities, while the

remaining six comprised the control group (Benner et al., 2012). Of the 70 student participants, 44 students received interventions and 26 students did not; the total student population for all 13 participating schools was between 359 and 638 students (Benner et al., 2012). The actual intervention process and fidelity checklist comprised five elements: a precision request, assigning behavior intervention, a reflective period, a behavior-debriefing process, and student reentry into the classroom (Benner et al., 2012). Research findings suggested that on-task behavior was not significantly impacted due to treatment (Benner et al., 2012). However, Benner et al. (2012) determine that schools whose students were subjected to treatment did have a small increase in the margin of on-task behavior when compared to students who were not subjected to treatment.

Researchers Nelson, Lane, Benner, and Kim (2011) designed a study specifically targeting the “collateral effects of literacy instruction on the social adjustment of students by reviewing treatment-outcomes conducted using group design methodology, focusing on a more defined set of outcomes measures, and analyzing outcomes using average effect-size estimates as a common metric” (p. 143). Nelson et al. (2011) paralleled studies by Ball and Trammell (2011) as they both determined literacy impacted an individual in multiple ways. However, Nelson et al. (2011) examined previous scientific studies to determine whether there was a strong correlation between literacy instruction and socially acceptable behavior. Nelson et al. (2011) explored whether literacy and other educational deficiencies increased as the student aged, because it was unclear whether learning deficiencies were precursors to deficient social adjustment or if poor social adjustment caused learning deficiencies.

Nelson et al. (2011) posited, “Our intention is to inform parents, educators, researchers, and other professionals about the current state of evidence on the extent to which effective literacy instruction improves social adjustment” (p. 144). To focus the study, Nelson et al. (2012) selected a plethora of key terms, such as remedial reading, reading readiness, and behavioral disorders, as their search query. Nelson et al. (2012) search focused further by incorporating seven inclusion criteria. Among these criteria was to identify students with reading and/or behavioral complications (Nelson et al., 2011). This research analyzed various forms of reading interventions among a control group (Nelson et al., 2011). Nelson et al. (2011) placed an emphasis on identifying literacy areas, such as phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary as their independent variable. It was also determined that study should include various forms of quantitative data when analyzing the social impact of the interventions (Nelson et al., 2011). And lastly, the researchers determined their research should be available in English (Nelson et al., 2011).

Using the above criteria, Nelson et al. (2011) found only four articles that met their specifications. These articles examined subjects, such as Torgesen and Bryant’s 2007 study on phonological awareness training for reading; Cooper et al.’s (2005) research describing the stepping stones to literacy; Torgesen and Bryant’s (1999) research on phonological awareness training; and the work of Stevens et al.(1994) in cooperative integrated reading and composition (Nelson et al., 2011). Of the approved studies, only three utilized a random selection process and all offered small samples (Nelson et al., 2011). Despite the fact that research conducted by Ball and Trammell (2011) indicated that a positive correlation did exist between a student’s academic

achievement and reading interventions, Nelson et al. (2011) determined “that literacy instruction does not appear to have a collateral positive effect on the social adjustment of students” (p. 154).

According to a 2011 study conducted by Nidich et al., any district wishing to improve both higher order thinking skills and decrease undesirable behavior among their at-risk population should consider transcendental meditation, which is similar to Rappaport and Minahan (2012), who felt that undesirable behavior was correctable. Nidich et al. (2011) chose transcendental meditation as their intervention strategy and utilized transcendental meditation among 125 students who tested below proficiency level in their math or English standardized test and the California Standards Test. Nidich et al. (2011) stated, “the school participating in this study was a public middle school, located in a large, urban school district, with primarily low socioeconomic status and ethnic minority students” (p. 557).

During the process, all 189 selected students continued to attend the same school and participated in the same curriculum (Nidich et al., 2011). All participants tested below proficiency level on the same exam (Nidich et al., 2011). The students comprised two groups; the experimental group contained 125 students subjected to 12 minutes of transcendental meditation at the beginning and end of each day for three months, and the remaining 64 students served as the control group (Nidich et al., 2011). The experimental group experienced the transcendental meditation “technique [taught] by certified instructors in a standard seven-step course” (Nidich et al., 2011, p. 558). This process included an introductory one hour lecture to discuss the benefits of the program, a one hour preparatory lecture to present the mechanics of how to practice the technique,

a ten minute personal interview with the teacher, and one hour personal instruction sessions (Nidich et al., 2011). Students also participated in 5-7 group meetings to verify the correctness of their practice and to acquire additional knowledge about the practice (Nidich et al., 2011). Unlike Rappaport and Minahan (2012), whose intervention process was required less time, Nidich et al. (2012) felt that this process would prove beneficial.

According to the researchers, the process was a “simple, natural, effortless technique that allows the mind to settle down and experience a silent yet awake state of awareness” (Nidich et al., 2011, p. 558), which allowed the brain to arouse the autonomic nervous system. A study by Travis, Tecce, Arenander, and Wallace (2002) noted the reaction to this arousal was increased activity in the frontal lobe area of the brain responsible for higher-order processing (as cited in Nidich et al., 2011). At the conclusion of the Nidich et al. (2012) study, the researchers discovered the following:

For math, 42.0% of the meditating students showed a gain of a least one performance level compared to 18.0% of the non-meditating control students. For English, 26.0% of the meditating students exhibited a gain of at least one performance level compared to 14.0% of the non-meditating students. (p. 560)

Ritchey, Silverman, Montanaro, Speece, and Schatschneider (2012) discussed an in depth study of the impact that reading interventions might have on struggling students. Ritchey et al. (2012) selected 123 fourth-grade students based on their reading inability and, in part, due to research conducted in the 2007 study by the National Center for Education Statistics. The study found that “34% of fourth-grade students in the United States perform below basic levels in reading” (Ritchey et al., 2012, p. 318).

Based on the findings in previous studies, Ritchey et al. (2012) selected 123 fourth-grade students in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States through a randomized process. The mean age of their subjects was nine years, seven months (Ritchey et al., 2012). The students separated into a control group and an intervention group. For the purpose of this study, no student was selected who was eligible for “special services for any academic area” (Ritchey et al., 2012, p. 321). According to Ritchey et al. (2012), “We administered five pretest/posttest measures, two progress monitoring measures, three posttest only measures, and collected two measures that served as moderator variables” (p. 322). These assessments included the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, Fourth Edition; Test of Word Efficiency; Maze; Passage Reading Fluency; Word Identification Fluency; Assessment of Strategy Knowledge and Use for Information Text (Ritchey et al., 2012).

The study focused on evaluating tier two interventions, specifically targeting various components of reading, such as decoding and fluency; with the understanding the ultimate goal of reading was student comprehension (Ritchey et al., 2012). Elements, such as reading comprehension and fluency were included in studies by both Nelson et al. (2011), and Tuckwiller et al. (2010). In addition, Vasquez and Slocum, (2012) also selected items, such as fluency and comprehension, in their study on the reading ability of the at-risk student. The various components targeted reading elements, such as decoding or the ability to break down smaller larger, multi-syllable words (Vasquez & Slocum, 2012). The exercises focused on elements such as understanding prefixes, suffixes, and root words within a reading selection (Vasquez & Slocum, 2012). Fluency was also part of the interventions. According to the authors, multiple research studies concluded that

fluency played a significant role in student comprehension of literature; therefore, Ritchey et al. (2012) designed a study to address these elements.

The study ran for two years, and during this time, “24 scripted lessons were implemented over 12 to 15 weeks (mid-January to April). Interventions were provided in three 40-min sessions per week (16 hours total) in groups of two to four students” (Ritchey et al., 2012, p. 324). Twelve tutors aided the process and received “approximately 20 hours of training and demonstrated fidelity prior to intervention” (Ritchey et al., 2012, p. 324).

At the conclusion of the study, Ritchey et al. (2012) reported mixed findings. Among these findings were that “children in the intervention group performed significantly better on the identification and application of comprehension strategies ($g = 0.56$) and on science knowledge ($g = 0.65$), both closely aligned with instruction” (Ritchey et al., p. 329). When addressing reading fluency, students required additional services in order to demonstrate improvement; however, despite this discrepancy, this research team concluded that “these results suggest that children at higher risk may be the best candidates for the intervention tested here” (Ritchey et al., 2012, p. 330). The findings of Tuckwiller et al. (2010) were similar to that of Ritchey et al. (2012) in they agreed that interventions are indeed beneficial to the reading process for the at-risk student.

