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A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TWO ALTERNATIVE MIDDLE SCHOOLS: HOW PREPARED ARE STUDENTS FOR HIGH SCHOOL SUCCESS?

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A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TWO ALTERNATIVE MIDDLE SCHOOLS:

HOW PREPARED ARE STUDENTS FOR HIGH SCHOOL SUCCESS?

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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March, 2013

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I could not have completed this journey without much patience, love and support. I would like to acknowledge those who "came along for the ride", either knowingly or unknowingly, to help me reach my goal.

First I would like to thank my mother, Marcelle Cherau and my father Ralph Kilmer for never giving up on me and encouraging me to "get back to work" and "finish the paper." I know I was not always receptive but you were persistent and finally, it is finished! You are the wind beneath my wings. To my aunt, Rosalie Cumbee, thank you offering to read whatever chapter I was working on and offering sage advice and words of encouragement about the whole PhD process. To Mike, you have put up with weekend classes, night classes and piles of papers for many years, thank you for encouraging me to finish. To my friend, Vicky Bivens who spend hours with me reading, re-reading, correcting and keeping me on task - Thank You!

To the members of my committee, Dr. Tracy Walker, Dr. Jon Becker and Dr. Susan Leone, thank you for your guidance and support. I appreciate your patience and persistence in working with me to finish this endeavor.

Finally, I sincerely thank Dr. Kathleen Cauley. I know this has been a long journey and I appreciate your steady help and exacting expectations. I cannot thank you enough for your patience and for seeing me through to this projects' completion.

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A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TWO ALTERNATIVE MIDDLE SCHOOLS:

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

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This study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of alternative middle school programs utilizing a longitudinal, mixed methods design and was driven by research questions which analyzed trends in attendance, discipline, and Standard of Learning test pass rates in history and science for 8th, 9th, and 10th grade. It also examined student perceptions concerning preparedness for high school, skills previously taught, transition to high school, and relationships with peers and adults.

Data on attendance, discipline, and SOL scores were collected from 34 students from the 2009-2010 8th grade cohort who attended one of two alternative middle schools. Attendance data indicated a decrease in the number of absences each year from 8th – 10th grade, ranging from two days to 53 days per student. Discipline data reflected a drop in discipline referrals, each year, from 8th to 10th grade. The greatest improvement in discipline, indicated by a decrease in per student referrals, occurred between 9th and 10th grade. History SOL results indicated a pass rate

that remained between 70% - 71% for grades 8-10. The test results for the science SOL showed a drop in number of students passing from 8th to 9th grade and increasing from 9th to 10th grade.

An analysis of interviews with twelve students found that they perceived their alternative middle experience as having a positive effect on relationships, both with peers and adults, and a desire to graduate. They attributed an improvement in relationship skills and ability to select positive relationships with alternative middle school attendance. Students consistently noted small class size, as experienced in the alternative middle school, as an influence on both behavior and achievement. Students previously considering dropping out of school felt their alternative middle school experience had contributed to their changed mindsets and goals. Overall this study indicated that students attending the alternative middle school for 8th grade perceived their experiences as providing greater social rather than academic preparation for high school.   In addition, best practices are similar for high school and middle school alternative programs.

Chapter 1: **Introduction**

The goal of the American educational system is to teach students the knowledge and skills they will need to participate successfully in a democratic society. The twentieth century has witnessed an increase in educational research to reach the common goal of educating *all* of America's school children (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Reforming requirements for teachers and graduation standards as well as providing school choice are some of the ways society has responded to the need to enable students to meet their academic potential and the goals desired by parents, educators and the public.

Since the birth of American education, alternatives in public education have provided educational opportunities to different segments of society based on race, gender, and social class (Young, 1990). These alternatives to public schooling set the stage for the constantly evolving nature of the educational system in America (Young, 1990).   For years the alternative education options have been available for students who were challenged within the traditional educational system, including students with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, or behavioral problems. Criticism of public education of the late 1950's and early 1960's focused on racism and exclusivity as well as accusations of being designed for the success of the few (Lange & Sletten, 2002). During the 1960's alternative educational options became a widespread movement (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Many of the students served by alternative schools were labeled at-risk. Some educators and policymakers propose that students at risk of school failure could find success provided they are offered an alternate to traditional education (Raywid, 1994).

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Alternative schools have evolved to meet the needs of the specific audiences they serve. There are several characteristics that are common among alternative programs including, small class size, high teacher-student interactions, flexibility, and an environment that is supportive and conducive to student success (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Young, 1990; Barr, 1981).

The creation of the academic alternative school is based partly on the belief that when students are in nurturing and supportive environments, they are able to thrive academically (Frediana, 2002). The incorporation of a wide range of instructional methods is frequently cited as having a positive influence on student outcomes in many alternative schools (Zahorik, 1980; Raywid, 1987). While the actual differences are less apparent than perceived differences, according to Zahorik (1980) and Raywid (1987), they do suggest that greater dependence on individualized instruction allows students to move at their own pace, receive more assistance in difficult areas, and participate in more experiential learning. These approaches counter the negative effects of inflexible traditional curriculum and instruction that often discourage marginal students (Sinclair & Ghory, 1987).

The term alternative education was originally construed as an umbrella term covering a range of options in schooling. As classrooms and students evolve, so does the meaning of the term alternative education. Presently its meaning has evolved into an understanding of programming for at-risk youth, those who are likely to not finish high school (Knutson & College, 2009). At-risk students are described as discouraged learners, those who, for whatever reason, do not achieve in the standard high school program. Causes for school dropout for students from grades 9-12, according to the federal definition, are poor attendance, habitual truancy, academic lags, and teenage parenthood (Knutson & College, 2009). This description

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fits over 25% of American youth (Knutson & College, 2009). The dropout issue and the at-risk issue are virtually inseparable. Many states and school districts have come to the realization of the economic loss involved in the drop-out problem and have established separate educational programs for at-risk students, known as alternative or nontraditional schools and/or programs.

Finding ways to best meet the needs of students at risk for academic failure has become the focus of many alternative school studies in the literature (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Depending on the types of students served, the list of best practices may vary. Many well run alternatives feature commonalities that suggest program effectiveness. These essential elements are caring, nurturing adults, the creation of small learning communities, an assets approach to students, respect for youth, high expectations for achievement, inclusion of comprehensive services, engaging learning, and supportive and long-term follow up services (Kerka, 2005). It is imperative that alternative settings continue to adjust their programs to best meet the needs of their specific audience while keeping in mind the practices that have been shown to be effective.

Studies of alternative schools have noted many differences among curricula and learning environments (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Although there was considerable variation between the schools studied, Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) noted many common themes and strengths. Small class size led to high levels of interaction between teachers and students as well as more individualized attention provided to students (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Flexible scheduling and academic counseling allows customized academics to best meet the needs of students. Connections between curriculum and the real-world provide students with a sense of purpose and encourage buy-in.

Cox (1999), Gold and Mann (1984), and Jenkins (1997) studied quantitative measures of alternative program effectiveness. Examination of grade point average, school attendance, and

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self-esteem was conducted to determine the effects of the alternative setting (Cox, 1999). Cox's (1999) findings indicate a positive relationship between alternative schooling and the indicators he studied. Gold and Mann (1984), studied the effects of scholastic experiences on delinquent and disruptive behaviors, particularly at school. The effect of school bonds on school delinquency was the focus of Jenkins' (1999) study. Both Gold and Mann (1984) and Jenkins (1997) found that the more involved and successful students were in school, the less likely they were to misbehave or participate in delinquent behavior. When students feel safe and secure in their academic environment they are more likely to follow school policy. Alternative schools provide the structure and support needed for parents struggling to help their children learn and make appropriate decisions (Gosen, 2011).

Alternative schooling options in Virginia have grown exponentially over the last decade. Students served in Virginia's alternative schools are typically referred to *as at-risk for academic failure*. Virginia has provided required components and has outlined the services each alternative location should adhere to when creating an alternative school or program (Virginia Board of Education Annual Report, 2009-2010, p.iii & p. 3).

Retention in middle grades and even elementary school is associated with school dropout. Research has shown that students with prior behavior problems are most likely to fail during transition years and eventually drop out (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Some of the key dropout prevention initiatives include attendance and behavior monitors, tutoring and counseling, establishment of small learning communities, progress monitoring, and eighth to ninth grade transition programs (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). These same initiatives can be found in effective alternative schools and are especially important in the middle years of a students' educational career before entrance into high school.

Statement of the Problem

Educating *all* of America's children has become an increasing challenge as today's students are faced with more diversions and risky behavior choices than those of the past. Providing an education designed to not only build students academically, but also restructure habits and behaviors that have contributed to unsuccessful achievement in the traditional school setting is the goal of many alternative programs. There are many high school alternative programs throughout the nation; however, there is a lack of information regarding alternative middle school programs in the literature. This study gathered information about two alternative middle schools in a suburban school district in Virginia to evaluate their effectiveness. The broad intent of this study was to provide knowledge that can be used to enhance the alternative middle school's services and outcomes, both academic and behavioral.

Purpose of the Study

The students attended the alternative middle schools for a variety of reasons ranging from social and behavioral issues to discipline placements. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the alternative middle schools' program. I examined the academic indicators of science and history SOL scores, number of days absent, and number of discipline referrals, over three years: 8th grade (alternative school experience), 9th grade and 10th grade. In addition, student opinions of alternative school effectiveness were assessed via interviews. These students were selected from students who attended one of the two alternative middle schools during the 2009-2010 school year and did not change schools since enrollment into 9th grade. Interview questions focused on student preparation in the areas of academics and study skills, transition to high school, conflict mediation and/or resolution, and the ability to form relationships with peers and/or teachers or other adults. Additional questions reflected best

practices for alternative schools as found in the literature.

Research Questions

1) What are the trends in student outcomes two years after leaving the alternative
   middle school regarding:

   a. Number of days absent?

   b. Number of discipline referrals?

   c. SOL pass rates and scaled scores in history and science?

2) What are the perceptions and experiences of students who attended the alternative
   middle school regarding:

   a. Preparation for high school?

   b. Skills previously taught at the alternative middle school (study skills, anger
      management skills, conflict resolution skills, and relationship building skills).

   c. Transition to their current school?

   d. Interpersonal relationships with peers and adults at their current school?

Methodology

Data was collected for grades 8, 9, and 10 regarding number of days absent, number of
discipline referrals per student, and SOL scores for history and science. This data was analyzed
to determine trends from year to year. Interviews were conducted to collect information about
students' perceptions of the alternative middle school's effectiveness concerning their
preparation for their current school (high school), the transition process from the alternative
middle school to the high school, and their interpersonal relationships in their current school.
Questions were designed to collect objective and subjective data, via interviewer observation of
participants' body language and facial expressions. The questions were field tested using

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participants who were not eligible for the interview because they had either changed schools since 9th grade enrollment or were no longer enrolled in school. The field testing determined length of interview, clarity of the questions and appropriateness of the questions. Students who attended one of the alternative middle schools for eighth grade during the 2009-2010 school year were invited to participate if they had not changed high schools since enrollment into 9th grade.

Major Findings

Thirty-four students met the criteria for inclusion in the study. Attendance data indicated an overall decrease in number of absences each year from 8th – 10th grade, ranging from two days to 53 days per student. Discipline data dropped in the number of discipline referrals each year, from 8th to 10th grade. The greatest improvement in discipline, indicated by a decrease in the number of personal referrals per student, occurred between 9th and 10th grade. The number of students taking the history and science SOL varied each year depending on course enrollment and attendance for the test administration. History SOL test results indicated a pass rate that remained between 70% - 71% for grades 8-10. The test results for the science SOL showed a drop in number of students passing from 8th to 9th grade and increasing from 9th to 10th grade.

The responses to interviews by the twelve students who returned permission forms were inductively coded, allowing themes to emerge through the voices of these students. The themes identified were: student-student relationships, student-teacher relationships, class size, and desire to graduate from high school. Students perceived their alternative middle experience as having a positive effect on their relationships, both with peers and adults, and their desire to complete high school. An improvement in relationship skills and ability to select positive associations were attributed to alternative middle school participation. Students consistently noted small class size, as experienced in the alternative middle school, as an influence on both

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their behavior and achievement. Students who had previously considered dropping out of school or pursuing a GED felt their alternative middle school experience had contributed to their changed mindset and goal.

Definition of Terms

Alternative Education – any nontraditional education program and/or service that meets the academic, social and emotional needs of the students (Virginia Alternative Education Association/Virginia Commission on Youth, 2008).

Alternative Program – often defined by the program's characteristics, such as programs that focus on behavior, interest or functional level (Aron, 2003).

Alternative School – designed for students at risk of not graduating from high school; an alternative school is typically a public school that has at least 30 students but not more than 250 students and has a separate administrator or teacher in charge of the school and offers a nontraditional curriculum (Aron, 2003).

At-Risk – students who experience or who are predicted to experience failure during their schooling years. The National At-Risk Education Network describes at-risk students as those who experiences a significant mismatch between their circumstances and needs and the capacity or willingness of the school to accept, accommodate, and respond to them in a manner that supports and enables their maximum social, emotional and intellectual growth and development. Retrieved from http://www.atriskeducation.net/defining-at-risk.

Nontraditional Education– educational programs that are offered as alternatives within or without the formal educational system and provide innovative and flexible instruction, curriculum, grading systems, or degree requirements (Horn, 1996).

Chapter 2: Review of the Related Literature

Introduction

The goal of providing the best education for all of America's children has prompted an increase in educational research and experimentation throughout the second half of the twentieth century (Lange & Sletten, 2002). New approaches to education emerge as questions arise and policies and practices are put in place addressing these questions (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Society has responded to the need to enable students to meet their academic potential by reforming requirements for teachers and graduation standards as well as providing school choice (Aron, 2006). Although these changes have been made, some students continue to fall below the achievement goals set by educational stakeholders (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Some policymakers and educators suggest that students at risk for school failure could find success if given an alternative educational option. Alternatives to the traditional school model provide a chance for students who have not found academic success the opportunity to have their needs met (Lange & Sletten, 2002). To address the problems of students leaving the traditional school system before completing high school, educators have developed many interventions to address the needs of at-risk students, including the alternative school.

In existence for over forty years, alternative education programs have dwelled primarily on the periphery of schooling. Evolving since the 1960's, influences on the alternative program's mission and purpose have kept them from finding their place as meaningful or fully understood educational innovations. Although most educators, policymakers, and researchers

agree that alternative schools are designed for students at risk for school failure, a widely used common definition is lacking (Raywid, 1994). Because there is no commonly accepted definition of alternative schools it is difficult to precisely account for the number of schools and/or programs in operation in the United States (Lehr & Lange, 2003). The growth of alternative schools in many states raises the question about their characteristics and use.

Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) note that there are many different kinds of alternative schools and programs, often characterized by their flexible schedules, smaller student-teacher ratios, relevant and career oriented themes, and modified curricula. The creation of the academic alternative school is based partly on the belief that when students are in nurturing and supportive environments, they are able to thrive academically (Frediana, 2002). Despite the fact that many educators view alternative education as an important approach to reach disenfranchised youth, there is very little consistent, wide-ranging evidence of alternative schools' effectiveness (Lange & Sletten, 2003).

This review will address areas of alternative education starting with the definition and history and continuing through best practices for effective alternative settings as found in the literature. In addition, current trends and characteristics of alternative schools and typologies as well as how effectiveness is measured will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with the alternative schools and programs found in the state of Virginia.

Alternative Education Defined

As the numbers of students not finding success meeting today's educational standards continues to rise, addressing their needs in the traditional education system becomes more important and more of a challenge. Mainstream or traditional education stresses a *back to basics* philosophy and culture that society has traditionally deemed appropriate. Viewed as teacher-

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centered, traditional education has been challenged by education reformers who favor learner-centered and task-based instruction.   The standards movement, which is driven by testing, favors the traditional approach to instruction but often sets goals that are not attainable by the at-risk student.   One of the possible solutions approaching the issue of students not meeting the desired educational outcomes and standards in traditional education settings is alternative education. Despite its proliferation, it has been hard to define what constitutes an alternative education program.

The term *alternative education* covers all educational activities that fall outside the traditional K-12 school system, including vocational programs, special programs for gifted children, and programs for the [handicapped] (The Virginia Commission on Youth, 2008).   A majority of the alternative schools that exist across many states and local school districts are defined by the tendency to serve students who are at risk for school failure within the traditional educational system (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

The Virginia Alternative Education Association (2008) has researched alternative education definitions and recommended to the Virginia Commission on Youth (VCOY), that alternative education be defined as

> any nontraditional education program and/or service that meets the academic, social and emotional needs of the students. They may include but are not limited to: ISAEP (Individual Student Alternative Education Plan program for 16 & 17 year olds), GED; Detention; Pregnant and parenting; Academic enhancement; Behavior intervention; Substance abuse; Career development/internship/apprenticeship; Transition to and from other schools/programs; and formal or informal education or training that occurs inside or outside the traditional school setting. (p.3)

The Advisory Group for the Commission on Youth (2008) decided that the term *nontraditional education* was a more accurate description of the options currently available in the Commonwealth of Virginia and is how the school system in this study categorizes its current alternative programs. This study utilizes the definition of alternative education/nontraditional education as presented to the Virginia Commission on Youth by the Virginia Alternative Education Association and focus on the student at risk of school failure.

History of Alternative Education

Alternatives to traditional or comprehensive education have existed since the beginning of public education and have included private schools, parochial schools, or home schooling alternatives for those who could afford them or whose beliefs dictated a particular approach to education (Young, 1990). The alternatives that are most recognized today began in the 1950's and early 1960's (Tissington, 2006). Alternatives to traditional education during the 1950's to 1960's were sought because of public criticism of traditional public education. For example, comprehensive education during this time period was criticized for being racist and exclusive to the promotion of a few (Raywid, 1981).

The types of alternative schools during this time period, known as the Freedom Movement, were outside the public school system and they included freedom schools, offering quality education to minorities and operating in churches or storefronts (Young, 1990). Freedom schools were established to provide a free education to students not being served adequately in the public school systems. These schools offered "freedom to learn and freedom from restrictions" but did not last long as an alternative option for students (Raywid, 1981). Although short-lived, freedom schools provided the framework for the alternative movement and options we note today by providing choice and the idea that not all students learn in the same way. In

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addition to being viewed as the first alternatives outside the public education system, the early schools also inspired reform within the public school system in the late 1960's (Lange & Sletton, 2002). After the 1960's, alternative school programs continued to take shape in and outside the public school system, getting closer to the present day trends in alternative education.

The late 1960's to 1970's saw alternative forms of education proliferate and become widespread within the United States (Miller, 1995). According to Raywid (1981), the number of alternative schools exploded from 100 to over 10,000 during the 1970's. The 1970's saw rapid growth in the number and types of alternative schools as the concept "caught on" in the public education arena. Raywid (1994) notes that although alternative education took many forms, there were two traits that were present from the start: "they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and consequently they have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs, and environments" (p.26). Raywid states that the first of these traits has often linked alternative schools with unsuccessful students who have not found success in a regular school program. The second trait has often linked alternatives to creativity and innovation in organizations and practice.

The type of alternative school varies according to which of these two traits best fits the needs of the target population. The schools of the 1970's appeared "at a time of great innovation and movement in the educational system with lasting implications for public schools with respect to curriculum, delivery, and structure" (Lange and Sletten, 2002, p.10). These early schools, which could be called choice-based "learning alternatives," resembled what Raywid refers to as Type I alternative schools or schools of choice. Often characterized as 'open schools,' the schools of the 1970's provided parent, student, and teacher choice, as well as pacing,

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noncompetitive evaluation and child-centered curriculum (Young, 1990). These alternatives represent what we would call 'restructured' schools emphasizing content, instructional strategy, or both.

The open school concept saw the creation of programs, including, schools without walls, schools within a school, multicultural schools, and magnet schools, which all provided choice and child-centered curriculum as the nontraditional approach. As the definition of alternative schools began to narrow, open schools became more conservative and remedial because students were functioning below average achievement levels (Tissington, 2006). Although the original definitions of Freedom Schools and open schools became outdated by the 1970's and 1980's, some of the components and ideologies have remained even until today (van Acker, 2007).

The 1980's saw the definition of alternative education begin to narrow (Lange & Sletten, 2002). This decade also brought a decline of open schools and the options of alternative education moved "from the more progressive and open orientation in the 1970's to a more conservative and remedial one in the 1980's" (Young, 1990, p. 20).   Young (1990) notes that throughout the 1980's, students who were disruptive or failing in their home school were the target for many alternative settings. The focus of alternative schools in the 1980's shifted from the creativity of open schools to one serving students who were low-performing and disruptive in the traditional setting. The collective decision making of the open schools, which included both students and teachers, was shifted to teaching basics in the alternative schools during the 1980's, suggests Raywid (1994). The fundamental approach of teaching the basics: reading, writing, and arithmetic, provided the backbone of most alternative education, in the 1980's, abandoning the more liberal approach taken in the previous decade.

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The release of *A Nation At Risk* (1983) further supported the return to fundamental educational basics to increase student achievement and improve the nation's position as a global competitor. The exception to the fundamental approach to education that grew rapidly in the 1980's was the magnet school, which expanded school choice for parents, brought innovation through specialty schools and programs, and promoted voluntary forms of racial integration (Archbald, 2004). The concept of the magnet school introduced the first widely adopted form of public school choice in the United States and differed greatly in its educational approach from the majority of alternative schools in the 1980's.

Alternative education of the 1990's was defined differently to different audiences (Lange & Sletton, 2002). During the 1990's, there was an increase in public attention focused on school violence, dropout rates, and behavior problems in our nation's public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). For example, The Gun-Free Schools Act (1994, PL 103-882) and the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act (1994, Title IV, Part A) both required that school districts expel students for at least one year for bringing a firearm to school (Aron, 2003). The Gun-Free Schools Act allows local districts to place expelled students into alternative settings (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). These directives allowed alternative placements, by the districts, to be an option for expelled students. Gray and Sinclair (2000) note that out of the 3,523 students expelled for firearms during the 1998-1999 school year, 44 percent were referred to an alternative setting. School administrators and teachers face a very difficult task in balancing two potentially conflicting obligations: the right of all students to have a safe and effective school learning environment and the right of each student to have a reasonable chance to obtain a quality education (Gut & McLaughlin, 2012). There appeared to be a renewed

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interest in alternative settings that focused on chronically disruptive, suspended, and expelled students.

Although often viewed as placements with individualized opportunities for students at risk of school failure, alternative education schools and/or programs in the 1990's frequently became settings for disruptive youth (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1999). The late 1990's were witness to a growth in state-level activity and legislation/policy on alternative schools, changing the focus of alternative schools during this decade. Just as with regular public schooling, Dynarski (1999) notes:

> alternative schooling is not an option, but an absolute requirement in every American community. Alternative schooling opportunities will be needed to accommodate the educational needs of its youth because the traditional school system, and particularly the traditional high school, can no longer serve the needs of the students and their family lifestyles common in the 1990's (p. 6).

Many alternative schools resulting from the 1990's looked very different from the original alternative schools as their purpose changed to meet the needs of society and the students served in the education system. The rejection of the conventional views of education in lieu of different, or "alternative visions grounded in a genuine desire to support children's natural ways of learning and growth" contributed to the rapid growth of alternative schooling that was observed during this decade (Miller, 2000, p. 399).

Though still often associated as a measure of drop-out prevention, alternative education schools and programs since the 1990's have been "designed to provide an alternative to dropping out of school, with special attention to the student's individual social needs and the academic requirements for a high school diploma" (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2003, p.

2). The alternative schools and programs found today are more synonymous with "drop-out prevention programs," focusing on remediation over individual growth and creativity. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 mandates that educators hold all students to the same high academic standards. These mandatory standards are required for high school graduation and set standards in reading and math for school age children (NCLB, 2001).

In addressing the reforms for dropout and at-risk prevention programs NCLB mandates that programs be developed "to prevent at-risk youth from dropping out of school, and to provide dropouts, and children and youth returning from correctional facilities or institutions for neglected or delinquent children and youth, with a support system to ensure their continued education" (U.S. Department of Education, NCLB 2001: Part D, Sec. 1401, A.3). Current legislation mandating accountability at state and local levels has contributed to further increase the number of students placed in alternative education as districts struggle with funding tied to achievement (NCLB, 2001). Alternative education, for students at risk of education failure, affords the public school system and its leaders a way to fulfill its responsibility to provide equal access to education with the added benefit, for all involved, of reducing the dropout rate. Alternative schools have been successful in reducing truancy, improving attitudes toward school, accumulating high school credits, and reducing behavior problems (Cash, 2004).

Designed for students who cannot succeed in the traditional classroom, alternative schools and programs depart from conventional rules and regulations that govern textbooks, class size, grading, curriculum, locus of instruction and teacher qualifications (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). Although the approach to instruction varies in many alternative settings, serving students at risk of academic failure because of poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior,

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pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school continues be the focus of alternative schools and/or programs (NCES, 2002).   Some programs use computer learning and distance learning, some are built around outdoor activities and challenges while others rely on the community as a classroom or blend academic instruction with real world work experience (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). Serving students at risk for academic failure for a variety of reasons remains the mission of the alternative setting, no matter what method of instructional delivery is utilized.

Current Trends in Alternative Schools

Alternative education programs are proliferating in an attempt to meet the needs of students who would benefit from nontraditional approaches to learning. In a review of legislation on alternative schools, 48 states indicated that they are now more likely to rely on alternative placements for students with learning and behavioral problems, particularly in response to the pressure of student achievement accountability requirements (Lehr, 2004). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD), the number of public alternative schools, for students at risk of educational failure, not including alternative programs, increased from 2,606 in the 1993-94 school year to 3,850 in the 1997-98 school-year. The National Center for Educational Statistics reported that during the 2000-01 school year 10,900 public alternative schools and programs for students at risk of educational failure, serving 612,000 students, were operating in the United States (Kleiner, Porch & Farris, 2002).

During the 2007-08 school year, NCES reported that 646,500 students were enrolled in alternative schools and programs for students at risk of education failure (Carver & Lewis, 2010). Of these 646,500 students, 558,300 (86.4%), were served in 10,300 district administered

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alternative schools and programs (Carver & Lewis, 2010). The remaining 87,200 students were served in alternative settings administered by an entity other than the district (Carver & Lewis, 2010). These statistics clearly indicate the momentum and proliferation of alternative schools and programs that was predicted by many researchers (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Lange & Sletton, 2002; Raywid, 1994). According to NCES (2012), the total number of secondary alternative schools in Virginia during the 2010-2011 school year was 189 serving 3,349 students. NCES does not delineate between grade levels other than elementary and secondary schools with secondary encompassing middle and high school grades.

Characteristics of Alternative Schools for the At-Risk Student

Alternative education reflects society's recognition that educational settings and models cannot be standardized and must be varied to allow each individual to find a learning environment in which he/she can find academic and/or behavioral success (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). Alternative schools, for students at risk of education failure, are designed to meet a variety of traditional challenges including academic options, dropout prevention, disciplinary consequences, and providing academic/behavioral remediation (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). Based on students' varying degrees of departure from the standard school organization described by Raywid (1994), there are often two consistent factors that appear in many of the alternative settings: The first is a target population and the second factor is the common theme of disenfranchisement from traditional education. These schools have small enrollments (25-75 students), serve primarily high school age students, can be accessed through student choice or by mandatory placement, include both short or long-term placements, and offer both academic and a range of supportive services (Lehr, Lanners, & Lange, 2003).

In addition, one-on-one interaction between teachers and students, a supportive

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environment, student-centered curriculum, flexibility in structure, and opportunities for students to engage in decision making are often common characteristics among alternative schools for students at risk of failure (Aron, 2006; Lange & Sletton, 2002). Flower, McDaniel, and Jolivette (2011) note that students who are served in an alternative education setting require academic and behavioral instruction and supports in order to improve their own life circumstances. Without these services, students in alternative education could continue their path of negative outcomes in both school and life once they leave the alternative setting (Flower, et al., 2011).

Alternative School Typologies

The review of the literature identifies a wide range of alternative education options, driven by various education theory and research principles. Raywid (1999) noted that early efforts using alternatives as a means of introducing system-wide change, generated numerous options and some positive signs of success. One commonly cited three-level classification is that developed by Raywid. Raywid's (1990) research and focus on the individual student/learner concluded that there were three types of alternative programs that emerged from the thousands of individual programs in place across the country at that time. There are "pure alternatives," or schools and programs that are more humane, more responsive, more challenging, and more compelling than regular schools; "disciplinary alternatives," or schools and programs that serve as the "last chance" for the worst and weakest student; and "compensatory alternatives," or schools and programs that are remedial for academic purposes (Raywid, 1990). These types are referred to as Type I or Restructured Schools, Type II or Disciplinary Programs, and Type III or Problem –Solving Schools (Raywid, 1990). More recent research by Raywid (2001) has taken into account the overlap of categories and has expanded on her previous research of alternative settings. These types are commonly referred to as Type IV and V schools.