Researchers Vasquez and Slocum (2012) utilized online or distance learning with four students enrolled in the fourth grade. Vasquez and Slocum (2012) stated, “the purpose of this research project was to evaluate the effectiveness of an online system for delivering remedial reading instruction to students at a distance” (p. 223). Vasquez and

Slocum (2012) developed questions to guide their research , such as: a) to what extent will synchronous supplemental reading instruction delivered online increase the oral reading fluency (ORF) for students at risk of reading failure? b) To what extent will synchronous supplemental reading instruction delivered online increase overall reading skills as measured by Woodcock-Johnson III Test of Achievement (WJ-III) reading battery , Letter Word ID, Word Attack, Reading Fluency, and Passage Comprehension; for students at risk of reading failure? Finally, c) what are students,' tutors,' parents,' and teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness and desirability of the online tutoring as measured by a study-specific social validity questionnaire (Vasquez & Slocum, 2012, p. 223).

The study included four fourth-grade students in the Philadelphia area as well as “four tutors, two teachers, and parents of the students” (Vasquez & Slocum, 2012, p. 223). Teachers identified the participating students as having a learning disability in the area of reading (Vasquez & Slocum, 2012). All students had an average IQ but scored below the 20th percentile in their respective reading achievement assessment (Vasquez & Slocum, 2012).

The intervention took place during a 50-minute block in the students' homeroom class (Vasquez & Slocum, 2012). Because homeroom was an elective class, the intervention did not use core instructional time in mathematics, language arts, and science (Vasquez & Slocum, 2012). Similar to the study conducted by Saine et al. (2011), computer aided instruction was utilized as the primary means of administering the reading intervention. This intervention took place in a computer lab equipped with computer equipment and Internet connectivity, and included a variety of teaching and

learning strategies, such as a short video clip, one on one, tutor to student interaction, and a short repeat reading selection (Vasquez & Slocum, 2012). Vasquez and Slocum (2012) reported, “The independent variable included three main components: online tutoring system, reading curriculum, and repeated readings. The independent variable was delivered as a treatment package and no attempt was made to analyze the contribution of the separate components” (p. 224).

The primary dependent variable was the measurement of reading accuracy and fluency through an assessment known as DIBELS (Vasquez & Slocum, 2012). A secondary dependent variable “was general reading skills, which were measured with the WJ-III Letter-Word Identification, Reading Fluency, Passage Comprehension, Word Attack and Picture Vocabulary subtests” (Vasquez & Slocum, 2012, p. 225). The third set of dependent variables evaluated the social impact of the interventions. According to Wolf, the social elements needing evaluation were: “the social significance of the target behavior, the appropriateness of the procedures, and the social importance of the results” (as cited in Vasquez & Slocum, 2012, p. 225).

At the conclusion of the study, Vasquez and Slocum (2012) reported a significant increase in their subjects’ reading skills. This conclusion was supported by the research conducted by Saine et al. (2011) who also determined that computer-assisted learning outperformed traditional instructional methods when attempting to elevate the at-risk student’s reading level. Although Vasquez and Slocum (2012) experienced multiple technical difficulties during the study, such as computer crashes and momentary loss of Internet access, their conclusion was that distance learning could have a positive impact

on student reading capabilities. Vasquez and Slocum (2012) reaffirmed their findings by citing 28 other research projects conducted on similar issues with similar results.

Summary

While researching the topic of the current study, common themes clearly emerged. One overwhelming theme was the impact that NCLB and IDEA have had on alternative programs/schools across the nation. Each article mentioning these two programs did so in a manner that demonstrated their authority over public education. Themes, such as positive motivation, RtI, and various reading initiatives seemed to be the focal points when dealing with at-risk students as mentioned in the research of Ball and Trammell (2011).

Other points of interest included the use of kinesthetic lessons and alternate mathematic course options as a means of fostering success among the struggling students. A strong level of importance was placed on finding teachers who are either familiar with underprivileged, at-risk students or individuals who have a desire to work with this demographic (Quinn et al., 2007). Another reoccurring theme was the need to identify strategies that will work with the demographic represented within a specific area (Quinn et al., 2007). Program leaders must be willing to try different ideas in order uncover what is the most effective solution for their clientele. No matter whether the discussion centered on academic or behavior interventions, the driving theme was that students must achieve.

Specifically targeting areas, such as reading fluency as well as comprehension were identified as an important element by multiple researchers (Nelson et al. 2011; Saine et al., 2011). In addition to highly targeted interventions, computer-aided

instruction was cited on multiple occasions as being highly effective when administering reading interventions with the at-risk student population (Saine et al., 2011). Other issues included both funding and training of intervention strategies among teachers. With today's shrinking budgets and overworked teachers, the idea of providing additional materials and training to staff who work with less than 5% of the student body is difficult to justify. It is extremely important to provide solid statistical figures to warrant this kind of investment.

In Chapter Three, elements, such as the problem and justification for this study along with the research design and implementation will be discussed. In addition, the population and sample are clearly defined, while justification of their selection itemized. This chapter also contains data compiled from the MODESE as it pertains to research question number two. The procedure in which these data were analyzed are clearly outlined in this chapter.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter the research design, population and sample, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis utilized during this study are discussed. While NCLB legislation addressed educational standards for every school district in the nation, school districts were forced to examine each educational practice (Frishberg et al., 2010). This academic movement pressed school districts to face the expectation they must work with a higher level of diligence to ensure that all students receive the utmost education possible. Because Missouri's dropout rate rose 15.5% from 2000-2009, a high degree of need exists to seek out and identify programs to support students and keep them in school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

A cross-sectional survey was the most appropriate means in which to fulfill the obligations of this study; more specifically, research question number one. This method was selected based on the fact that a predetermined number of participants would be asked to participate (Fraenkel et al., 2012). In addition, a quantitative study would be conducted in addition to the cross-sectional survey to address research question number two (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Problem and Purpose Overview

One purpose of this study was to explore alternative programs throughout Missouri. This was done in an effort to highlight possible academic solutions and identify the best practices for working with at-risk students. The second purpose of this study was to determine if there is a significant difference in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way styles of alternative programs within Missouri.

As stated earlier, students dropping out of high school will cost the United States \$337 billion in lost wages over the course of their lifetime, and an individual with a high school diploma could earn as much as \$260,000 more during his or her lifetime than a person who drops out (“The High Cost”, 2008). Therefore, by analyzing and addressing programs to support high-risk students in the United States, research findings might make a significant impact on the current economic situation.

Several potential problems could have arisen during the course of this study. Some of these issues stemmed from the different definitions of both alternative schools and alternative programs throughout the state (Fraenkel et al., 2012). In order to increase the accuracy of this study, it was important to remove as much ambiguous terminology as possible (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Elements, such as perceived reality and assumptions, could alter an individual’s definition of alternative schools or programs, which in turn could have influenced his or her responses on the survey (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Another potential problem could have involved gathering data. The study utilized an online survey; therefore, the number of individuals who actually participated could have affected the validity of the findings. An accurate study should anticipate at least a 20% nonresponse rate, which is far less than the 50% nonresponse rate standard mail surveys experience (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Another factor which might have affected the outcome was one subjective question that asked participants to define the theme of their alternative program. Terms, such as “theme” may be ambiguous by nature. Assumptions can be made by participants as to what their theme may or may not be (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The information gathered from research question number two

investigates the connection between the theme and persistence to graduation rate.

Because of this element, defining the term “theme” was critical to ensure accurate results.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following research questions controlled the focus of the current study:

1. What are the characteristics of alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Educational Network?

2. What difference, if any, exists in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Education Network?

H₂₀: There is no difference in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Education Network.

H_{2a}: There is a significant difference in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Education Network.

Research Design

Based on the elements of this study, it was determined this was quantitative research which utilized a cross-sectional survey (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Tinto’s (2007) theory of student retention served largely as the lens through which the design emerged. The purpose of the study was to identify the characteristics of Missouri alternative programs as well as determine the effectiveness of both revolving door and one-way style of programs. In order to identify the most effective means in which to analyze the data

received, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method statistical procedures were closely scrutinized before determining the most appropriate method.

In the article titled, *On Methods: What's the Difference between Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Rhodes (2013) explained, that within a research study the qualitative nature would dictate that the information would be examined at a profound level. Rhodes (2013) addressed a comment commonly discussed concerning qualitative research that the methodology is anecdotal in nature and provides no substantial statistical backing. In response to this argument, Rhodes (2013) provided a brief list of favorable aspects to qualitative research, including that it allowed identification of new and untouched phenomena and afforded a deeper understanding of mechanisms

Rhodes (2013) also provided a list of qualitative research limitations, including that it could not generalize to the general population; offered challenges when applying statistical methods; and afforded difficulty in assessing relationships between characteristics. These limitations would ultimately prove that a qualitative study would not be the most applicable statistical process, which in turn, eliminated the use of a mixed method study as well.

However, during the Rhodes (2013) research, it was discovered that the same level of scrutiny applied in a qualitative study also emerged within quantitative research. According to Ben-Eliyahu (as cited in Rhodes, 2010), "The quantitative approach to gathering information focuses on describing a phenomenon across a large number of participants thereby providing the possibility of summarizing characteristics across groups or relationships" (p. 3). Creswell (2005) continued along this same line by stating:

Quantitative research is a type of educational research in which the researcher decides what to study, asks specific, narrow questions, collects numeric (numbered) data from participants, and analyzes these numbers using statistics and conducts the inquiry in an unbiased, objective manner. (p. 39)

Benefits to utilizing quantitative research designs were that quantitative methodology allowed the gathering of information from a relatively large number of participants; could cover a number of groups, allowing for comparison; allowed generalizing to broader populations; provided numerical or rating information; offered information for initiating policy or guidelines; and generated statistical techniques that determined relationships between variables (Rhodes, 2013). Bluman (2010) provided additional support to the use of a quantitative study as he listed the potential groups that would best be analyzed with this process. Among this list was identifying student-to-teacher ratios within an alternative school or program's classroom. Teacher-to-student ratio is one specific element that will be analyzed in this study (Bluman, 2010). As before, Rhodes (2013) reviewed the limitation of quantitative research as difficulty in recognizing new and untouched phenomena and caution in interpretation without a control group. Unlike qualitative research, the limitations associated with quantitative research would not profoundly impact this specific study. Therefore, a quantitative method was the most appropriate method to use for this specific study.

Population and Sample

Because the population being studied was small, a random sampling method was used (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The Missouri Alternative Education Network, or MAEN (2014), supplied a list of 101 school districts in Missouri that actively participated in

alternative education. In order to create consistency, the population focused on Missouri school districts with total student populations between 1,000 and 7,000 and grades from K-12. Based on those data, 59 school districts were eligible to participate in the study. A random sample of 50 eligible districts were selected using a random number generator. As a means of achieving anonymity among the participants, an alphabetical letter was assigned to each one. This alphabetical code was used throughout the study in place of the district's names. The participating districts and participants received the survey individually on three separate dates (see Table 1) as a means of obtaining a sufficient number of responses.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation portion of this project consisted of a survey (see Appendix A) as one means of gathering data. This survey consisted of 22 questions written to gather descriptive data from each participating school district (Fraenkel et al., 2012). In addition, a final open-ended question allowed participants from each district to write a brief description of one noteworthy element of their program. The tips outlined in Leedy and Ormrod's (2005) book, *Practical Research*, aided in the creation of the questions. The tips consisted of the following: Keep it short; Keep the respondent's task simple; Provide clear instruction; Use simple, clear, unambiguous language; Give a rationale for any items whose purpose may be unclear; Check for unwarranted assumptions implicit in your questions; Word questions in ways that do not "lead" respondents to preferred or desirable responses; Determine in advance how responses will be coded; Check for consistency; Conduct one or more pilot test to determine the validity of the questionnaire; Scrutinize the almost-final product one more time to make sure it addresses the needs of

the surveyor; and make the questionnaire attractive and professional looking (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Based on this information, a pilot test of the questions was conducted. A small group of individuals with in-depth, first-hand knowledge of Missouri alternative programs who were not taking part in the study were selected to participate in this pilot. The pilot group's task was to navigate the survey, providing feedback concerning the clarity of questions, monitor the amount of time to complete the survey, and determine the functionality of the survey form (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The dispersal of the survey was through the website SurveyMonkey (2014), which included an email to each participating individual explaining the process and questions. Definitions to key terms, such as revolving door and one-way programs were provided to the participants prior to their engagement in the survey.

A secondary means of gathering data came from the MODESE (2014) website. The site offered the persistence to graduation rate for 2011, 2012, and 2013 from each participating school district (see Table 1). This information was correlated against survey question number 11, which asked the participants to identify which style of alternative programs, revolving door or one-way programs, best described their school. The three-year average for each school district was calculated creating a data set that was subjected to a *t*-test. (Fraenkel et al., 2012)

Table 1

Persistence to Graduation Percentage by Year and Average

District Name	<u>Graduation %</u>			Graduation Average
	2011	2012	2013	
A	87	85	86	85.500
AA	87	92	90	91.000
B	76	92	96	94.000
BB	84	90	93	91.500
C	85	86	90	88.000
CC	92	94	92	92.667
D	84	93	92	92.500
DD	96	95	94	94.500
E	85	92	93	92.500
F	94	83	99	92.000
G	94	96	95	95.500
H	88	90	92	91.000
I	91	89	92	90.500
J	91	92	91	91.500
K	85	90	87	88.500
L	88	90	92	91.000
M	83	89	87	88.000
N	89	89	84	86.500
O	90	91	90	90.500
P	82	88	92	90.000
Q	81	85	84	84.500
R	91	93	94	93.500
S	61	62	56	59.000
T	100	95	100	97.500
U	93	96	95	95.500
V	95	97	98	97.500
W	88	90	96	93.000
X	87	91	90	90.500
Y	91	96	96	96.000
Z	75	79	84	81.500

Data Collection

The process of data collection is an essential element in achieving accuracy in any study. Therefore, a detailed, chronological procedure was administered. Upon receiving approval from the Lindenwood IRB committee to conduct this study, (see Appendix B) the process began to confirm the contact information for each eligible district. This was accomplished by making a phone call to each district and confirming the name and contact information from each district.

The first official contact was via email. An electronic letter explaining the project as well as all expectations went to each district liaison. This letter explained in detail the research questions and the purpose of the study, included a confidentiality statement, and offered a sincere note of gratitude for participating in the study. The email requested a written response from all willing participants to ensure the sample numbers were sufficient.

The next phase in the process was to email a link to the survey. This confidential survey allowed the gathering of all essential data, while protecting the participants' identity. In order to keep the process moving forward, the survey went to the participants within the same week as their participation acceptance email response.

The survey was compatible with Microsoft Excel and once gathered, the information was then used to create an Excel spreadsheet. Once the data were uploaded, information was examined in an effort to extract the facts necessary to complete the project. This question examined the possible connection between styles of programs and the persistence to graduation rate. When analyzing this element, the responses were extracted from the survey that addressed each district's style of program. Districts

identified themselves as either a revolving door or one-way program. The other factor in this equation, the persistence to graduation rate, was extracted from the MODESE (2014) web site. Data from 2011, 2012, and 2013 were gathered and then averaged for each district. This average was then analyzed through a *t*-test to determine if there was a statistical difference between the two styles of programs when compared to the persistence to graduation rate.

During this process, there was a strong emphasis placed on establishing both internal and external validity (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Despite the belief that a connection should exist between two variables, if the study itself is not consistent or valid, the research becomes obsolete (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). In addition to validating the process, each question was examined for potential bias to ensure the findings were not situational but would remain consistent over time (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2011).

Because the study utilized an online survey, the number actually participating might have affected the validity of the findings. Of the 50 eligible school districts, only 30 elected to participate in this study. Achieving the number of participants required for an accurate study was possible by anticipating at least a 20% nonresponse rate, which was far lower than the more than 50% nonresponse rate standard mail surveys experienced (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Data Analysis

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), “Data are those pieces of information that any particular situation gives to an observer” (p. 88). Based on this statement, researchers must clearly identify their data. For the purposes of this study, each question served as individual data.

The process of analyzing data is one that requires a great deal of attention. The slightest flaw can cause drastic changes in the findings (Creswell, 2005). Therefore, establishing a method and developing a procedure was as important as analyzing the actual data (Creswell, 2005).

A *t*-test was chosen as the primary means of analyzing the quantitative element. Bluman (2010) discussed the use of a *t*-test in situations when a researcher is exploring the connection, or lack thereof, between two elements. Bluman (2010) continued in this section by discussing the use of averages in tandem with a *t*-test: “It is not wrong to use averages, but the results cannot be generalized to individuals since averaging tends to smooth out the variability among individual data values” (p. 536).

The survey used in the current study contained 20 questions of a descriptive nature, as well as one optional open-ended response item. Of these questions, two provided an opportunity for a written response. These two short answer questions, including common language from all responses, which were then analyzed. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), “certain words, phrases, patterns of behavior, subjects’, ways of thinking and events repeat and stand out” (p. 171). During this process, different answers based on the nature of the question or response may develop multiple codes. These codes are then used to by the researcher to accurately and efficiently convey the findings.

Once this code was generated, the information was then subjected to a frequency distribution process (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Fraenkel et al. (2012) stated, “This is done by listing the scores in rank order from high to low, with tallies to indicate the number of subjects receiving each score” (p. 190). For the purpose of this study, the term “subject”

was represented by the response code given by each participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Once this frequency distribution was completed, the data generated were placed on a histogram figure. This figure was identified as the most efficient means of displaying these findings based on the understanding that a histogram is designed to display “data at the interval or ratio level of measurement” (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 194).

Summary

Understanding the potential problems that arose during the course of this study, such as common language and participation, was only one vital portion of researching alternative programs. Other elements included identifying the most appropriate means in which to analyze and interpret the data gathered. This was achieved by utilizing research conducted by Bogdan and Biklen (1998) and Fraenkel et al. (2012). The MAEN (2014) established the population; which was scrutinized by the preset qualifying criteria before randomization to generate a more objective sampling of participants.