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Type I or Restructured Schools offer full-time, multiyear, education options for students of all kinds, including those needing more individualization, and those seeking an innovative or challenging curriculum (Raywid, 2001). These schools provide full-time education options for any student, whether gifted or a dropout or academically at risk or behaviorally at risk, across multiple years (Settles & Orwick, 2003). Type I is effectively a "learning alternative" that emphasizes the learner and can be viewed as a replacement for the regular school. These schools are progenies of the early free schools and may start as early as the elementary grades (Kochhar-Bryant & White, 2007). Type I (restructured or educational) alternative education programs can be described as schools *of choice* based on innovative programs or strategies to attract students. These schools include charter schools and offer progressive education to a wide variety of students. Type I alternative education programs enroll students who, prior to entering the program, were truant, pregnant, engaged in substance abuse, had special education needs, or were in need of a gifted curriculum (Raywid, 2001). Also included are those students who are unsuccessful in achieving passing scores on standardized tests and could potentially put their school in jeopardy of not meeting federal, state and/or local mandates. Although not specifically designed for the at-risk student, Type I programs often incorporate ideas that work to the advantage of students who are struggling in mainstream schools (Kochhar-Bryant & White, 2007). Considered a 'true alternative setting,' these programs attempt to improve the match between student and school (environment) and offer a change in educational setting to foster student success. Programs for high school dropouts or potential dropouts and sponsored by school districts would fit into the Type I category, along with newer programs for students unable to pass standardized tests (Krentz, Thurlow, Shyyan, & Scott, 2005).

The second type of alternative program focuses on student behavior and is known as

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Type II or the Disciplinary Program (Raywid, 2001). Type II students are those who are offered a 'last chance' program due to poor behavior choices made by the individual and are typically the step preceeding expulsion (Settles & Orwick, 2003). Familiar models include last-chance schools, boot-camps, and in-school suspension programs. Type II programs are designed to change the student with a mix of behavior modification and intensive individual attention (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). Type II programs are alternative discipline programs that attempt to change students by teaching compliance skills, and to then return students to their traditional schools or classrooms.

The Type II programs, in theory, benefit the mainstream classroom by removing students whose behavior prevents others from learning, the 'troublemakers.' These disciplinary programs provide the support needed to help those most disenfranchised from the school system with a mix of behavior modification and intensive individual attention (Sagor, 1999). The behavior modification found in Type II programs aim to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students (Raywid, 1994). Violent or disruptive students are 'sentenced' to Type II or disciplinary programs (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). Raywid (1999) suggests the metaphor "soft jail" to resemble the disciplinary program, or Type II alternative school. Research trends show that programs in this category do not lead to long-term positive outcomes and can potentially increase the risk for negative outcomes (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Type III or Problem-Solving Schools, are remedial in nature (Raywid, 1994). These schools are alternatives specifically designed for at-risk students, the target population, and tend to be non-punitive, more positive, and compassionate for students in need of extra help, remediation, or rehabilitation (Kochhar-Bryant & White, 2007). Type III students are often in need of remediation and/or rehabilitation of academic, social/emotional skills, or both and these

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programs are more akin to therapy (Raywid, 1994). These settings provide short-term

therapeutic services such as counseling, access to social services, and academic remediation

(Settles & Orwick, 2003). These programs elicit change through counseling, access to social

services, and academic remediation, rather than through behavior modification and are

considered therapeutic programs (Raywid, 1994). Although Type III programs serve targeted

populations, students can choose not to participate and are expected to return to their former

educational setting after remediation.

More recent classification offered by Raywid (2001) identifies constellations of

characteristics from all three programs and defines them according to focus such as 'changing

the student,' a characteristics from Types I and III; 'changing the school,' a combination of

Types I and II; and 'changing the educational system.' This classification is fundamental when

she asks: 'Do we change the child or the environment?' which represents a focus on the

outcome desired by participation in the program (Raywid, 2001).

Many schools fall between the original three types and exist as hybrids of these three

categories, indicating a potential Type IV category (Lange & Sletten, 2002). The hybrids

combine elements of Types I, II and III presented by Raywid. Type IV or variations of Type IV

represent what is commonly perceived as alternative programming in U.S. public schools

(Kochhar-Bryant & White, 2007). White and Kochhar-Bryant (2006) state that "it is most likely

that alternative schools and programs today are hybrids in that the curriculum and instruction or

the services that these schools and programs provide to students are alternatives to the

curriculum and instruction or services that regular schools provide" (p.2). Roderick (2003)

proposed another type of alternative school, either a Type V or a new typology emphasizing a

student's educational needs above risk factors, demographics, or program characteristics.

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Raywid's measures of effectiveness include increases in student motivation, goal orientation, efficacy, and self-esteem. From her research, Raywid (2001) finds that Type I (restructured) programs are the most successful with the struggling student; whereas, Type II (disciplinary) programs are the least likely to lead to substantial student gains. Student progress in Type II programs is positive while students are enrolled, but regresses when students return to a traditional setting, perhaps due to the short length of the program (Raywid, 2001). Providing high quality individualized therapeutic supports along with educational instruction over a longer period of time (two or more years) may lead to better outcomes (Aron, 2006). Research indicates that Type III programs may improve behavior and achievement but there are challenges when students return to their home schools therefore, it is recommended that transition and follow-up services be provided as students re-enter their home schools to facilitate positive long-term outcomes (Lange & Sletten, 2002). As alternative programs continue to evolve, it is possible that category overlaps will broaden as we strive to educate all students and provide them with the setting most conducive to meeting their individual.

Four practice-based models for setting up alternative education programs and four guides for evaluating them are discussed by White and Kochhar-Bryant (2006). These models indicate that in order for alternative education to be effective the end does not necessarily justify the means but it attempts to shape education systems, school districts, schools or a subsystem to fit the needs of the students who are not finding success in the traditional classroom (White & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006). The four models described by White & Kochhar-Bryant (2006) are: The Chalker model (1996, 1999), The Virginia model (Duke & Griesdorn, 1992), The Barr and Parrett model (1997), and the Tobin and Sprague model (1999).

The Chalker model for setting up alternative programs suggests that a program that works in one location may not work in another location. Chalker (1996) suggests instructional delivery models should be selected to best meet the needs of the students they serve. The transfer of whole program ideas, including weaknesses, does not also mean the transfer of its success. Chalker (1996, 1999) recommends different models such as transition, behavior intervention and school continuation as studying program models and adapting best practices to fit the needs of the location and population. Some of the models Chalker (1996) suggested include: school transition, behavioral intervention, the academic model, and school continuation.

The Virginia model is based on behavioral and psychosocial objectives developed for the alternative school (White & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006). Duke and Griesdorn (1999) list the objectives for the Virginia model including: "high" daily attendance rate, increased percentage of students who feel good about attending school, improvement in student attendance over the previous rate, reduction in daily disciplinary referrals, acquisition of social skills, such as anger management and peer mediation, and "low" number of suspensions/expulsions. These objectives can be accomplished, suggest Duke and Griesdorn (1999) by "developing a continuum of alternatives, each targeting a distinct group of students and involving a design suited to their needs" (p. 89). The researchers also recommend that each alternative school employ a reading specialist, learning disabilities specialist, and school counselor which would allow close monitoring of program objectives and trained personnel to work with student challenges (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999).

The Barr and Parrett (1997) model indicates that program success is due to both preparation and administration of a new program. Their model includes four components to start an alternative school built around a committee. This committee initiates a plan, develops a collaborative program, implements curricula, instructional methods, and student services, and finally there is an evaluation of the staff, program, and program effect on students.

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Roderick (2003) has identified several distinct groups the first of which is students who have fallen "off track" because they have gotten into trouble. These students need short-term systems of recovery and a transition back into the regular high school. The second group Roderick (2003) identifies is students who have transitioned early into adulthood either because of parenthood, the inability to stay in school (immigrants or caring for sick or elderly parent/grandparent) or those coming out of the juvenile justice system. Another identified group is those who are older and have fallen very behind educationally. These students are either dropouts who need a few credits to graduate, those who had children and have decided to finish their high school education or adults leaving the criminal justice system. Roderick (2003) notes that these students are currently having their needs met and are populating many of the urban alternative education programs.

The final group identified by Roderick (2003) is comprised of students who have fallen behind educationally and have significant problems such as very low reading levels, and are very over age for their grade level. They may be 16-17 year olds with third or fourth grade reading levels who never *graduated* from 8th grade or they may be students who have attended high school for several years but never accumulated any credits. This group of students is very large and most school systems do not have programs that can meet their needs (Aron, 2003). They have been repeatedly retained and many were placed in special education.

A variety of locations have been utilized for alternative programs including vocational schools, work-based learning, special programs in regular schools, museums, planetariums, nature centers, community day schools, community colleges, home schooling, and juvenile justice facilities (Kerka, 2003). In addition there are many examples of public alternative programs or schools that are well known across the country such as High Schools That Work,

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School-To-Work/ School-to-Career, and Independent Study (Kerka, 2003). These models offer specialized curricula such as General Educational Development Tests (GED) preparation, conflict resolution, anger management, Tech prep, career-technical education, and therapeutic adventure experiences often through alternative delivery systems such as online or distance learning (Kerka, 2003). Many of these programs not only target the at-risk student but all students who fail to thrive in the traditional school setting and may one day lead the way in academic reform in regular education (McDonald, 2002).

Best Practices of Effective Alternative School Settings for At-Risk Students

Youth considered at risk of academic failure need the same things as other children and adolescents: opportunities to learn and develop, guidance in making constructive choices, and help with specific problems or situations (Grobe, Niles, & Weisstein, 2001). Resilience, or the ability to adapt to challenges and/or change, is very important with students who are socially disadvantaged and at risk for academic failure and can be fostered by a supportive environment featuring caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation (Hurlington, 2010).

Although there is no clear consensus on how alternative schools should be structured, there are several best practices that can be found throughout the literature. The first common theme found regarding best practices for alternative education is caring adults who form relationships with students. These adults may be "teachers, counselors, mentors, case workers, or community members who understand and deeply care about youth and provide significant time and attention" (James and Jurich, 1999, p. x). These influential adults should also have a respect for youth. Many children and adolescents feel they have no respect from peers or adults which alienates and marginalizes them (Kerka, 2005). Through the instruction of social skills,

students learn how to interact with adults and peers appropriately and gain skills needed to function in life (Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

The second common theme incorporates the sense of community within the school walls. Small learning communities have been shown in many studies to have an impact on achievement and youth development (McDonald, 2002). Research indicates that career academies, designed to be small learning communities, seem to be the most successful for at-risk students (Elliott, Hanser, & Gilroy, 2002).

Authentic learning, which ties into the learning community concept, is the next common theme in the research of alternative program best practices. Along with academic instruction, vocational education, social skill instruction, behavior modification, and authentic, engaging learning that connects school and work has been found to instill hope to the at-risk student (Kerka, 2005). The National Alternative Education Association (NAEA, 2009) cites that alternative programs should actively promote student engagement and give students the opportunity to participate in the learning environment structure to encourage feelings of ownership.

Finally, high expectations for student achievement and behavior has been shown to be essential in an alternative setting, along with the supports needed to help students meet the expectations (Kerka, 2005). An assets approach to students, or emphasizing the positive rather than punitive, has been shown to be effective with behavior management (Kerka, 2005; Tobin & Sprague, 1999). Flower and colleagues (2001) found that when positive interventions and supports were used regarding challenging behavior, there was an increase in appropriate student behavior.

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In addition to these common best practices factors, Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) noted several strengths in their research of fifteen alternative programs for unsuccessful or at-risk students. The first strength Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) noted was class size. The researchers found that class sizes were typically smaller in the alternative setting than found in the traditional setting and has been shown to be one of the most effective practices in alternative education, since its inception (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Smaller class size is noted to promote a high level of interaction between the student and teacher which fosters the personal relationships essential for the success of an alternative setting (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Personal relationships noted by these researchers directly ties into the best practices findings by other research in the literature. Flexible scheduling and supports that ensure adequate academic instruction as well as experiential learning opportunities are additional best practices found by this study and previous studies.

Additionally, studies on effectiveness of alternative schools tend to focus on three specific areas: students' responses to their choices made in school and program flexibility (Lehr & Lange, 2000); students' sense of satisfaction and changes in self-esteem (Gold & Mann, 1984; Lange & Lehr, 1997); and students' academic achievement (Lange & Lehr, 1999; Knight, DeLeon & Smith, 1999). It is vitally important that schools provide each individual student, even one who may present disciplinary challenges, with a reasonable chance to complete a quality education (Gut & McLaughlin, 2012).

How Effectiveness is Measured in Alternative Schools for At-Risk Students

Evaluation of program effectiveness is essential to shaping the education system, the school district, or school to fit the needs of students who find the traditional setting ineffective (White & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006). There is limited literature on the effectiveness of alternative

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education programs and it is difficult to generalize the research because of the differences in programs (Civil Rights Project, 2000). Even when using a common definition, defining success in an alternative school or program is challenging. Accountability and outcome measures used in mainstream schools are not always appropriate for alternative education unless the alternative setting is considered a school and has measureable outcomes (Aron, 2003). Often other measures are used to evaluate program effectiveness in addition to the traditional outcomes measures and may include performance and/or attitude outcomes that could indicate program effectiveness (Aron, 2003). However, as Aron (2003) notes, using graduation from high school or completion of a degree is an inappropriate outcome for an alternative education program whose goal is to transition students to regular schools or out of juvenile detention or a treatment center. Instead, alternative education accountability measures should include shorter-term measures or have a means to track students who may cycle in and out of a program before experiencing steady progress (Aron, 2003).

Studies by Cox (1999), Gold and Mann (1984), and Jenkins (1997) are very applicable to current research drawing on quantitative factors such as grades, student involvement, and attendance as related to students' disruptive behaviors and delinquency. Cox (1999) uses a control group of students in an alternative school to evaluate the effect of alternative schooling on grade point averages, school attendance, self-esteem, and delinquent behaviors. Cox's (1999) results indicate positive short-term improvements in grade point average, school attendance and self-esteem but not delinquency. According to Cox (1999), when the students returned to their traditional school, most of the positive effects gained in the alternative setting disappeared.

Gold and Mann (1984) contend that poor scholastic experiences are a significant cause of delinquent and disruptive behaviors, particularly at school. These researchers studied four

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alternative schools using interviews and supplementary data, such as schools, police, and juvenile court records, to conduct a short-term experimental design research project (Gold & Mann, 1984). They found that student scholastic performance, reflected by grades and relationships with teachers, is the most important component of their school experience and measure of school effectiveness (Gold & Mann, 1984).   The research also indicated a statistically reliable decline in delinquent and disruptive behaviors of the students in the comparison group, from the four alternative schools, relative to the students in the control group (Gold & Mann, 1984). They also noted that student attitudes, about themselves and toward their school, were associated with changes in behavior (Gold & Mann, 1984).