Once this list of participants was created, the task of administering and gathering survey responses was engaged. As the information was gathered, the results were analyzed by two primary methods. Research question one was descriptive in nature, but did pose two questions that required the use of a coding system (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), combined with a frequency distribution (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The second research question used a *t*-test as the primary means of analyzing this quantitative question (Bluman, 2010).

Individual questions were broken down within Chapter Four. The corresponding question includes a short synopsis of the participating school district answers. Utilizing

the process of breaking down each individual question and itemizing answers increased the probability of no corruption of the data or its analysis. The responses gathered through the survey process as well as a statistical analysis of quantitative elements of these responses comprise Chapter Four.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Data

In Chapter Four, the data provided by participating school districts, which covers details specific to alternative programs in Missouri, were analyzed. Not all districts in the study elected to answer every question. Of the original list of 101 districts provided by the MAEN organization, only 59 districts fell within the acceptable parameters set forth by the study. This range was between 1,000 and 7,000 total students K-12. Of the 50 qualified districts, responses were received from 30. Therefore, the percentages displayed represent 60% of the eligible school districts who elected to participate in this study.

The design of the study was both descriptive and statistical in nature to examine the types of programming available in Missouri as well as the persistence to graduation rate between various styles of alternative programs (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The study compared one-way and revolving door styles of programs based on their respective district's persistence to graduation rate. The descriptive element of the study examined information pertaining to staffing, experience levels, financial support, and administrative oversight. Data also included specific details on the participants' programs.

From this assembled list of school districts, a random sample of 50 eligible participating districts was selected. Each participant received the survey, individually, on three separate dates (see Table 2) as a means of obtaining a sufficient number of participants.

Table 2

Distribution and Collection of Survey Information

Number of Surveys Distributed	Number of Surveys Collected	Date
58	10	February 24, 2014
0	1	March 1, 2014
48	6	March 7, 2014
0	3	March 24, 2014
42	10	March 31, 2014

An online survey, consisting of 22 questions written to gather descriptive data from each participating school district, was the primary means of data collection. Utilizing this form of data collection increased efficiency as well as decreased cost to the researcher (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The final two questions were open-ended and allowed the participants to write a brief description of one element of their program that was noteworthy. An additional question provided the respondents an opportunity to elaborate on the steps their districts take to prepare their at-risk students for the future.

Analysis

The results of this study were calculated through quantitative analysis (Bluman, 2010). The first phase of this study was to examine a portion of the gathered data using descriptive analysis. Survey questions three through 20 satisfied this element. Questions one and two of the survey were the primary means of collecting demographic information from each participating school district. Questions number 21 and 22 provided an opportunity for participants to provide a written response in regard to the program elements specific to each participant's district.

The questions were specific to alternative programs and focused on at-risk classrooms. Research question number one was: What are the characteristics of alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Educational Network? The following survey responses directly address research question one.

The demographics of the population of the study provided essential information to the study. Among this information, participants were asked to identify various educational components, such as instructional methods, curricular components, and instructor experience levels (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009) and to identify the grade levels in which they serve within their alternative programs. All of the respondents in the survey reported having a program to serve their grades 9-12 populations which is indicative of the popular trends of providing educational alternatives for students in order to improve retention. However, the data take a significant downswing at this point with alternative services to students. Only 24.1% of reporting schools stated they had programs in grades 5-8, and only 6.9% of districts had a program currently in place for kindergarten through fourth grade.

As the percentage of programs decreased, the number of students served decreased as well. According to the data, 37.9% of districts reported serving between 11-30 students, which represented the largest group served by these programs. The second largest group, 51 students or more, was identified by 34.5% of participants. Finally, 13.8% of districts served between 0-10 students in their alternative program.

Research conducted by D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) identified that maintaining a low student-to-teacher ratio is crucial in the alternative educational environment; therefore, the participating school districts also identified their student-to-

teacher ratio. In this portion of the survey, 3.4% of participants reported having a student-to-teacher ratio of 4 to 1. Meanwhile, 6% noted their ratio was 8 to 1, while 24% reported their ratio at 10 or more to 1.

Additional questions within this survey addressed the staffing element of alternative programs within Missouri. According to the results gathered, 37.9% of districts acknowledged their full-time teaching staff consisted of between 0-2 teachers. In addition, 27.6% indicated employing between 3-5 full-time instructors, while 24.1% reported having 6-9 full-time teachers within their alternative program. Only 10.3% of participants conveyed having 10 or more full-time teachers in their programs.

For survey questions five and six, participants were asked to identify their administrative support. Based on this question, 86.2% of school districts who chose to answer this question stated that a full-time administrator did oversee their alternative program along with other administrative duties around the district. Meanwhile, 13.8% of districts stated they had little administrative support for their programs.

Survey question seven addressed both instructional delivery methods as well as the type of curriculum utilized with the participant's programs. According to the results, 20.7% indicated the use of computer-based instruction as their primary means of educating their at-risk student population. The same number, 20.7%, also indicated the use of teacher-guided instruction as the means to educate students within their alternative programs. Only 58.6% utilized a mixture between computer-based and teacher-guided instruction within their alternative programs.

Question number eight specifically targeted the forms of curriculum used to educate the at-risk population within the participant's districts. According to the

responses, 37.9% reported utilizing the standard district-approved curriculum when educating their students which means the same curriculum is used in each and every classroom throughout these particular school districts. Meanwhile, 31% of participants reported using a modified curriculum within their program. This curriculum model would align closely to the district-approved practice with some modifications for the at-risk classroom. Only 20.7% of participants reported utilizing a customized, alternative based curriculum within their programs. This curriculum would contain all the significant educational standards found in public educational settings. However, the mode in which these standards are delivered and assessed are specifically tailored for the at-risk learner (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Lastly, 41.4% of districts reported using a computer-based curriculum model. Again, this mode of educational delivery would contain the essential standards found in other curriculuar models. However, the computer system would be able to customize the instruction for each individual learner based on his or her assessment.

Within Figure 1, the question addressing the various themes within Missouri alternative programs is illustrated. Participants were asked to select from three possibilities which best describes their program's theme or purpose. Their choices were either a revolving door, one-way, or a combination of both styles. In order to increase consistency, these program styles were defined in the survey. A revolving door program is one that allows students to come for one or multiple hours per day depending on their individual situation. The goal of a revolving door program is to address the academic and/or social concerns of each student and return him or her to the regular classroom setting. A one-way program is a situation where a student is placed in the alternative

program as a new educational setting. A student enrolled in a one-way style of alternative program will either graduate high school through that program or drop out of school. The definition of a combination of the two programs is a situation where the program administrator can select either style based on the individual needs of the student.

Based on the responses gathered, 78.6% of the participating school districts identified their theme or purpose as a combination of a revolving door and one-way style alternative program. However, the majority of responses revealed that their primary theme was consistent with a revolving door program but the teachers are able to keep a student full-time, if necessary. Therefore, by definition, these districts used a combination program. Meanwhile, 21.4% recognized their program as one-way, and only 3.6% identified their program as solely a revolving door style.

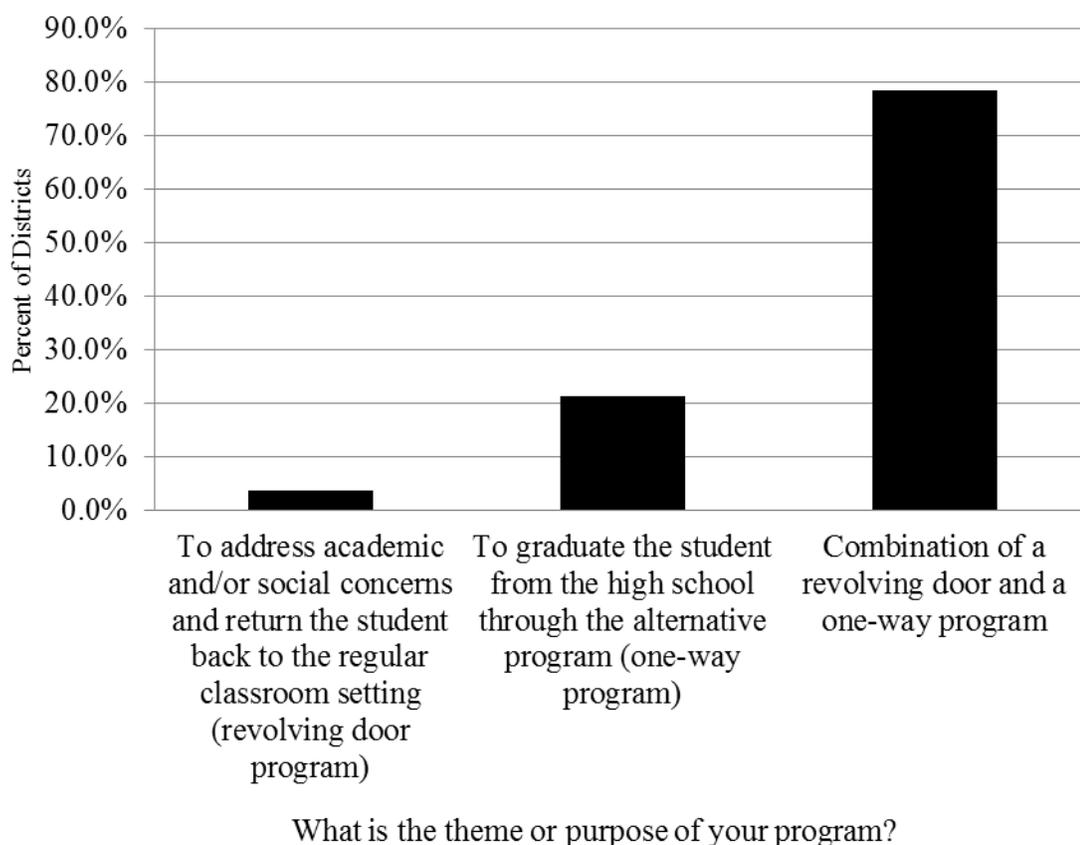


Figure 1. Theme or purpose of the program.

This portion of the survey was vital in successfully answering research question number two. The second research question for the study examined the potential connection between the persistence to graduation rate of revolving door and one-way alternative schools/programs within the MAEN. Compilation of this data included information from survey question number 11 compared to the persistence to graduation rate provided by the MODESE.

Assessing the information gathered from the MODESE required reviewing and averaging three years of graduation percentages for each participating school district. Based on guidance from Bluman (2010), a *t*-test was determined to be the most accurate

means of analyzing this information. Therefore, a *t*-test was applied to determine whether a statistically significant difference existed between the two styles of programs.

As shown in Table 3, the mean graduation rate for revolving door programs over a three-year period was 88.23, while one-way programs yielded a three-year mean of 92.06. Despite the fact there was a disproportional number of observations, the *t*-test revealed no significant difference between these two styles of programs as they related to persistence to graduation. This conclusion was based on the observed *p*-value, which was calculated to be 0.2756 at a 95% confidence level.

Table 3

Results of t-test: Two-sample Assuming Equal Variances

Statistical Measure	Revolving Door	One-Way
Mean	88.23188406	92.066667
Variance	56.31752306	6.8
Observations	23	5
Pooled Variance	48.69944259	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
<i>df</i>	26	
<i>t</i> Stat	-1.113649839	
P(T ≤ <i>t</i>) two-tail	0.275619336	
<i>t</i> Critical two-tail	2.055529439	

Note. Observations = Participants.

As illustrated in Table 4, participants were asked to identify various components of their programs infrastructure. Elements, such as program evaluation tools, budget and program hours of operation can be unique to alternative programs. The alternative programs selected for this study was only one component of an entire school district.

Therefore, the continuation of these operations are subject to change based on the need of the district as a whole or available funding. It is for this reason the question was asked for the participants to identify the manner in which their program is evaluated. Based on the results provided by all participants who elected to answer this question, alternative programs within Missouri are assessed by a combination of elements: graduation, dropout rate, and a student's individual growth were indicated as being the primary means in which these programs are evaluated.

According to D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009), the ability to provide targeted and valuable professional development to staff who work with at-risk students is essential in achieving success. This professional development element is only possible through sufficient funding. In addition to professional development opportunities, the at-risk student may require additional support, such as school supplies or adequate clothing (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Again, available funds designated for this population allows a program to address the deficiencies of students' basic needs.

Other infrastructure elements discussed in the portion of the survey dealt with the hours of operation for each alternative program and the type of diploma the students are awarded when they have graduated from the alternative school/program. Among many other elements, an educator's ability or willingness to tutor students at various times of the day is yet another critical part of succeeding with the at-risk learner (Wilhelm, 2009). The at-risk student may have obligations or responsibilities that the typical student does not (Wihlem, 2009). Therefore, the ability to vary a program's hours of operation can be effective. Conversely, according to the results of this survey the majority 88.9%, of responses indicated the hours of operation are consistent the standard school schedule.

However, once a student has successfully completed the graduation requirements set by each district he or she is awarded a diploma. However, each district is allowed to determine what kind of diploma is awarded. The two primary options are to either award a student the standard district high school diploma, or award the student with an alternative high school diploma.

Table 4

Program Infrastructure and Operational Procedures

Survey Question				
Program evaluation tool	96.6%	34.5%	55.2%	24.1%
	Graduation rate	Dropout rate	Individual growth	Standardized test scores
Annual budget	30.8%	26.9%	42.3%	
	No response	\$1,000-\$5,000	\$5,001+	
Hours of operation	88.9%	18.5%	14.8%	14.8%
	Standard school hours	Late start	Early dismissal	Evening classes
High school diploma	82.1%	17.9%		
	Yes	No		

Note. 29 out of 30 participants identified their program evaluation tool. 26 out of 30 participants identified their annual budget. 27 out of 30 participants identified their hours of operation. 28 out of 30 participants identified their diploma status.

The manner in which a program is populated varied program to program. Participants were asked to identify each referral source that is used within their process, and 89% of participants identified either administrator and/or counselor referral as their primary means of identifying students for their alternative program.

A foundational aspect of alternative programs is the ability to identify and remedy various social and/or academic deficiencies (Quinn et al., 2007). According to a survey conducted in 2009, 71% of schools indicated they were either exploring or currently utilizing an intervention process for at-risk students (Benner et al., 2012). Based on the findings of this study, Missouri alternative programs would fall within the national average since more than 90% of the participants indicated the use of various, multitiered intervention programs (see Table 5).

Meanwhile, a lack of parental involvement has become an indicator to a student's ability to successfully complete the rigors outlined in the public educational system (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). As noted in this study, more than 70% of districts indicated their parent involvement was nonexistent among their at-risk population. Likewise, only 7.1% of participants indicated a high level of parent involvement among their student population.

Also noted in Table 5 were the results from the survey question pertaining to the referral process for an alternative school/program student. Participants were asked to indicate who referred a student to their alternative program. According to the responses, 89.3% of districts indicated either school administrators and/or school counselors made the majority of the referrals. Parents requesting their student be placed into the alternative program made up the lowest number of referrals with 39.3%.

Table 5

Student Selection, Parent Involvement and Intervention Process

Survey Question				
Student referral process	42.9%	89.3%	89.3%	39.3%
	Teacher referral	Administrator referral	Counselor referral	Parent referral
Intervention strategies	90.9%	45.5%	9.1%	4.5%
	RtI	PBIS	READ 180	Aggressive replacement training
Parent involvement level	7.1%	35.7%	50%	71.1%
	High	Med	Low	None

Note. 22 out of 30 participants identified an intervention strategy. 28 out of 30 participants identified their level of parent involvement. 28 out of 30 participants identified their student referral process.

An additional aspect of this survey consisted of questions pertaining to the overall teachers' experiences and their involvement within the at-risk classroom. Both Quinn et al. (2006) and D'Angelo and Zemanick, (2009) addressed the importance of both proficiency and appropriate teaching staff within the at-risk classroom. Flexibility and creativity were examples of professional traits that were paramount when attempting to reach the at-risk student (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). According to the results of this study, the majority of teachers worked within Missouri alternative programs/schools between four and seven years. Only 17.9% of these teachers worked in excess of 11 years. However, when examining the overall teaching experience, there was a slight increase as the majority of participants indicated that 37.9% had a staff that averaged between 8-10 years of teaching experience.

The final two questions allowed the participants to provide a short written response. The first question addressed a portion of AYP which required districts to take an aggressive approach in preparing students for their future. As participants replied to this question, themes began to emerge. The most frequent response indicated that Missouri alternative programs were collaborating with local colleges, universities, and various trade schools, which allowed students an opportunity to learn crucial skills for their future. Also listed was a strong focus on integrating problem-solving skills into the standard curriculum on a daily basis. The remaining responses referred to elements, such as a increased focus on ACT preparation and detailed outlining of their post-highschool years.

The final element of this survey allowed the participants to list aspects of their program they felt were critical to the success within their district. The items listed were characteristics, such as providing child care to their students, offering evening classes, and creating program handbooks to increase consistency. Some participants cited the use of other programs throughout their district that focused on behavioral issues while alternative school /programs targeted academic or social elements. One district referenced the importance of establishing good community relations through a service class. Developing a strong community relationship allowed the opportunity for their at-risk students to work directly with the public on various tasks.

However, one of the top three given responses given on this survey, included developing a strong and positive relationship between the teachers and their students. (see Table 6) Also included in this list was allowing teachers to be flexible with their instruction, assessments, and scheduling. Support from both the building-level

administrator and the board of education was listed as a critical element to developing a successful alternative program.