Gold and Mann (1984) identified two groups of students, 'buoyant' and 'beset.' Students who were more anxious, had lower self-esteem, and were depressed upon entry into the alternative program were identified as 'beset' and typically were not as affected by the alternative school experience (Gold & Mann, 1984). The 'bouyant' students who were most disruptive and delinquent as a result of perceived academic failure showed the most enhanced effect of attending an alternative school (Gold & Mann, 1984). Although both groups of students showed gains and optimism while in the alternative setting, only the "buoyant" students remained optimistic and kept a positive attitude toward school and their role as a student (Gold & Mann, 1984).

Jenkins' (1997) study of 754 middle school students examined the effect of school bonds on school delinquency. This study suggests that personal background, family involvement in schooling, and ability grouping influence the strength of the school bond, which in turn influences levels of delinquency in school (Jenkins, 1997). The indication is that the stronger the students' bonds to school, teachers, and peers, the less likely they are to engage in misbehavior

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or delinquency at school (Jenkins, 1997). Hirschi (1969) suggested the same concept of using school bonds (to schools, teachers, and peers) to reduce student misbehavior and/or delinquency.

Program effectiveness might be measured, suggests Ferguson (1998), by evaluating three components of the system: the program and its features; the implementation of the program; and the program implementers. Ferguson (1998) raised the issue of lack of uniformity from one program to another as an issue when developing an evaluation that could be used for alternative programs in general. There are several guides that researchers (White & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006) have suggested to assist in the evaluation of alternative education programs including The Bluebook Guide developed by Quinones, Kirshstein, and Loy (1998), a document prepared by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2004); EDNet, prepared by the National Youth Employment Coalition (2004); and The Baldrige National Quality Program (BNQP) (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2005).

The first two guides are designed to assist with the monitoring and evaluation of the programs as well as logistics which includes needs assessment and budget design (White & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006). The Bluebook Guide developed by Quinones, Kirshstein, and Loy (1998) is helpful in setting up monitoring and evaluation systems.   Although prepared for the use of technology in schools and classrooms, this guide answers common questions about monitoring and evaluation. EDNet is a self-assessment tool for gathering school and education program data used to improve the school and its programs (White & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006). EDNet, a self-assessment tool, was prepared by the National Youth Employment Coalition (2004) for gathering school and education program data to improve the school and its programs. Its focus is on continual improvement and criteria include teaching and learning, essential supports, opportunities and services, and purpose, organization, and management. The first part

of EDNet includes a self-assessment and the second part includes a scripted set of follow-up questions.

The BNQP criteria emphasize "learning-centered" education and are specific to the systems that support and the resources required to reinforce the program being evaluated (White & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006). This document is a tested guide for self-assessment with a purpose of serving as a working tool for understanding and managing performance and for guiding organizational planning and opportunities for learning (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2005).

The evaluation of effectiveness of the two alternative schools in this study will be a blending of the Virginia model (Duke and Griesdorn, 1992) and the Tobin and Sprague (1999) model. Although Cox (1999) found that most positive effects disappeared after one year, this study will determine if there are any long term effects of a middle school alternative placement. The academic indicators of attendance, discipline, and standardized test scores were evaluated over three years as well as student perception of effectiveness of the alternative middle school experience, which parallels the Virginia model (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999). Interview questions based on alternative school best practices such as class size, adult mentors, modeling social skills, and behavior modification as well as academic preparedness, reflect the Tobin and Sprague (1999) model.

After attendance at the alternative middle schools in this study, participants either transitioned to their traditional home high school or to the alternative high school in the district to continue their education toward the goal of graduation. The school counselor and teachers met to recommend the high school they felt would best meet the needs of each student. The data collected on attendance, discipline and SOL test scores will indicate persistence of habits, behaviors and academic skills formed while attending the alternative middle school. The results

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of the interviews indicated the students' opinions of the effectiveness of the alternative middle

school experience and the role it has played in their preparedness for high school and academic

and personal decisions since.

Virginia's Alternative Schools/Programs

The Virginia Board of Education's Annual Report (2009-2010) states

Virginia's alternative programs were established by the General Assembly in 1993-

1994 with the intent of involving two or more school divisions working in

collaboration to establish options for students who have a pending violation of school

board policy, have been expelled or suspended on a long-term basis, or are returning

from juvenile correctional centers. (p.iii)

These students are typically referred to as at-risk of academic failure. Virginia's Board of

Education (Annual Report, 2009-2010, p.iii) outlines the following components for all of its 30

regional alternative programs:

- an intensive, accelerated instructional program with rigorous standard academic achievement and student behavior;
- a low pupil-teacher ratio to promote a high level of interaction between the student and teacher;
- a plan for transitioning the enrolled students into the relevant school division's regular program;
- a current program of staff development and training;
- a procedure for obtaining the participation and support from parents as well as community outreach to build school, business, and community partnerships; and
- measurable goals and objectives and an evaluation component to determine the program's effectiveness.

Although there are many differences among Virginia's programs each of the schools have a

specific purpose providing services in one of the following categories (VBOE Annual Report,

2009-2010, p. 3):

- educational (core subject instruction, vocational, remediation, tutoring);
- counseling (individual, group, family);

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- social skills training;
- career counseling (transitioning to the world of work, job shadowing, mentoring, work/study agreements);
- technology-related education (direct instruction, Internet research, keyboarding);
- conflict resolution and mediation; and
- drug prevention education.

Virginia's alternative programs, for students at-risk of academic failure, have grown in number from four, in the 1993-1994 school year serving 217 students, to 30 programs, serving 4,085 students during the 2008-2009 school year (VBOE Annual Report, 2009-2010). The number of students served represents a 1,882.5 % growth rate for the fourteen year time frame. The 30 regional programs represented 117 school districts across the state. The VBOE data has more than is relevant to this dissertation as all schools or programs that are considered alternative are reported together including, alternative schools for discipline, special education, and Charter/Magnet Schools. The NCES (2012) reports the number of Virginia alternative schools for the 2010-2011 school year as 189 and the number of students served in these settings as 2,133. This statistic represents an overall increase in the number of facilities but a decrease in the number of students served. The NCES separates their statistics by category and reports on alternative schools, special education, and Charter Schools separately.

Rationale for Current Study

Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldyke (2009) ask the questions, "To what extent are states collecting data on outcomes for those who have attended alternative schools? What indicators of effectiveness are measured?", indicating a need for the type of data that will be collected in this study (p. 21). If the alternative program is considered a *school*, then the traditional means of measuring student success may be the only option as it is tied to federal funding for the school system. The outcomes that are often measured are academic attainment, school attendance,

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reductions in disruptive and/or violent behaviors and exclusions, suspensions, or discipline referrals (Gutherson, Davies, & Daszkiewicz, 2011). In addition, an improved sense of direction and self, including changes in self-esteem, motivation, and confidence, improvement in developing and sustaining relationships with family, peers, and other adults as well as positive progression routes are measurable outcomes for effective alternative school success (Gutherson, Davies, & Daszkiewicz, 2011). Program implementation follows the traditional curriculum requirements needed to be prepared for the state Standards of Learning tests (end of course) with nontraditional methods of instruction.

In Virginia, there are gaps in alternative education services such as lack of placements for middle school students (VCOY, 2008). This study documented the effectiveness of two alternative middle school programs in a Virginia suburban setting by comparing student perceptions and student outcomes as measured by academic indicators of success. A majority of previous studies on alternative education focused on high school, not middle school, and did not track student outcomes past one year after their alternative experience. This study reflected student outcomes for two years after leaving the alternative middle school.

This study combined the traditional measures of student success, academic indicators, with students' opinions of their experience at the alternative middle school to measure program effectiveness. Standardized tests scores in history and science, number of discipline referrals, and number of days absent were used as the traditional academic indicators of student success in this study. The academic indicators were analyzed over three years; 8th grade, 9th grade, and 10th grade. This provided two years of data after the alternative education experience to analyze long-term effects. This study also interviewed 10th grade students who attended the alternative middle school, for students at risk of academic failure, during their eighth grade year.

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Because of the different findings cited in a) definition(s) of alternative schools, b) program designs, c) program implementation and d) program evaluation, this study attempted to build upon the consistent positive conclusions gleaned from the literature. The alternative schools in this study were created to provide programs for middle school students who were academically competent but had not achieved academic or behavioral success in the traditional school setting. These students represented the typical student at risk for school failure. The hybrid alternative program design as presented by Roderick (2003) most closely resembles the alternative schools examined in this study with participants ranging from over age students to teenage parents to students who were unidentified or recently released from exceptional education services. Program implementation followed the traditional curriculum requirements needed to be prepared for the state Standards of Learning tests (end of course) with nontraditional methods of instruction. Program evaluation focused on academic indicators of success over a three year period, eighth grade in the alternative school, and the two following years of high school. Interview questions were based on best practices as presented in the literature by Tobin & Sprague (1999) and Gutherson, Davies, & Daczkiewicz (2011) as well as program specific questions that reflect the findings of Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006).

Chapter 3: Methodology

The research questions were designed to determine the effectiveness of the alternative middle school by examining the academic indicators that represent best practices of alternative programs. The at-risk student enrolled in the alternative middle school, either voluntarily or by placement, is usually considered at-risk as a result of poor attendance, behavior, and/or under-achievement, as reflected in below passing SOL test scores. Alternative program effectiveness was measured in the analysis of academic indicator data from the students who attended the alternative middle school. The research questions for this study were:

1) What are the trends in student outcomes two years after leaving the alternative middle school regarding:

   a. Number of days absent?

   b. Number of discipline referrals?

   c. SOL pass rates and scaled scores in history and science?

2) What are the perceptions and experiences of students who attended the alternative middle school regarding:

   a. Preparation for high school?

   b. Skills previously taught at the alternative middle school (study skills, anger management skills, conflict resolution skills and relationship building skills)?

   c. Transition to their current school?

   d. Interpersonal relationships with peers and adults at their current school?

Research Design

This study utilized a longitudinal, mixed methods design. Data was examined to determine program effectiveness in the transition from an alternative middle school to a comprehensive high school. Qualitative data was collected via student interviews.   Additional quantitative data was provided by the school district participating in this study. This data included science and history standardized test scores, attendance data, discipline data, school attended for each year of the study, and free or reduced lunch status.

Creswell (2003) suggests that a mixed methods approach employs strategies of inquiry that involve collecting data either simultaneously or sequentially to best understand research problems. A mixed methods design is useful to capture the best of both quantitative and qualitative approaches by allowing the researcher to generalize the finding to a population and develop a detailed view of the meaning of a phenomenon for individuals (Creswell, 2003). The data collection involves gathering both numeric information as well as text information so that the final database represents both quantitative and qualitative information (Creswell, 2003). The mixed methods that were employed in this study were closed-ended measures, represented by the quantitative data, and open-ended observations, represented by the interview questions.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible and is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. McMillan & Schumacher (1997) state that

> descriptive research is concerned with the current or past status of something. This type of research simply describes achievement, attitudes, behaviors, or other characteristics of a group of subjects. A descriptive study asks what is or what was; it reports things the

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way they are or were. Descriptive research does not involve the manipulation of

variables. (p. 281)

Qualitative research involves the inquirer making knowledge claims based primarily on

constructivist perspectives, advocacy/participatory perspectives or both (Creswell, 2003).

Strategies employed include narratives, phenomenologies, ethnographies or case studies

(Creswell, 2003).

This study employed the phenomenological perspective. In phenomenological research

the researcher attempts to understand the 'lived experiences' as related to the phenomenon being

studied (Creswell, 2003). This research design method is based on the belief that there are

multiple ways of interpreting the same experience and the meaning of that experience is what

constitutes reality (Creswell, 2003). Curry, Nembhard, and Bradley (2009) note that primary

methods of qualitative data collection include in-depth interviews, focus groups, observation, and

document review.

Interviews were the qualitative data method utilized in this study to collect detailed

perceptions from the participants. As is common with qualitative analyses, there are various

forms of interview design that can be developed to obtain thick, rich data utilizing a qualitative

investigational perspective (Creswell, 2007). The interview is a form of data collection in which

questions are asked orally and participants' responses are recorded (McMillan, 2004). The

method of recording in this study was through audio recording and note-taking by the

interviewer.

Questions addressing student preparation for their current school regarding grades,

attendance, behavior, relationships, both with peers and adults, transition from the alternative

middle school setting into the high school setting, and accessibility to counseling services or

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other helpful adults were asked of participants. Participants were asked to reflect on and interpret their own experiences in the alternative setting as it related to preparation for their current school setting, which made qualitative research the preferred methodology for this portion of the research.

The academic indicators of number of absences, number of discipline referrals and SOL test scores in history and science were compared and analyzed from grades 8-10 for the 2009-2010 cohort of 34 students. The twelve individuals who were interviewed were from the cohort and returned their signed permission forms.

Interview advantages and disadvantages. Kvale (1996) defines the qualitative research interviews as a technique whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the world of the participants with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena. There are both advantages and disadvantages of interviews as a form of research.

One advantage to this method identified in the literature was, obtaining information from the participants that might not have been offered in another research method due to the rapport established between the interviewer and the participant. Additionally, probing questions following the initial questions led to more accurate information and richness of data collected. In face-to-face interviews, the interviewer observed body language and non-verbal responses which led to further probing to clarify responses. This is sometimes referred to as social cues and includes participants' voice and intonation providing additional information to the interviewer (Opdenakker, 2006). The rate of *no answer* or *don't know* responses is reduced in the interview process and interviews usually produce higher return rates of persons agreeing to be interviewed when compared to other research methods.

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Expense and time consumption were two of the disadvantages found in the literature of conducting interviews as a research method (McMillan, 2004). In this study there were minimal expenses aside from transportation to the school sites and the snacks provided to the students. Time away from the researcher's current work location as well as time required to interview each student and secure a location in the school were factors influencing this study. In addition, small sample size and refusal to participate, if greater than 10% or 15%, could bias the results (McMillan, 2004). Interviewer bias could have been a disadvantage due to the amount of probing and response clarification as well as response interpretation. These concerns are known as interviewer effects (McMillan, 2004). This study had a small sample size due to the size of the cohort and the number of returned permission forms. Most of the students were more than willing to share their experience from the alternative middle school which led to a limited amount of probing however, the term *transition* confused several students as their interpretation was different from the intention of the researcher. The use of a tape recorder decreased interviewer bias with the interpretation of responses. Creswell (2007) suggests that a weakness with open-ended interviewing could be the difficulty with coding the data. The data from this study was entered into a program that assisted the researcher with coding as well as Wordle which allowed prominent terms to become larger and stand out.