Table 6

Characteristics Within Missouri Alternative Program/Schools

Essential Characteristics	Frequency
Positive student relationships	14
Flexibility	11
Administrative support	9

Note. 17 out of 30 participants provided a written response to this question.

Summary

The data analysis in Chapter Four, formed two separate segments. Segment one involved gathering and cataloging descriptive information from each participating school district. The information could create a baseline for future studies on alternative programs in the state of Missouri. The information was specific to alternative programs and included details concerning Staff Experience, Staff Duration, Budget, Program Theme or Purpose, Evaluation Practices, Curriculum, Program Evaluation, Administrative Support, and Essential Elements of Alternative Programs.

Also located in segment one was the open-ended response element to this study. Participants were allowed an opportunity to discuss elements they felt were essential in successfully reaching the at-risk student. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to identify various elements their programs were doing to prepare their at-risk students for a future in today's society.

Segment two compared the program styles; revolving door and one-way programs and their respective persistence to graduation rate for each participating district. Three years of graduation percentages for each district aided this process. Inferential statistics, specifically a two-sample *t* test, were used to determine whether there was a significant difference existed between the two styles of programs (Bluman, 2010). According to the results, the *t*-test concluded no significant difference in the persistence to graduation rate between one-way or revolving door styles of alternative programs. According to Bluman (2010) “when the null hypothesis is not rejected, it means that the value of *r* is not significantly different from 0 (zero) and is probably due to chance” (p. 537).

Chapter Five outlines and restates the purpose of this study, the research questions used to guide the study, the limitations faced during the course of this project, the procedures utilized, and the results. Also located in Chapter Five, is a brief discussion regarding the findings which emerged during the quantitative analysis and the implications for future practice in the educational setting. In addition to this information, the chapter offered thoughts for future projects based on these results.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the characteristics of alternative educational programs across Missouri. In doing so, information pertaining to teacher experience and tenure, administrative oversight and support, and budgetary commitment was derived from a voluntary survey. In addition, a comparison between the styles of programs and the persistence to graduation rate was conducted using statistical analysis (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The following two research questions provided the guidance necessary to complete this study:

1. What are the characteristics of alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Educational Network?
2. What difference, if any, exists in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Education Network?

The null hypothesis stated there was no difference in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Education Network. The alternate hypothesis stated there was a significant difference in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Education Network.

This study also included a review of current and landmark legal proceedings that contributed to the formation of alternative programs in Missouri and the nation. The articles selected covered kindergarten through twelfth grade and incorporated curriculum from the major disciplines of reading, writing, mathematics, science, and history. Other reading selections specifically addressed programs such as RtI and PBIS that outline

possible intervention strategies for social, academic, and behavioral issues (Benner et al., 2012).

The literature selected for the current study included a variety of academic, behavioral, and social strategies used to provide assistance to individuals at risk for failure (Nelson et al., 2011; Vasquez & Slocum, 2012). While some of these programs, such as ELM, specifically targeted mathematics, other programs provided a more generic intervention approach (Ball & Trammel, 2011; Benner et al., 2012). These strategies ranged from teaching students socially acceptable behavior to exercises in self-control.

Data collected through both a survey and information found on the MODESE web site satisfied the requirements for this research. The organization, MAEN, provided a list of 101 Missouri school districts actively participating in alternative educational programs. From this list, a qualification factor of student populations between 1,000 and 7,000 total students in a single school district was applied and 58 school districts were deemed acceptable participants. The survey element of this study provided responses pertaining directly to the first research question.

Findings

The results of this study were examined in two segments. Segment one explored the characteristics consistent with alternative programs across Missouri. This segment featured gathered and catalogued descriptive information in order to establish a baseline for future studies. The information pertained to elements consistent with public education and elements specific to alternative programs. According to the school districts that participated in this study, only 6.9% reported having programs in place for students at or below the fourth grade; however, 24.1% districts stated that they had an

active program for students at or above fifth grade. The programs reported serve from 10 to more than 50 students while maintaining an average class size of between 8 and 15 students.

The number of staff allocated to these programs varied greatly. While 10.3% of districts reported having more than 10 full-time teachers, 65.5% of schools stated they had fewer than five teachers dedicated to their programs. Of the teachers surveyed, 25% of districts reported that the average time spent within the alternative programs was between one and three years. Furthermore, 50% of these programs stated their educators averaged between four and seven years in their programs, 7.1% of programs identified their averages were eight to 10 years, and 17.9% of programs reported having an average of more than 11 years of experience per teacher in the alternative programs.

The percentages shifted slightly when examining years of teaching experience for the educators. When asked how many total years of teaching experience, both inside and outside of the alternative program setting, 37.9% of districts stated the average was eight to 10 years of total teaching experience per educator, 31% acknowledged their averages were between four and seven years, and 24.1% reported having more than 11 years of experience per teacher. Only 6.9% of schools reported having an average of less than three years.

Administrative oversight was also a focus of this study. When examined, more than 80% of districts stated they had administrative support for their alternative programs. This indicated an administrator within the district held responsibilities including overseeing the alternative programs. However, the number dropped to 65.5%

when asked if that administrator's only duties were supervising their alternative programs.

The topic of curriculum and instruction brought to light many interesting findings. According to the responses received, 58.6% of participating alternative programs mixed computer-based instruction and teacher-guided instruction. The sole use of computer-based or teacher-guided instruction split the remaining responses at 20.7%. Meanwhile, the actual curriculum utilized within each program spread more evenly with 37.9% of responses stating they used their own district approved curriculum. The use of modified district curricula comprised 31% of responses, while a customized alternative curriculum received 20.7%. The leading response of districts was the utilization of a computer-based curriculum with 41.4% of the responses.

The responses gathered concerning the theme or purpose of each alternative program was more universal. The combination of a revolving door and one-way style program received 78.6% of the responses. The one-way style program received the second highest amount with 21.4%, while only 3.6% of districts stated they used only a revolving door program.

When asked about program evaluations, 96.6% of programs stated the graduation rate was the primary means their districts used to determine the effectiveness of their alternative program. However, many also indicated that both the dropout rate, individual growth of each student, and standardized test scores (24.1%) were factors in this equation. According to Bluman (2010), these outside factors can be expected.

The operating budget for each program was diverse with one district reporting an annual budget over \$100,000, while 26.9% stated that their annual budgets ranged

between \$1,000 and \$5,000. Furthermore, 42.3% of programs reported having an annual operating budget at or over \$5,000 annually. These funds were what programs used to provide support to both their staff and students. The study also addressed the selection of program participants. According to the findings, 89.3% of programs stated that both administrative and counselor referrals were the primary means of populating their alternative programs, 42.9% of districts stated teachers also contributed to this referral process, and 39.3% indicated that parents played a role in placing a student into the alternative programs.

According to the survey, 90.9% of programs reported utilizing RtI as their primary means of intervention. In addition to programs such as RtI, many districts indicated they used multiple intervention programs. One such program was Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS). The PBIS system received the second highest response rate at 45.5%, indicating many districts used both programs to address the concerns of at-risk students. Only 9.1% of districts reported utilizing the READ 180 program in this capacity.

Parental involvement was also a focus of this study. As expected, 85.7% of districts stated they ranked parental involvement at either a medium or low level. Only 7.1% of districts noted high levels of parental involvement, while 7.1% of programs reported no parental involvement at all.

When asked about the hours of operation, 88.9% of programs indicated they operated on the same schedule as their primary buildings, 18.5% of programs utilized a late-start system, and 14.8% of districts used either early dismissal or evening class

opportunity. One district indicated their classes as primarily online, which allowed students to complete their course work during their own time frame.

The last quantitative element of the study addressed the topic of high school diplomas. The question asked whether graduates of the alternative programs received a standard high school diploma or an alternative high school diploma. Of those who responded, 82.1% stated their alternative school graduates received a standard high school diploma, while only 17.9% reported issuing an alternative high school diploma to their graduates.

The final two questions allowed each participant an opportunity to answer two questions in written form. The first question addressed how their program prepared their students for the future. The answers received ranged greatly, from allowing students to attend classes that could earn college credit, to classes designed to mimic the work place. Several districts stated their programs aligned students with a potential career path, such as mechanics or basic computer operations. Numerous districts also stated Missouri Connections was a means of determining a potential career for their students. While other districts reported their focus was on ACT preparation or other vocational programing.

The last question inquired about the value of their program to the development of their at-risk students. The responses were as unique as the students they served. Many districts stated the most impactful aspect of their program was the flexibility in their daily schedule that allowed students to maintain a job while completing high school. One district noted providing child care during the day was helpful, allowing young parents to attend school more easily. Another district stated they had tremendous success hosting a

family night for their students and their families. Many districts mentioned the use of contracts that allowed for a higher success rate among their students. However, the most recurring comment was that the alternative school's primary focus was to develop relationships with their students. This common thread of alternative education surfaced again and again throughout this study. The need for successful development of relationships between the at-risk student and their instructors was essential to retaining the student and subsequently, successfully addressing the needs of this population (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Limitations of the Findings

The limitations of this study came from the number of participants and the establishment of a common language because many terms used were specific to alternative programs. Given the fact that only 30 school districts completed the survey, some questions received a disproportionate number of responses. An additional limitation of this study was the confinement to only one state, Missouri. Therefore, by nature, this study was highly focused and limited. The final limitation of this study was the use of unknown respondents. Without being present at the time of the survey completion, the researcher was under the impression that the person completing the survey did in fact obtain and provide accurate information.