Although there was a previous teacher/student relationship between the interviewer and some of the participants, no current professional relationship remained. This decreased interviewer bias. The use of audio tape recording could have inhibited some participants; however, the overall benefit of verbatim responses that could be reviewed multiple times by the interviewer far outweighed the risk. Reliability of notes taken during the interview was increased by allowing the participant to read over the notes and provided the opportunity to add or revise

as necessary to increase accuracy. These notes and the audio tapes were used by a third party participant to transcribe the interview responses. In addition, the researcher contacted each participant via telephone and reviewed individual responses for clarification and additional comments.

Participants

    Setting. The school division surrounds a city on the East, North, and West comprising 245 square miles. The school system has a student population of approximately 49,000 students. The district can be characterized as urban, suburban, and rural because of its diverse settings. Minority students make up 51% of the district's population and 35% of students qualify for free or reduced lunches. There are 14 middle schools within the school district, two of which were considered alternative, or nontraditional, education in 2008-2009. Due to ongoing budget constraints, the school system was forced to close the two alternative schools at the end of the 2009-2010 school year.

    Students were mainstreamed to their zoned middle school, zoned high school, encouraged to attend the alternative middle school program, placed in the alternative high school program, or placed in the alternative behavior academy. The alternative middle school program and the behavior academy were created as a result of closing the two alternative middle schools. The alternative high school, formerly an alternative school, reopened as an alternative program for the 2010-2011 school year.

    The two alternative middle schools in this study are described in the Virginia Commission on Youth Guide to Alternative Education Options (2008) as serving students who have not found success in the traditional classroom, have academic weaknesses, and/or challenging behaviors. Both schools featured highly structured classroom environments with a

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low pupil teacher ratio. An interdisciplinary curriculum model was described as the program for instruction. Students attended a minimum of one year and were admitted through an application process and/or disciplinary placement.

Sample. Non-probability, purposive sampling is common in educational research as it allows the researcher to focus on individuals that represent the characteristics necessary for a topic (McMillan & Shumacher, 1997). Purposeful sampling usually assures a high participation rate and allows for confidentiality (McMillan & Shumacher, 1997). The aim is to identify "information-rich" participants who have certain characteristics, detailed knowledge, or direct experience relevant to the phenomenon of interest (Pope & Mays, 1995). Purposeful sampling was used to identify potential participants who attended the alternative middle school for eighth grade during the 2009-2010 school year.

Purposeful sampling occurred for the quantitative data collection because there were only two alternative middle schools from which to sample and all who were eighth graders during the 2009-2010 school year were potential participants. During the 2009-2010 school year, there was a total of 68 eighth grade students in attendance at the two alternative middle schools. Of the 68 students, 34 fit the parameters for this study of not changing schools since 9th grade enrollment and quantitative data was collected on this sample.

Potential interview participants were all students who attended one of the two alternative middle schools as 8th graders during the 2009-2010 school year and currently attended their zoned, comprehensive high school or attended the alternative high school program. To improve consistency of responses, student selection consisted of students who had not changed high schools since entering 9th grade.

Parent permission forms were mailed to the home of potential participants. The mailings were implemented by the district Research and Planning Department as school-age children were actively participating in the study. Reminder postcards were mailed one week after the original letter was sent to remind parents/guardians to sign and return the permission letter. Parental permission was secured prior to the interviews. In addition, the researcher read and students signed youth assent forms at the time of participation. Interviews were conducted at the participants' current high school during study hall or directed study.

The interview sample was drawn from the cohort group of 34 students resulting in convenience sampling. Selection for the interviews depended on returned letters of parent permission that were mailed home via the districts' Research and Planning Department. Twelve participants were secured, 9 from one alternative middle school and 3 from the other.

Instrumentation

The researcher created an instrument with open-ended questions to gain maximum data from the interviews. In addition, the researcher prepared follow-up questions or probes in order to ensure optimal responses from participants. The goal was to have the interview participants reconstruct their experiences in the alternative middle school as related to overall effectiveness. The researcher prepared questions to guide the individual interviews. There are three types of interview questions typically used in qualitative research: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (McMillan & Wergin, 2009). Structured questions give the respondent choices from which to choose an answer. This type of question is often used in phone interviews. Semi-structured questions do not have pre-determined answer choices and are more open-ended but are specific in intent. The subject responds and there is room for probing and follow-up questions to gain clarification. The semi-structured question is the most common type of

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interview question in educational research (McMillan & Wergin, 2009). The final type of interview question is unstructured. Unstructured questions are open-ended, broad in range, and the interviewer has a general answer in mind but may ask different questions to each respondent. Use of this type of interview question creates a difficult interview and is subjective.

The researcher created an instrument with open-ended questions with specific intent, delving into the experiences and knowledge of the participants to gain maximum data from the interviews. The open-ended, neutral questions were worded clearly and were mindful of the participants' culture. In addition, the researcher prepared follow-up questions or probes in order to ensure optimal responses from participants. The goal was to have the interview participants reconstruct their experiences in the alternative middle school as related to overall effectiveness. The questions guided the interview although the researcher varied from interview protocols by asking follow-up, probing questions when participant responses opened new avenues for data collection.

Interview Question Field Test. A field test evaluated the instrumentation of interview questions to increase reliability. Because the number of participants was limited to the small number of students who were in 8th grade during the 2009-2010 school-year, students who had changed schools since 9th grade enrollment or were no longer enrolled in the district were recruited to field test the instrument. The participants in the field test had the same interests as those who participated in the implemented study. In addition, field participants were asked to provide feedback about the interview and questions to determine length of the interview, understandability of the questions, and if the line of questioning was appropriate and generated relevant responses. The field test allowed the researcher to refine research questions to gather information that was useful and represented the purpose of the study. Several questions used

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terms that were confusing to the field test participants. The researcher changed the terms to better suit the participants culture and understanding and added probing questions that would assist by clarifying the questions.   See Appendix B for the interview.

Quantitative Data Collection

The district from which the sample of 34 students was secured provided the researcher with data for 8th, 9th, and 10th grade concerning attendance, discipline, and SOL scores for history and science. The attendance data was provided as number of days absent from school, discipline was provided as number of discipline referrals, and the SOL scores were raw scores which were converted to either pass or fail by the researcher. Additionally, the data collected from the district Research and Planning Department was identified only by an identification number. The use of redacted data allowed for anonymity of participants.

Qualitative Data Collection

After parental consent was secured and participants were selected for the interviews, the researcher contacted the school counseling departments to reserve the conference room in the counseling department or another secure, private location within the office and verified the participants' schedules. The meeting was scheduled and occurred in a quiet, confidential location at the participants' current high schools on the arranged date. The researcher reported to the appropriate school of the participant(s) and asked the secretary in the school counseling office to call the student to the room where the interview was to occur.

The interview occurred during the student's study hall or directed study block, so no instructional time was disrupted or lost.   The interview was scheduled for 30 minutes to allow the participant time to respond and express his/her opinions of his/her alternative middle school experience.   Before the interview began, the researcher read the student assent form

emphasizing anonymity and the right to withdraw from participation at any time. Students then signed the assent form. The purpose of the study, the procedures/ground rules for the interview, and how the data collected would be used was reviewed before the interview began. Participants were offered a snack and a bottle of water to help them relax and were asked to think back to their time spent in the alternative middle school.

A primary challenge for the researcher was to allow the participant space and time to fully reflect and answer these broad, open-ended questions before probing. After listening to the first couple of interviews, the researcher observed that she had a tendency to re-explain the question before giving the participant the time needed to fully reflect on his/her experience and construct a response. Listening to the recordings of the first two interviews allowed the researcher to modify this behavior, but it was a continual challenge. The researcher had to remind herself that the students were reflecting on a past experience and might need a few minutes to gather their thoughts and memories. The researcher began each interview with some factual, direct questions, including completing the demographic piece of the interview to allow the participant to become comfortable with the surroundings and the researcher.

Interviews were recorded using a cassette player and cassette tapes and were later transferred to the researcher's laptop into Audacity, a free audio recording and editing software program. The researcher also took field notes by hand which proved to be helpful in portions of one interview that was hard to hear. The field notes enhanced the reliability of the taped interviews by providing a "check" of the taped interview. Several participants checked to make sure the researcher wrote down key points and ideas by saying "you got that?" At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher saved the interview recorded by the cassette player and checked to make sure there was enough space between interviews to not tape over the previous interview.

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The data analysis process began when each interview was transferred to Audacity in an MP3 format and saved on the researcher's computer as a backup.

Participants were informed that voice recording would be utilized to ensure no loss of data and that further contact, via follow-up telephone call, would be necessary to review and clarify responses. The interview proceeded and the researcher took notes in addition to the audio recording. At the interview conclusion, the researcher asked the participant to read over the field notes taken by the researcher for accuracy and to make any changes he/she felt necessary. All but two student interviews were conducted during the school day. The two remaining interviews were conducted during the summer as the students were absent on the pre-arranged interview date and had to be rescheduled. These interviews were conducted at the public library in one of the private study rooms located near the students' homes. Students met the researcher at the library and were picked up by their parents at the conclusion of the interview. The same interview process was repeated and the conditions were identical with the exception of the location.

To protect the confidentiality of the individual respondents, the researcher identified each participant with an identification number, and a false name of the participants' choice, which corresponded to the matching demographic form that was partially filled in before the meeting and completed at the interview. Within the demographic form, the researcher prefilled the following information: participant identification number, current grade, gender, ethnicity, current school, and which alternative middle school the participant attended. Respondents were asked length of time spent at the alternative middle school and future plans, including college. There were three questions on the demographic form that did not relate to the school identification of

the participants. Three questions related to future plans of the participant. See Appendix A for the demographic form.

NVivo 9 was selected as the qualitative analysis tool to assist the researcher in organizing and analyzing the interview data. A non-biased individual transcribed the interviews, reducing the chance of interview bias and opinion misinterpretations as well as increased reliability and internal validity of the transcription (Kvale, 1996). This also allowed the researcher to have materials to read to the participants when the follow-up phone calls were made to ensure accuracy of responses and allow participants to add any information that may have thought of between the interview and phone call. All but one participant said they were satisfied with their responses and had nothing else to add.

Validity and Reliability

Kirk and Miller (1986) state that qualitative research can be evaluated in terms of objectivity and, moreover, "the partitioning of objectivity into two components: validity and reliability" (p. 19). According to McMillan (2004), the primary criterion for evaluating qualitative studies is the credibility of the study. The extent to which the data, data analysis, and conclusions are believable and trustworthy defines credibility, states McMillan (2004). Determining whether the identified themes are plausible, accurate, consistent, and meaningful are essential for credibility with qualitative research.

For qualitative research, credibility is related to the following principles: triangulation, reliability, and internal validity (McMillan, 2004). Triangulation compares the findings of different techniques to see if the patterns discovered are the same at different times (McMillan, 2004). Reliability refers to the extent to which what has been recorded is what actually occurred, enhanced by the use of field notes, tape recorders, participant quotations and literal

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descriptions (McMillan, 2004). Internal validity refers to whether the patterns or themes observed reflect reality or if they are merely influenced by the researcher who is also the instrument (McMillan, 2004).

Researcher bias, opinion, misinterpretations. or personal expectations are potential threats to internal validity.   Researcher awareness of the threats and an abundant use of details describing conversations and observations can strengthen internal validity and illustrate patterns and interpretations. By collecting data in natural settings, the participants are more comfortable and the data is more likely to show repeated patterns of observations, strengthening internal validity (McMillan, 2004).   This study utilized both field notes and the use of audio recorded interviews to enhance credibility and reduce researcher misinterpretations and/or misidentified theme observations. In addition, the researcher asked the participants to read the notes for accuracy, which is referred to as member checking.

Data Analyses

The three research questions provided the structure for the data analysis. Table 1 provides the research questions and the data analysis technique used for each research question. The quantitative data was collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Findings were developed inductively by comparing attendance data, discipline data and SOL test scores, in the areas of science and history over three years. Descriptive statistics can be the most powerful way of understanding the relationships among variables (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997).

The basic analysis of the interview data was completed using descriptive analysis following data entry into the qualitative software package NVivo. The researcher evaluated the importance of and visualized relations between the data entered into the program as well as analyzed hidden phenomena from the interview text. In addition, NVivo assisted the researcher

by locating, coding, and annotating findings in primary data material and assisted in evaluating importance and visualizing complex relations between data. From the developed codes, the researcher was able to identify phenomenological themes. The analysis process created distinct units of meaning, developed and refined a coding system to organize emerging themes, and documented relationships using these themes.

Either emic or etic coding can be used during the coding process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Emic coding allows the use of the participants' language to develop the codes and themes. Etic coding is set by the researcher based on observations or literature findings. For this study, the researcher employed an emic coding strategy. In taking an emic approach, a researcher tries to put aside prior theories and assumptions in order to let the participants and data *speak* and to allow themes, patterns, and concepts to emerge (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990).

Delimitations

The research study was restricted by the following major delimitations:

1. This research was limited to two alternative middle schools within one school division.

2. The respondents were restricted to students who were eighth graders at one of the two alternative middle schools during the 2009-2010 school year.

3. The participants did not change high schools since their enrollment into 9th grade.

4. Twenty of the original 54 students (37%) were not eligible for the study due to various reasons including relocation, changing schools, and retention.

5. The subjects were volunteer respondents which could affect the number of participants.

Table 1

Research Questions, Instrument Items, and Data Analysis

Research Questions	Corresponding Instrument Items or Data Source	Anticipated Data Analysis
1. Is there a difference in number of days absent in 8th grade, 9th grade and 10th grade for students who attended the alternative middle school for 8th grade in 2009-2010?	Number of Days Absent	Descriptive Statistics
2. Is there a difference in science and history SOL scores 8th grade, 9th grade and 10th grade for students who attended the alternative middle school for 8th grade in 2009-2010?	History and science SOL scores	Descriptive Statistics
3. Is there a difference in the number of discipline referrals in 8th grade, 9th grade and 10th grade for students who attended the alternative middle school for 8th grade in 2009-2010?	Number of discipline referrals	Descriptive Statistics
4. What are the perceptions of alternative education students regarding the alternative education's: preparation for their current school; transition to their current school; and interpersonal relationships?	Interview transcription	NVivo utilizing emic coding and analyzing themes

VCU IRB

The researcher received approval from both the district in which the schools and students

in the study are located as well as VCU Institutional Research Board to conduct the study.

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<center>**Chapter 4: Results**</center>

Quantitative Findings

    Participants. Participants for this study were selected from 54 students from a large suburban school division who attended eighth grade at one of the two alternative middle schools during the 2009-2010 school year. Only 34 of these students who transitioned to a high school and remained there for two years, met the parameters of this study. Of the 20 students removed from the sample, two students moved out of state, one student moved to another school district, one transferred to a private school setting. Three students were placed in the district's behavior academy, which was a transient program. Six students were referred to Individual Student Alternative Education Plan (ISAEP), or GED preparation program. Three students repeated eighth grade and four students changed high schools after enrolling in the 9th grade and therefore did not fit the study parameters (Figure I).

    Demographics. Nineteen (55.9%) of the remaining 34 students attended the alternative middle school in the east side of the district while 15 (44.1%) students attended the alternative school in the west side of the district. Of the nine high schools within the participating district, eight were represented by the students in this study. The sample consists of 16 (47.1%) black females, 13 (72.2%) black males, and five (27.8%) white males. One (5.6%) male student was identified as needing exceptional education services.

    During 8th grade, 25 (73.5%) students received free or reduced price lunch. Nine (26.5%) were not qualified or did not apply for benefits. During 9th grade, 19 (55.9%) qualified for free lunch or reduced lunch and 14 (41.2%) did not qualify or did not apply for benefits. In 10th

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grade, 21 (61.8%) participants received free or reduced lunch and 13 (38.2%) were not qualified

or did not apply for benefits. Eligibility for free or reduced lunch can change from year to year

depending on income reported or whether or not students return the paperwork for eligibility.

Students may fail to return the paperwork for any number of reasons including embarrassment of

financial status or loss of papers due to lack of organization.
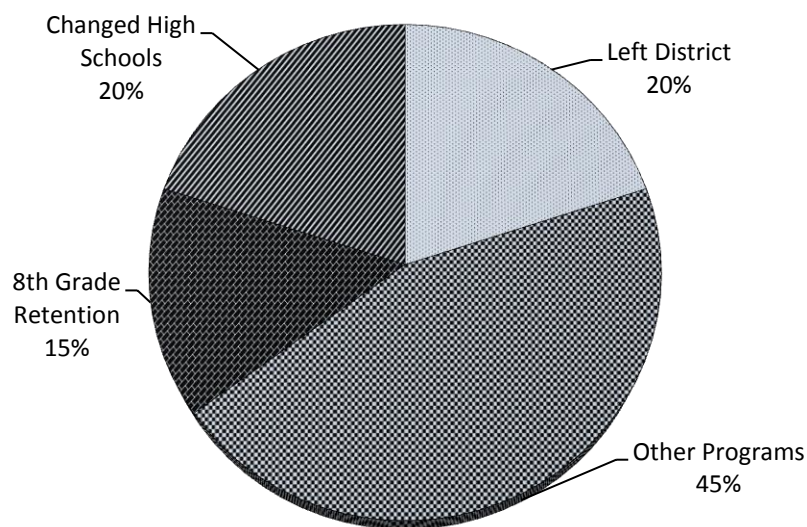
Figure I. Percent attrition from original participant pool.

Research Question 1: What are the trends in student outcomes two years after leaving the

alternative middle school regarding: Attendance, Discipline and SOL Scores in History

and Science?

Comparisons of the data for number of days absent, number of discipline referrals reported

and SOL test scores in the areas of science and history were made. This was done to note any

trends in the data beginning with participation in the alternative middle school setting from 8th

grade through the participants' current grade, ten. By 10th grade, attendance and discipline data resembled data of students who had not attended the alternative middle school and were not considered at risk.

Table 2

Average number of days absent and average number of discipline referrals with standard deviations for grades 8-10.

	8th Grade		9th Grade		10th Grade	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Days Absent	22	16.83	13.5	12.9	8.8	8.99
Discipline Referrals	6.76	4.69	5.9	4.8	1.3	5.09

Attendance. As Table 2 shows, the average number of absences decreased from 8th grade through 10th grade. Improvements in absences, reported as a decrease in the number of absences from 8th to 9th grade, were evident in 23 of the 34 participants. These decreases ranged from 2 days to 53 days per participant. One participant showed no increase or decrease in the number of absences from 8th to 9th grade, maintaining 10 absences for each year. Eleven participants showed an increase in the number of absences from 8th to 9th grade. Increases ranged from 2 days to 37 days per participant. From 9th to 10th grade, 18 participants showed a decrease in the number of absences, with a range of 1 to 42 days; seven had no change. Of the seven participants with no change in attendance, six maintained perfect attendance (zero absences), and

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one maintained one absence for each year. Overall, the average number of days absent

decreased by 9.3 days per participant from 8th grade to 9th grade, 4.7 days per participant from 9th

grade to 10th grade, and 14 days per participant from 8th grade to 10th grade (Figure II).
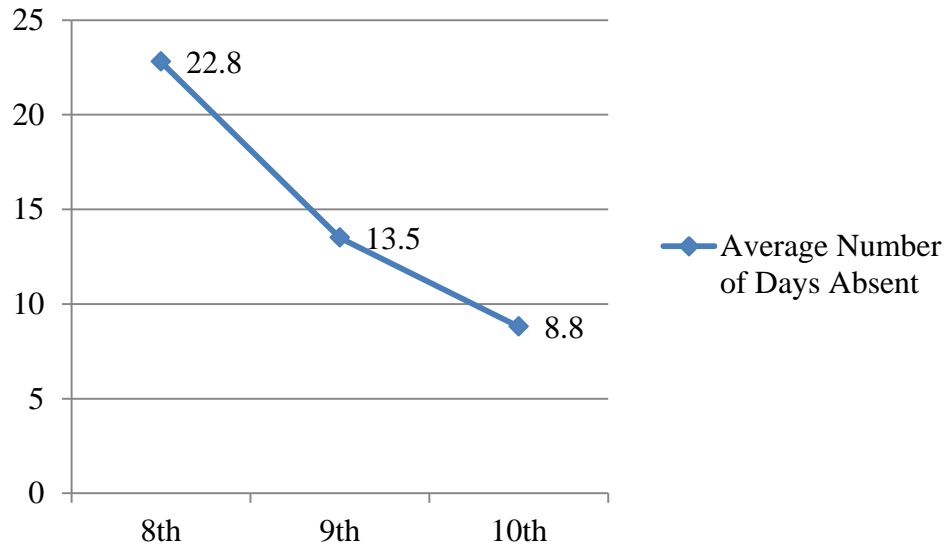
Figure II. Average number of days absent during 8th, 9th, and 10th grade.

    Attendance data were also graphed in a box and whiskers plot to illustrate students'

individual days' absent (Figure III). The median for 8th grade attendance was 19 days absent.

The range in number of absences for 8th grade was 0 to 71 days per student. The outliers, as

shown in the plot, are for students 2 and 28 and are represented by the numbers that fall beyond

the 3rd quartile whisker. Student 2 was a black female and student 28 was a black male. The

median for 9th grade attendance was 13 days absent. The range in number of days absent per

student for 9th grade was zero to 48 days. Student 2 remained an outlier in 9th grade. The

median for 10th grade attendance was seven days absent. The range in number of days absent per

student for 10th grade was zero to 32 days. There were no outliers for 10th grade as all students' attendance fell within the 3rd quartile whisker. Although she was an outlier for grades 8 and 9, student 2's attendance decreased over the three years from 71 absences in 8th grade, 48 absences in 9th grade to 22 days in 10th grade. Student 28's attendance decreased from 60 absences in 8th grade, 16 absences in 9th grade to zero absences in 10th grade.

Discipline. Table 2 also illustrates that the average number of discipline referrals dropped from 8th grade to 10th grade. To illustrate this trend in more detail, data was grouped as 0-5 referrals, 6-10 referrals, 11-15 referrals, and 16-20 referrals. Figure IV illustrates the number of students, by grade level, receiving discipline referrals within a specified range. The grouping by number of referrals was to delineate between students who would be considered 'habitual offenders' in the district from this study and those who would not be considered habitual offenders.

The Code of Student Conduct for this particular district defines a habitual offender as a student who commits five or more violations of the Code of Student Conduct, excluding attendance violations, has been suspended for 10 days out of school at least once, has had two face-to-face meetings with the principal, and the school has addressed the behaviors in a variety of manners, such as in-school-suspension, after school detention, or Saturday detention (District Code of Student Conduct, 2012-2013). At a comprehensive school, students deemed habitual offenders would be sent to the next level of discipline often involving the disciplinary review hearing officer.
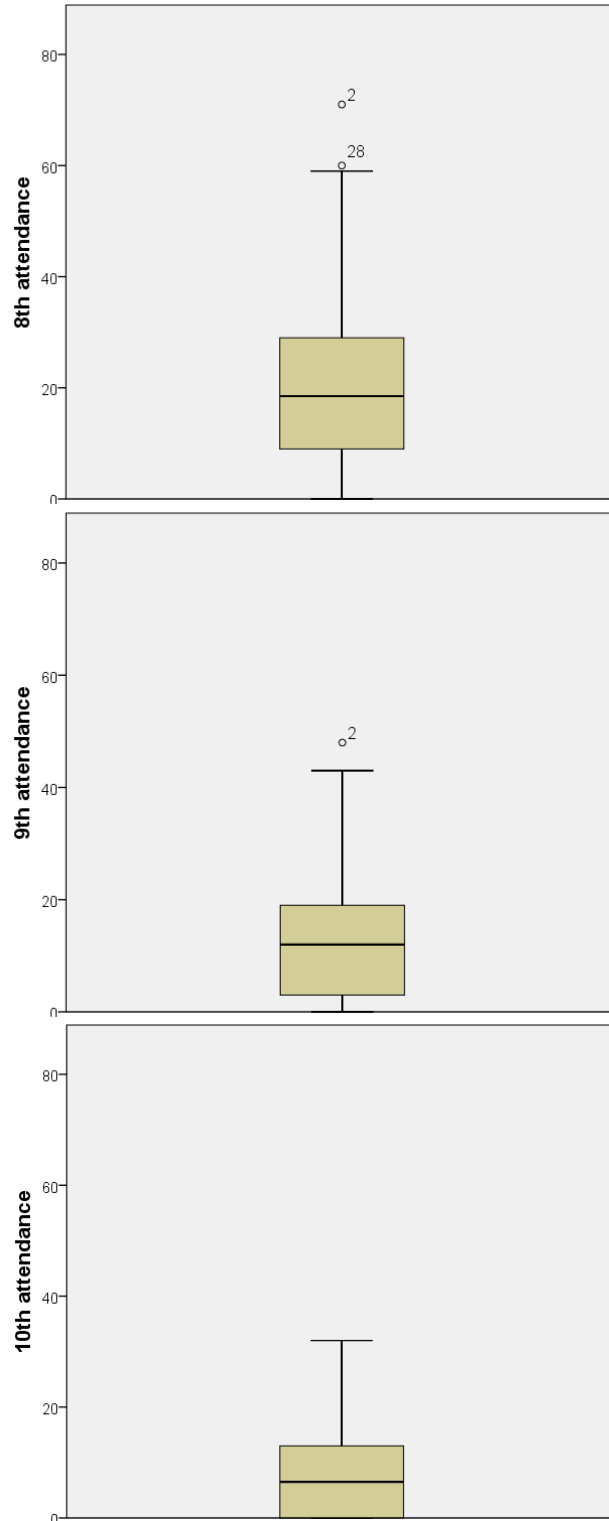
Figure III. Average attendance data for all students for grades 8, 9, and 10.
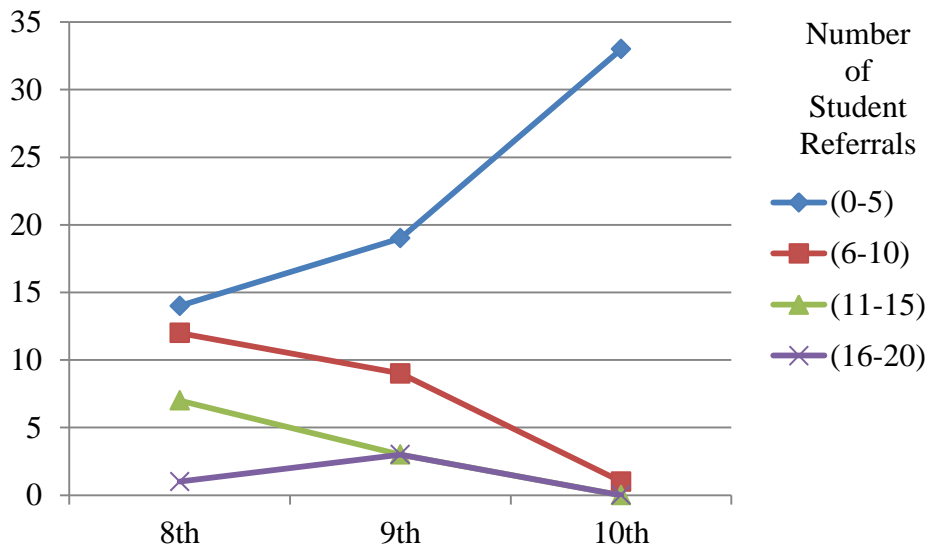
Figure IV. Number of students receiving discipline referrals within a specific range for grades 8-10.