Conclusions

The findings of this study reflected two different methods based on the research question addressed. The first research question was descriptive in nature; therefore, no statistical analysis was necessary in the evaluation process. The second research question

utilized statistical analysis to determine if a statically significant difference existed.

Therefore, a combination of two different analyses determined the outcome.

Research Question 1. *What are the characteristics of alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Educational Network?*

This research question was written in a manner consistent with a descriptive study (Fraenkel et al., 2012, Chapter 5). The information gathered through survey questions three through 20 provided the descriptive information for research question number one (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Based on this information, several consistent attributes were identified. One such attribute was the importance of maintaining a low student-to-teacher ratio (D'Angelo & Zemanick 2009; Wilhelm 2009). This reoccurring answer was supported by research conducted by D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) as well as Wilhelm (2009). Both studies found alternative programs would increase their ability to reach at-risk students by decreasing the number of students for which one instructor was responsible.

Another attribute was to provide meaningful and intentional professional development specifically tailored for the alternative school/program instructor (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Wilson et al., 2011). Wilson et al. (2011) identified that this teaching position was unique when compared to the standard classroom. Therefore, the need for tailored professional development was critical, which was in alignment with the responses in this study (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Wilson et al., 2011).

Flexibility was yet another characteristic identified by the participants as a vital element which a successful alternative school/program must incorporate. Flexibility should begin with administration as they created master schedules as well as daily

operating hours, and continued through an at-risk teacher daily lesson (Wilhelm, 2009). As stated by one participant, the at-risk student does not fit the typical mold of a normal student. Therefore, educators must think outside the mold to reach them. The ability to be creative and flexible was one of the top responses given by the participants of this study. This same characteristic was identified as a critical element by other research as well. As stated earlier, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) listed flexibility as one of the most important aspects in reaching the at-risk student. In addition, Isbell and Cote (2009) also identified the need for a high level of flexibility within the learning environment of an alternative school/program.

Furthermore, providing instructors as well as administrators with a plethora of both academic and behavioral intervention strategies was also frequently identified among the participants. This response was consistent with research conducted by Quinn et al. (2007) and Benner et al. (2012) who also identified the use of tiered intervention strategies among the at-risk student population as a highly effective means of altering undesirable behavior and/or supporting academic gaps. Despite the fact that the types of intervention programs varied from district to district, the concept of utilizing interventions did not. Tiered interventions were consistently identified as an effective means of reaching the at-risk student (Benner et al., 2012; Quinn et al., 2007).

Parental involvement was highly consistent throughout this study as over 89% of participants identified their parental involvement as non-existent. D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) identified both the lack of parent involvement as well as the importance of parent involvement in the success of all students. Easton and Soguero (2011) also identified a high need for parent involvement in these situations. However, according to the

results of this study, only a few participants identified this as an area in which they were making an concerted effort to improve.

An additional factor that emerged was the importance of employing experienced instructors who had a strong desire to work with the at-risk student population (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). According to the results of this study, employing the correct teachers tied directly into establishing a strong rapport with the student and subsequently providing that student with an opportunity to achieve academic success (Quinn et al., 2007).

Providing students with experienced instructors also ties directly into another reoccurring characteristic among Missouri Alternative schools: placing a high value on a positive teacher/student relationship. Once again, D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) and Wilhelm (2009) identified the value of establishing a strong and positive relationship between an instructor and their students. This characteristic was identified with a greater frequency than any other during this study.

Research Question 2. *What difference, if any, exists in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way alternative schools/programs within the Missouri Alternative Education Network?*

After reviewing survey responses, persistence to graduation data were examined from the MODESE for the years, 2011, 2012, and 2013. The data from question number 11, "What is the theme or purpose of your program," combined with the persistence to graduation average of each participating school district created this comparison. This process allowed the use of a two-sample *t*-test to determine whether there was a significant difference between the two styles of programs. According to the results, the *t*-

test indicated no significant difference in the persistence to graduation rate between one-way and revolving door style alternative programs.

Despite these findings, the number of districts that identified themselves as a revolving door program outnumbered those that identified themselves as a one-way program by a ratio of more than four to one. This discovery warrants further research as it appears to have no significant impact on a student's ability to successfully complete high school educational requirements. However, studies conducted by D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) indicated the opposite as they stated being a member of the student body with the ability to experience high school events was crucial to the successful development of the at-risk student. This, in turn, may ultimately lead to the successful completion and graduation of high school (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Implications for Practice

According to the data gathered and the statistical analysis conducted during the course of this study, there was no statistical difference in the theme of alternative programs and their corresponding district's graduation rate. Therefore, the result of this research suggested no improvements were made when evaluating potential improvements to the current alternative educational programs in the state of Missouri.

However, the information gathered through the survey did suggest a consistency between programs. These consistencies included the use of teacher-guided instructions as the primary means of guiding instruction (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). In addition to teacher-guided instruction, many districts stated they utilized various computer-guided instruction as a supplement when needed. Another constant that emerged was the importance placed on developing a relationship or rapport with the at-risk student. This

was listed as one of the strongest ingredients when attempting to achieve success in this environment (D'Angelo & Zemanick 2009; Wilhelm 2009).

Elements within Chapter Two outlined common traits for identifying the at-risk student and provided a list of best practices for alternative programs. Among these traits were developing a positive relationship between staff and student (Benson, 2012; Dicksteen, 2012; Quinn et al., 2007), allowing professional flexibility (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009), providing targeted professional development (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Wilson et al. 2011), and integrating computer-guided instruction into the daily curriculum (Saine et al., 2011).

Many authors shared similar characteristics to the responses received during the written portion of this study. According to Raywid (1982):

Traits commonly attributed to successful educative programs have been identified as that of a) choice – voluntary participation by teachers, students and families; b) autonomy and control – horizontal rather than vertical hierarchy of authority and decision-making; c) curriculum and skills – curriculum relevant to students' needs and life experiences; and d) spirit of common enterprise – purposeful emphasis on school as a community. (as cited in Wilson et al., 2011, p. 36)

The work of Wilson et al. (2011) also contained suggestions for establishing an alternative program. These suggestions included: a) being physically located in the community in which one would be served; b) employ both certified and non-certified staff from the community; c) limit the maximum number of students to 100 or lower; d)

finding highly qualified teachers who seek employment with disadvantaged students; and e) the allow the school to function democratically.

Based on the research analyzed during the course of this study, an effective alternative school/program should employ a sufficient amount of educators to maintain a low student to teacher ratio (D'Angelo & Zemanick 2009; Wilhelm 2009). These educators would have a strong desire to work with this demographic as well as a solid mastery of their content area (Benson, 2012). In addition, the educators selected would demonstrate the ability to develop a positive relationship with their students as this was a reoccurring aspect of reaching the at-risk student (D'Angelo & Zemanick 2009; Wilhelm 2009).

As noted from the responses from the research, educators who work with alternative school students should be subjected to numerous professional development opportunities specifically tailored to working with the at-risk student (D'Angelo & Zemanick ,2009; Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011). This professional development would address elements, such as multi-tiered intervention strategies for both academic and behavioral deficiencies within the at-risk learner (Quinn et al., 2007).

The classroom and instructional methods would vary based on teacher style and student population. The use of traditional direct instruction would be integrated into computer based curriculum as needed (Saine et al., 2011; Vasquez & Slocum, 2012). Professional flexibility would be afforded throughout the building allowing instructors and administrators to use their professional judgment in reaching their students (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Finally, the theme of the program/school would be adopted based on the need of the school district. Given the fact that research found no statistically significant difference in the persistence to graduation rate between the two themes (revolving door and one-way programs), this decision should be made based on each student as flexibility was identified as a key element for successfully reaching the at-risk learner (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the research conducted during this study, several recommendations for future studies have been identified. One such study would be to identify the resettlement patterns of both graduates and dropout students after their cohort graduation date (Biddle, 2010). This study could assist school districts in determining the impact their dropout population had on the local economy. Therefore, it would aid them in determining the need for an alternative school/program in their district (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Investigating the long-term effectiveness of various styles of alternative programs as they relate to high school completion, post high school achievement, and job placement/retention would be essential (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Research could include programs that address not only the current educational status of at-risk students, but also determine the skills these students obtain within their alternative programs which assist them in their future (Wilson et al., 2011). Based on the finding of this study, characteristics of programs that have been proven effective in aiding at-risk students in their future could be generated and shared with other alternative programs or schools.