The range in the number of personal discipline referrals for this participant group of 34 students was zero to 20 (as illustrated in Figure IV). The number of referrals per student changed from year to year with an overall improvement observed. The average number of referrals per student decreased from 6.76 referrals in 8th grade to 1.3 referrals in 10th grade, or an average decrease of 5.46 referrals per student (Table 2). In 8th grade, 20 (59%) of the 34 participants had more than five personal discipline referrals. This number decreased to 15 (44%) students in 9th grade and to 1 (.03%) student in 10th grade. The greatest improvement in discipline, indicated by a decrease in the number of personal referrals per student occurred between 9th and 10th grade. Figure V reflects a decrease of 176 referrals from 8th grade to 10th grade. The number of discipline referrals decreased by 21 referrals from 8th grade to 9th grade and by 155 referrals from 9th grade to 10th grade.
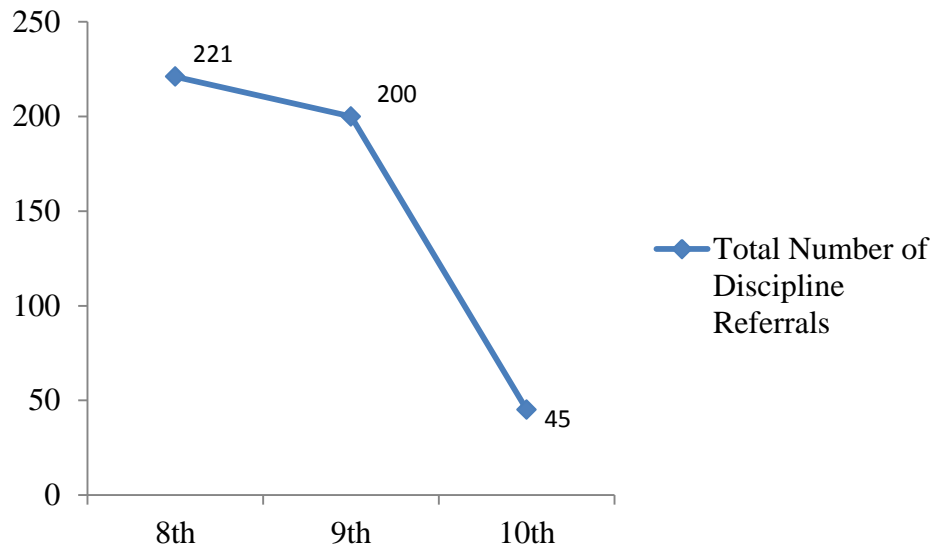
Figure V. Number of discipline referrals for 8th, 9th, and 10th grade.

Average discipline data were graphed into a box and whiskers plot to illustrate where

individual students' discipline referrals fell within the range (Figure VI). The median for

number of referrals per student in 8th grade was six. The range for 8th grade was zero to 20

referrals per student. There were no outliers for the 8th grade data as all students fell between the

1st and 3rd quartile whiskers. The median for 9th grade discipline was five referrals per student.

Three students fell outside of the 3rd quartile whisker, students 25, 28, and 31. Students 25 and

31 were black females and student 28 was a black male. Students 25 and 28 both had 17

discipline referrals and student 31 had 16 referrals in 9th grade. The median for 10th grade was

one referral per student. Student 11 was outside of the 3rd quartile whisker with six referrals and

was a black male. The number of referrals for 10th grade ranged from 0 to 6 per student. All

four students who were outliers in 9th grade and 10th grade, students 25, 28, 31, and 11, increased

their number.

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Figure VI. Average discipline data for all students for grades 8, 9, and 10.

of referrals from 8th grade to 9th grade but decreased the number by 10th grade. Student 25 had 13 referrals in 8th grade, 17 in 9th grade, and 5 in 10th grade. Data reflected student 28's referrals as 5, 17, and 0 for grades 8, 9, and 10. Student 31 had 8 referrals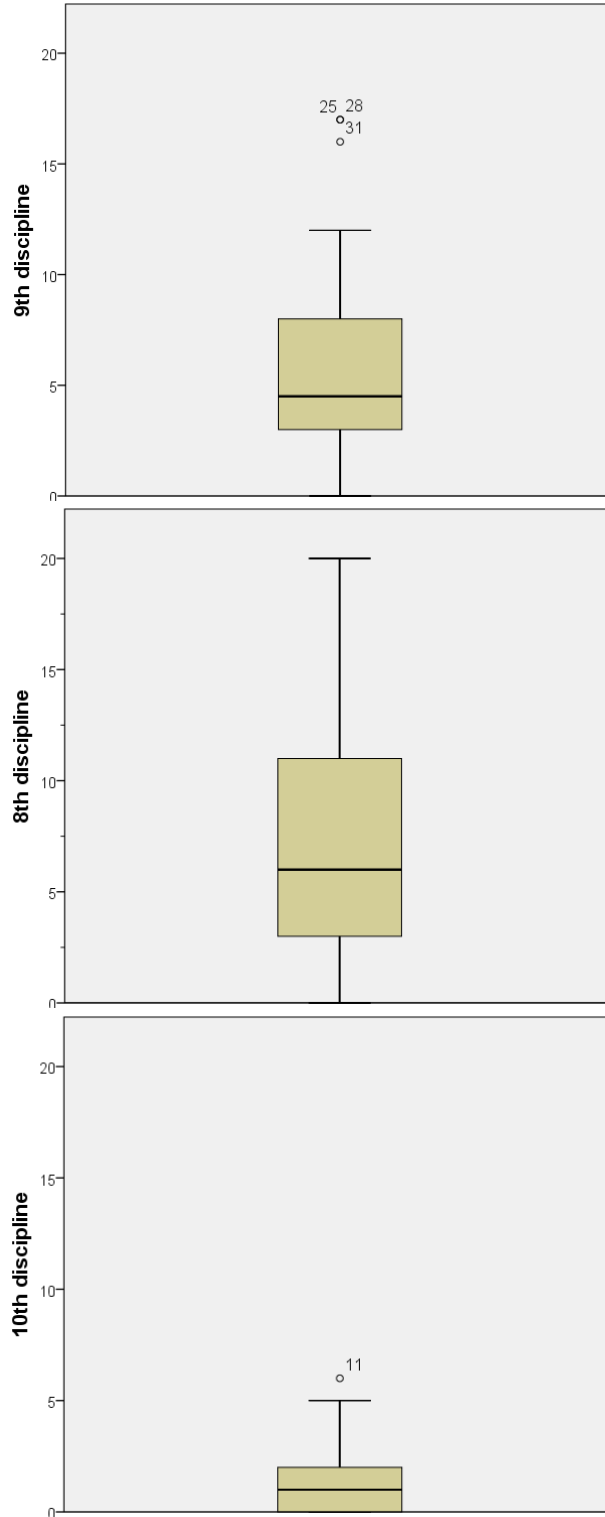 in 8th grade, 16 in 9th grade, and 3 in 10th grade. Student 11 had only one referral in 8th grade which increased to 12 for 9th grade and decreased to 6 in 10th grade.

History and science SOLs. The SOL scores were grouped into pass/fail categories with a score of 0-399 representing "fail" and 400-600 representing "pass", based on the cut scores published by the Virginia Department of Education. Of the 34 participants, 14 (41%) took a SOL in science for 8th, 9th, and 10th grades, 14 (41%) took a SOL in science for two of the three years, five (15%) took one science SOL over the three years and one (3%) student took no science SOL's from 8th – 10th grade. Of the 34 participants, thirteen (38%) took three history SOLs from 8th – 10th grade, 15 (44%) participants took two history SOLs, five (15%) participants took only one history SOL from 8th – 10th grade and one (3%) participant took no history SOLs from 8th – 10th grade. Table 3 reflects the percent pass rate for participants in each grade for both science and history SOLs within the given sample size. Students are required to pass SOLs to earn a diploma and must re-test if they did not pass the previous year. Hence, data across grade levels in Table 3 are not comparable due to the possibility that pass/fail rates could be influenced by repeat testers or students who are taking different tests because of course enrollment or placement.

Table 3

Percent pass and fail rates for history and science SOLs for 8th, 9th, and 10th grade.

	8th Grade		9th Grade		10th Grade	
	% Took and Passed	% Took and Failed	% Took and Passed	% Took and Failed	% Took and Passed	% Took and Failed
History SOL	72.7% (24)	27.3% (9)	70.4% (19)	29.6% (8)	72.2% (13)	27.8% (5)
Science SOL	93.9% (31)	6.1% (2)	55.2% (16)	44.8% (13)	89.5% (17)	10.5% (2)

Note: n's are in parenthesis.

History. Table 3 shows that while the number of students taking the history SOL decreased by 6 from 8th - 9th grade and decreased by 9 from 9th – 10th grade, the percent of students passing remained between 70%-72%.

Science. In science, the number of students taking the SOL decreased each year. Table 5 shows that pass rates dropped from 94% in 8th grade to 55% in 9th grade and rose to 89% in 10th grade. SOL testing depended on which course enrollment and whether or not he/she took the SOL at the end of the course. Figure VII reflects the percentage pass rate for students taking a SOL in either history or science for three consecutive years, grades 8, 9 and 10.
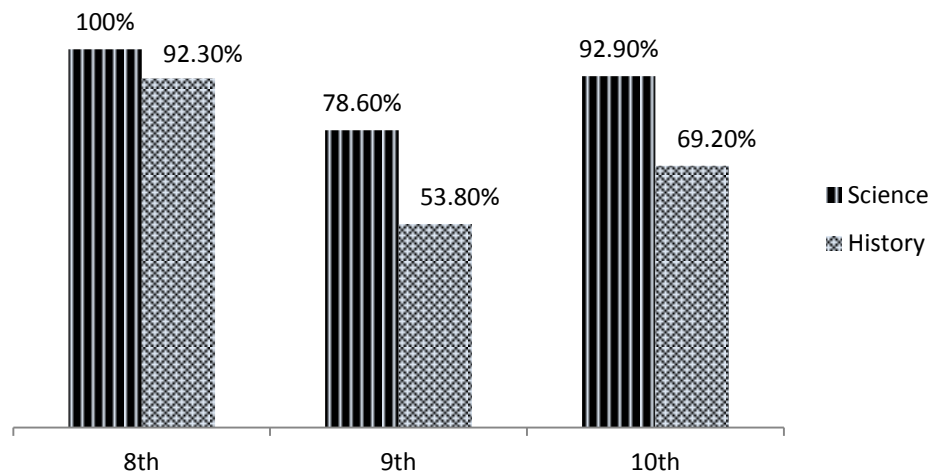
Figure VII. Science and history pass rate percentages for students taking a science or history SOL for three consecutive years, grades 8, 9 and 10.

Qualitative Findings

Participants. Of the 34 students who met the parameters of the quantitative portion of this study, 12 (eight females and four males) returned the permission form and were interviewed. Eight of the participants were black females, 8 were black males, and one was a white male. All but one received free or reduced lunch which classified them as disadvantaged. Four of the 12 students attended the alternative middle school located in the western portion of the district and the remaining eight attended the eastern alternative middle school. Ten of the twelve interview participants attended the alternative middle school for more than one year, one attended for one year and one attended less than one year.

Qualitative Data Analysis. Interview questions and probes allowed the participants to give their perspective of the alternative middle school experience which is

indicative of emic coding. The researcher created a folder to hold the imported transcriptions within NVivo9's *internal* folder. The folder created for the transcriptions was labeled *interview*. After folder creation and data entry, the next step was to use NVivo9 to analyze the transcriptions in the interview folder and create Nodes, (called Free Nodes and Tree Nodes). Data themes and codes are represented by these two types of nodes in the data analysis program.

The research questions were listed in the Free Node section. After the data was sorted and categorized it was distributed into the Free Nodes based on themes. Tree Nodes were created based on the interview questions and probes. The researcher also used the transcriptions to break down the participant responses and color code each response according to similarity to another participant's response to look for themes. The interview questions were used to create the Nodes and Codes. Forty Nodes were created with one to six codes that corresponded with the participants' responses.

To arrive at the codes, the most prominent words that appeared within the data were used. Wordle was used to create word clouds to help identify some of these outstanding words. A word cloud is a special visualization of text in which the more frequently used words in a piece of text are highlighted by appearing larger than the other words in the cloud (McNaught & Lam, 2010). Font color and direction of the words as well as the maximum number of words can be changed by the user.

Figure VIII illustrates one of the word clouds created from two interview questions. The parameters set for this Wordle were 50 words, vertical and horizontal direction. After the Wordle was created, words such as *at*, *I*, *um* were removed as they have no significant meaning. One of the questions asked if completing high school was

something the participant saw in his/her future and how the alternative middle school experience influenced this decision. The other question was the concluding question asking the participant to add any thoughts he/she might have that were not covered in the previous interview questions. The words that are shown as most prominent in this word cloud are the largest. Eleven of the 12 participants stated that *yes* they saw graduation as something that would happen. Because of the frequency of the word yes, it is the largest in this Wordle. The words *school*, *helped*, *work* and *teachers* are prominent because most of the participants talked about their behavior before they attended the alternative middle school and how they were not attending school or doing any work and how the teachers helped get them back on track. Several participants mentioned the *field trips* as something they wanted to make sure I noted and that the alternative middle school aided in *getting* them to their correct grade level.
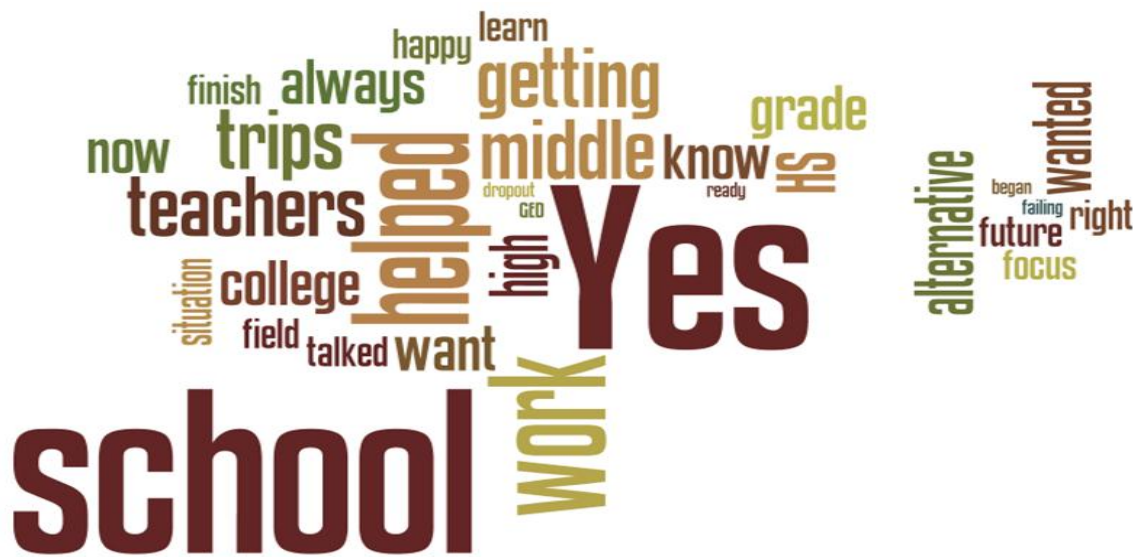
Figure VIII. Wordle word cloud for interview questions numbers 9 and 10.

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions and experiences of students who attended the alternative middle school regarding preparation for high school, skills previously taught at the alternative middle school, transition to current school and interpersonal relationships with peers and adults at current school?

Each of the four focus questions addressed by research question two was addressed by different interview questions and probes. The interview questions were grouped accordingly (Table 4).

Table 4

Interview questions addressing research question focus.