Exploring the impact of computer-guided instruction in language arts and mathematics as they pertain to both the graduation rate and standardized test scores at the

student level would benefit the field of alternative education (Doabler et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2011). In addition, the investigation of the impact of classroom instruction styles on both the graduation rate and standardized test scores at the student level would also be beneficial (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Saine et al., 2011). These elements play a vital role in public education as they have a direct impact on a school district's AYP.

Researching the primary reason for the development of at-risk behavior among students would also prove valuable among educators (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006). In addition, identifying any educational or social precursors to these behaviors in the early developmental process of the at-risk student could also prove valuable (Greenwood et al., 2011). Once identified, researchers could explore potential social or educational interventions directly addressing the precursors found in the at-risk student (Greenwood et al., 2011).

Another suggestion would be to conduct a study by which would apply identification codes to each individual category of questions as a means of determining the impact of various components of alternative programs within Missouri (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). This process would allow for a higher level of focus to be placed on effective intervention strategies while eliminating ineffective practices thus improving the efficiency of alternative programs/schools across the board.

Another beneficial study would be to research the percentage of students who are tested for an Individual Education Program (IEP) and did not qualify and interventions deployed in these situations compared to how many students with an IEP are being served in the alternative classrooms (Pullen et al., 2011). In addition, one could explore the success and/or failure rate of targeted interventions utilized among at-risk students

with a specific learning disability or IEP (Pullen et al., 2011). This process could again increase the efficiency of the alternative programs.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics of alternative programs in Missouri and to determine whether there was a significant impact on the graduation rate when compared to the two primary styles of alternative programs. The quantitative analysis of this study yielded a wide variety of results. However, there were some consistent responses when asked the primary grade level served within each alternative program. It became clear that graduation as well as preparation for the future was one of the primary concerns of the participating school districts. The most consistent response to the last question, “What is unique about your program that you feel is valuable?” was “to develop relationships with students.” The responses given during the course of the survey suggested the participating school districts had a strong focus on their individual student needs. This same philosophy was reinforced in multiple studies throughout the research (D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Wilhelm, 2009).

In addition to this descriptive examination, a statistical analysis determined whether there was a significant difference in the persistence to graduation rate between revolving door and one-way style programs. According to the data collected, there was no significant difference between the two styles of programs as they pertained to the persistence to graduation rate in their respective school district.

This study can be a baseline for future research. By establishing a database of consistent characteristics, studies may determine the most efficient course of action for school districts. The ever-growing need for alternative education is lost in the hustle and

bustle of today's educational system (Dropouts, 2011). With arrival of new programs and initiatives each year, administrators and teachers face more challenges than they can possibly address. Therefore, they must prioritize their time and resources. In this situation, any initiative or program that impacts a small demographic may be moved to the back of the line. This is unfortunate but understandable. However, due to the social and financial impact that one high school dropout inflicts on a community, it is vital that this small group of students receive adequate support (*Facing the School*, 2011).

Efficiency is the key to solving this problem. To address the needs of the at-risk population effectively, a district must be as efficient as possible. As funding becomes increasingly tight, it is vital that alternative program personnel become experts in maximizing the resources at their disposal. At the same time, districts cannot underfund at-risk programs. This action could send a message to students and staff that they lack value. This may, in turn, cause the metaphorical bar to lower to a point wherein the program becomes ineffective.

Appendix A: Survey

Survey

(There will be two industry-specific terms used during this survey. Both of these terms apply to a style or theme of alternative programs. The following definitions illustrate a collaborative effort between members of MAEN and provide clarity for the two terms).

Revolving Door Alternative Program—This term describes an alternative program designed to address specific needs of students with the goal to return them to the regular classroom setting once they show sufficient progress.

One-Way Alternative Program—This term describes an alternative program designed to accept students who prove incapable of successfully completing their education in a regular school setting. Students enrolled in this style of program will either graduate from the alternative program or drop-out of school. They cannot return to the regular classroom setting.

1. Please provide the name of your school district. _____
2. How long has your alternative program existed? _____
3. What grade level(s) does your alternative program serve? (Please select all that apply.)
 - K-4
 - 5-6
 - 7-8
 - 9-12
4. How many students do you serve in your alternative program?
 - 0-10
 - 11-30
 - 31-50
 - 51+
5. What is your student-to-teacher ratio? _____

6. How many staff members are dedicated to your alternative program?
- 0-2
 - 3-5
 - 6-9
 - 10+
7. Does your alternative program have a designated administrator?
- Yes
 - No
8. Does your alternative program have a designated, full-time administrator?
- Yes
 - No
9. What instructional method does your program utilize?
- Computer-based instruction
 - Teacher-based instruction
 - Mixture between both computer and teacher based instruction
10. What curriculum does your program utilize?
- Standard district approved curriculum
 - Modified district approved curriculum
 - Customized alternative curriculum
 - Computer-based curriculum
11. What is the theme or purpose of your program? (check all that apply)
- Revolving Door style/theme
 - One-Way style/theme
 - Credit Recovery / Missouri Option only
 - Other _____ (please explain)

12. How is the level of success measured within your alternative program?

- Graduate rate
- Dropout rate
- Individual growth of the student
- Standardized test score

13. What is the annual operating budget for your alternative program?

- \$0-\$500
- \$501-\$1000
- \$1001-\$5000
- \$5000+

14. How is your alternative program populated? (please check all that apply)

- __Teacher referral
- __Administrator referral
- __Counselor referral
- __Parent referral
- Other _____

15. What intervention strategies does your alternative program utilize?

- Response to Intervention
- Positive Behavior and Intervention System
- READ 180
- Other: _____

16. What is the level of parent involvement with your alternative program?

- High level of involvement
- Medium level of involvement
- Low level of involvement
- No involvement

17. What are your hours of operation? (please check all that apply)

- Standard school hours
- Late start
- Early dismissal
- Evening classes

18. What is the average number of years that your instructors teach within your alternative program?
- 1-3 years
 - 4-7 years
 - 8-10 years
 - 10+
19. What is the average experience level of your instructors teaching within your alternative program?
- 1-3 years
 - 4-7 years
 - 8-10 years
 - 10+
20. Do your alternative program students receive the same high school diploma as their cohort class taking classes in the normal classroom setting?
- Yes
 - No
21. What developmental strategies does your program incorporate to prepare students for their future? _____
22. Optional: What is unique about your program that you feel is valuable?

Appendix B: Institutional Review Board

LINDENWOOD

DATE: February 19, 2014

TO: Ronald Ladd, MS
FROM: Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board

STUDY TITLE: [539434-1] R. Josh Ladd Dissertation - IRB
IRB REFERENCE #:
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: February 19, 2014
EXPIRATION DATE: May 31, 2014
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research project. Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the IRB.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the completion/amendment form for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of May 31, 2014.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years.

If you have any questions, please contact Beth Kania-Gosche at (636) 949-4576 or bkaniagosche@lindenwood.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

If you have any questions, please send them to IRB@lindenwood.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board's records. Generated on IRBNet

Appendix C: Informed Consent

LINDENWOOD

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

A Case Study of Missouri Public School Alternative Educational Programs

Principal Investigator: R. Josh Ladd

Telephone: 417-██████████ E-mail: Joshladd@willardschools.net

If necessary, please forward this message to the appropriate individual.

1. This is an invitation to participate in a research study conducted by R. Josh Ladd under the guidance of Dr. Cherita Graber, Dr. Sherry DeVore, Dr. Terry Reid, and Dr. Lisa Christiansen. The purpose of this research is to determine what alternative education programs exist within the state of Missouri's public educational system.
2. Your participation will involve:
 - The completion of a 22 question, online survey.
 - Please select the link provided or you may copy and paste the link into your Internet browser. ██████████
 - Completion of the survey will be at your leisure.
 - The amount of time involved in your participation will be approximately 5-7 minutes. The research will include approximately 51 separate school districts.
3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.
4. There are no direct benefits for you as a study participant. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge about alternative programs and may help develop a system of best-practices among educational programs.
5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. There is no penalty of any type should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, we will not reveal your identity in any publication or presentation that may result from this study and the information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location.

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, R. Josh Ladd or the Supervising Faculty, Dr. Cherita Graber, [REDACTED]. You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs at 636-949-4846.

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Vita

Josh Ladd currently works within the Willard R-II school district as the administrator of alternative programs for all grade levels. His primary responsibility consists of identifying new and more efficient methods addressing behavioral, social, and educational intervention methods. Prior to his current role, Josh spent five years teaching classes, such as English I, English I Honors, English II, Speech and Debate, At-risk English, and At-Risk Pre-Algebra. He graduated from Southwest Baptist University with a Bachelor's of Science in Middle School Education and English in 2001 and from William Woods University with a Master's of Education in Administration in 2008. He continued his studies earning an Educational Specialist Degree in Administration from Lindenwood University in 2013.