Research Question Focus	Interview Questions
Preparation for high school	2,6,8,10
Skills previously taught at the alternative middle school	9,10
Transition to current school	3,7,10
Interpersonal relationships with peers and adults at current school	4,5,10

The analysis of the interview responses produced several major themes that represent how the alternative middle school prepared or did not prepare students for high school. Several themes were woven together and overlapped into each research question focus and are represented by four major themes: student-student relationships, student-teacher relationships, class size, and desire to graduate. Although none of the themes directly reflected academic preparation for high school addressed by questions 2, 6, 8, and 10, students' mind-set as a result

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of the relationships with teachers, conversations, and character-building experiences prepared them for high school in a different way. Students who had previously considered dropping out stayed the course toward earning a diploma. These same students felt a relationship with their teachers was now a possibility and could provide the supports needed to persist through high school and the self-efficacy needed for both academic and behavioral success.

Student - teacher relationships. Participants in this study felt they had matured a lot since their alternative middle school experience which helped them with relationships with both adults and their peers. The participants in this sample had an affinity for the alternative middle school teachers because they felt the teachers were genuinely interested in them and interested in helping them turn their lives around and succeed. Participants felt the combination of the teachers and the alternative experience is what helped them change their behavior and/or prepare them for high school. Student responses indicated that participants seem to get along better with the teachers they liked, which was linked to their perception of whether they thought the teacher liked and cared about them. Participants also stated that they worked harder for the teachers they liked.

The theme of class size also resonated with teacher relationships because the participants felt they got to know their teachers at the alternative middle school better because of the small class size and the limited number of teachers/classes they experienced. Participants felt they matured more at the alternative middle school, more than they would have at a traditional middle school, because of the amount of time spent having conversations with their teachers that were not necessarily related to academics and more of what they perceived as *adult* conversations. They did not feel this would have occurred had they been in a larger setting with more students competing for the teachers' attention. The participants felt their teachers at the alternative

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middle school did more than teach them academic skills, they learned skills that focused on success in the larger society.

> I did develop a relationship with some teachers at the alternative middle school, I mean, better than I have here [in high school], I felt like I knew the teachers more.

> ...they [teachers] make me feel good about myself.

> I kinda bumped heads with everyone about my behavior and my mouth, before my alternative middle school experience. I get along better now, I straightened up a lot. I'm interacting in class more and staying out of trouble. I would say there are not a lot teachers in high school that care as much as the teachers at the alternative middle school did.

> I always had a bad attitude since I was little. When I came to [the alternative middle school] the counselor kind of talked to me about my attitude and how I could handle it. I feel like I can talk to people and be more open than I could when I was young.

> At the alternative middle school, teachers were more like your parents.

> Teachers at the other [traditional] middle school I didn't get along with, that's why I got sent to the alternative middle school. Some teachers here [at high School] I really like. If I like the teacher, I do their work.

> My behavior got better at the alternative middle school. Smaller class size helped relationships. The one-on-one talking kinda got me straight.

> I used to argue with my mother about doing homework and my teachers. I get along better with teachers now. They are helping me get through the day. Teachers at the alternative middle school made me feel like I was important enough to learn. I haven't found anyone at my current [high] school that I'm comfortable to talk to.

Some participants did not get along well with the adults and/or teachers in their lives before the alternative middle school experience, during the experience, or after the experience. Most of the participants stated that they got along better with their teachers than they did with their parents. The theme 'student-teacher relationships' emerged from the participants' responses and fell under the bigger concept of 'interpersonal relationships,' which was one of the focus points of research question 2.

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My relationship with my parents and teachers was kinda shaky before the
alternative middle school experience and it's still kinda shaky.

Teachers here (at current high school) are kinda why I don't like school.

Student – student relationships. The participants in this sample reflected on their

relationships with peers prior to attending the alternative middle school and most felt they had

matured a lot since their middle school days. Participants were very aware of how their

relationships with their peers influenced both academic performance and behavior in school.

Their responses showed insight and many took time to think of a response that represented what

they wanted to say before they answered the questions.

> [Peers are] not a good impact on my learning – I'm too involved with friends. I
> do know now [since attending the alternative middle school] who is and who is
> not my friends.

> It [going to the alternative middle school] made me better knowing I can be
> responsible for everything and my actions.

> They [peers] make me not want to be like some of the other people that are going
> bad – they still my friends but make me want to do better. Where I came from a
> lot of people told me I won't gonna graduate and a lot of people told me I won't
> gonna pass so I'm just showing them that I can do it.

> I have less friends now because they get you in trouble. I [now] choose smart,
> intelligent friends who respect themselves and have nice behavior.

> I think friends play a big part in your grades because if you have many friends
> you are always wanting to hang out and not pay attention at school.

Many participants attended high school with some of the same peers they attended alternative

middle school with and noticed a change in their peer relationship. These students felt they

knew these peers on a different level than their new peers because of their shared alternative

middle school experience. The focus point 'interpersonal relationships' (research question 2) was

represented by the theme 'student-student relationships,' which emerged from the participants'

responses.

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Class size. Participants had a clear preference for smaller class size for many reasons but the most prevalent response was because they felt they got more attention from the teacher and they could concentrate better, with fewer distractions. Typically classified as at-risk, the participants made the connection between class size and their success both behaviorally and academically. The desire to continue in the alternative middle school for their high school classes, or at least the environment, was repeated several times because of the small classes and the minimized distractions. Participants who attended the alternative high school echoed the small class size and setting but stated that it was still an increase from their alternative middle school.

> In the alternative school there was probably 5-6 kids in each of the classes and here [in high school] it's more than 20. I think to have smaller groups of people, I learn better. It's easier at the alternative school to have one-on-one time with a teacher because not everybody is asking questions.

> In middle school they tried to keep it to a minimum so teachers could get around and help everyone and in high school there are like students from different grade levels so it's a little harder.

> In high school you have to deal with a lot of talking, more distractions and [teachers] not taking time with you.

> When a lot of people were in my class I couldn't concentrate and I had to really pay attention to what I'm doing versus like when 6 people in my class and my teacher could come over and help me when I need it instead of being busy with all the other students. I work better in a small class. I did better in my classes at the alternative middle school. Less distractions. No goofing off.

Although class size was not a specific focus of research question 2, this theme emerged from participants' responses to probes regarding skills previously taught and interpersonal relationships. Participants felt the smaller class size at the alternative middle school was conducive to developing skills needed to enter high school and build better relationships with both peers and adults.

Desire to graduate. All but one participant responded that graduating from high school

was their plan. Participants overwhelmingly felt that their experience as well as the

conversations and relationships they had with teachers, in the alternative middle school, helped

to influence this decision. They felt the support they received as well as the encouragement and

continued belief in their success is what has helped them stay on the path toward graduation.

> I can see that I will graduate, I know I'm gonna complete high school. [Going to the alternative middle school] made me just not want to be a dropout.

> Because most of my friends dropped out of high school from middle school and I see how they is now – I'm going to graduate. Graduating high school I'll have a better career.

> I used to say I wanted to get my GED to get out of school faster. Now I'm just like I'm gonna finish it and walk across the stage to make my teachers and my parents happy.

> My teachers at the alternative middle school, they always had different stories about them going to college and I could see myself going to college and getting my degree and PhD in something I'm interested in.

> In the alternative middle school we had meetings where we talked about our future, that's when I began to take things seriously.

> Only one participant, who had recently received news that she was pregnant, responded that she did not think she would graduate from high school due to her situation.

> The alternative middle school didn't influence my decision [of not graduating], just stuff that happened later.

Participants' desire to graduate emerged as a theme that resulted from the relationships and

conversations they experienced with the adults at the alternative middle school. Participants

stated they observed some of their friends who did not attend the alternative middle school and

did not want their educational journey to end in the same manner by not graduating.

Summary

Participants clearly appreciated the environment they experienced in the alternative middle school especially the smaller class sizes and the relationships they formed with their teachers. They felt valued and many, for the first time, felt that someone cared whether they found success both behaviorally and academically. Some participants were still experiencing the same struggles in academics and non-academics they felt in the alternative middle school. They could not explain the reason for this, but did note consistencies throughout their academic career such as difficulty with reading and dislike of certain subjects. Many participants felt they learned valuable lessons in the alternative setting, although not necessarily academic. Discussions, for example, whether in class or in small groups, taught the importance of learning to be an active participant in one's own education and personal development, solve problems and make good choices. These choices included asking the right questions, evaluating options and arriving at good decisions. Many of these discussions focused on relationships with others, which was a challenge for most of the participants. How to conduct oneself socially, removing oneself from toxic situations and functioning effectively as a part of a community were also discussed which improved student relationships with both adults and peers. Several participants reflected that these discussions were what made them decide to graduate and perhaps continue to college. When asked what they missed most about the alternative middle school and what else they would like to share many replied they missed everything and wished they were still there but especially missed the teachers.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

This study sought to add to our understanding of the effectiveness of alternative middle schools. Using similar measures of effectiveness as Gutherson, Davies, and Daszkiewicz (2011), this study collected data on attendance, discipline, and academics, represented by history and science SOL pass rates. Researchers have not previously analyzed the trends in data indicating program success for two years following participation in an alternative middle school program. This study only concerned students who transitioned to a comprehensive high school after leaving the alternative setting and gave voice to students who were considered at-risk of dropping out of high school. This examination of two alternative middle school programs found that although improvements in attendance, discipline and SOL pass rates were not sizeable in 9th grade data or one year out of the alternative middle school experience, there were notable improvements in tenth grade or two years out.

Although Cox (1999) reported in his study that most of the positive effects gained in the alternative setting disappeared once students returned to their traditional setting, this study has demonstrated an overall improvement by year three (10th grade) for attendance and discipline referrals that was not necessarily reflected in year two data. Improvements in both attendance and behavior, represented by discipline data, could be attributed to maturity and a better understanding of high school rules and expectations, as a result of alternative middle school experience. Several interview participants noted that they had *grown up* since 8th grade and attributed their improved attendance, behavior, and relationships to this phenomenon.

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Along with maturing, participants could have an improved perception of their self-efficacy, which would impact attendance, discipline and achievement, as well as goals, such as graduation. According to Taylor (2011), self-efficacy can be defined as one's capabilities to meet situation demands by mobilizing cognitive resources and available courses of action. The alternative middle school experience empowered many students who had not previously found academic, behavioral, and/or social success to set personal goals and have the resilience and ability to reach them. The two alternative middle schools that all of the students attended sought to provide a foundation for goal setting and improved decision making to produce positive outcomes.

Many of the students in this study noted the conversations they engaged in while attending the alternative middle school helped them realize they could become something other than a product of their environment and could achieve greater than they had previously demonstrated. Students who are at risk of school failure are often faced with greater challenges both academically and environmentally. When they realize they can be successful and discover the *tools* they already possess to find this success, whether it is academically or behaviorally, they will often capitalize on these actions through repetition to gain similar results. If a student has found his *key* to success then his goals becomes more attainable and he will do whatever it takes to reach those goals. Many of the students interviewed maintained that they *knew* they could graduate and they would do whatever it took to make sure it happened. They also expressed that this was not necessarily in the game plan before their alternative middle school experience. As students mature, they start to see their life as not only the present but also the future. They begin to link their present actions to the outcome of their future, which is part of the life-lessons secondary education seeks to provide.

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Attendance, Discipline, and SOL Scores

Attendance. The decrease in the number of absences from 8th to 10th grade could be due to the natural maturing of the student and perhaps value changes and goal setting that was cultivated in the alternative middle school. While we don't know about absentee rates prior to enrollment in the alternative middle school for 8th grade, in 9th and 10th grade, rates were comparable to the districts' absentee rate for all students. Students in 8th grade were absent an average of 22.8 (12.7%) days out of the school year of 180 days. For the same year, the districts' absentee rate for middle school was 4.5%. In 9th grade the students in this study reduced their absentee average to 13.5 days or 7.5% and the district reported a 5% absentee rate for high school students during the same year. Tenth graders in this study reduced their average number of days absent to 8.8 (4.9%) while the district reported a 4.8% absentee rate for high school students during the same year. The attendance rates of these at-risk students were looking more like typical students.

One of the reasons students might have been sent to the alternative middle school for 8th grade could have been the result of poor attendance reflected in the average number of days absent per student. Often, poor attendance is a factor that can influence academic achievement and behavior. When students are absent, they fall behind academically and when they return, acting in a negative manner is often the method chosen to compensate for not understanding the material presented or missed. This is especially true of the at-risk student. As students mature, they may begin to value the education because they see the *big picture* of their future not just their present situation and will attend school more regularly to make the most of their education. The students that were interviewed talked about setting goals and seeing graduation as something that really could be in their future instead of dropping out or obtaining a GED. Many stated they

wanted to get through school as quickly as possible before they attended the alternative middle school but had since changed their mind and wanted to earn their diploma.

Nineteen of the 34 students in this study had a decrease in the number of absences each year from 8th grade to 10th grade. The remaining 15 students varied in the number of days absent from year to year. Possible reasons for variability in the number of absences noted could include but are not limited to: pregnancy, transience or homelessness, student illness, parent illness where student had to stay home and take care of parent, substance abuse or delinquency and being placed in detention center for a period of time. The interviews conducted indicated that some students had jobs outside of school which often took priority to school, one had given birth within the three years and one was currently pregnant. Some of the interviewed students were still experiencing discipline challenges and their affinity for school had not changed enough to reflect a consistent positive change in their attendance.

According to Bandura (2006), the level of perseverance one exhibits when encountering obstacles and difficulty defines self-efficacy and could be linked to better decisions made by the students concerning attendance. Another possible reason for a decrease in the number of absences is that students could have been trying to avoid being placed at the alternative high school and made a conscious effort to remain *under the radar* by attending school and not being flagged as truant. Students who attended the alternative middle school had a marked improvement in attendance over the three years reflected by this study. Many factors contributed to this improvement including the students' attitude toward school which was a direct result of the positive experiences they encountered at the alternative middle school. Previously categorized as at-risk, students now began to look more like typical high school students instead of those at risk of dropping out of school.

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Discipline. As students progress through high school, the number of discipline referrals generally decrease from year to year. There are a number of reasons for this trend including maturity and goal setting. The total number of discipline referrals for the students in this study decreased dramatically by 80% from 8th to 10th grade. The per student number of referrals fluctuated from year to year with some students showing a decrease from year to year and some showing a rise one year and a drop the next. Students who were interviewed attributed their improvement in behavior to maturity and to deciding that there are some people who are not good influences and who encourage bad behavior. These students identified their need for fewer distractions, which included changing their circle of friends. They recognized the need to surround oneself with people who had similar goals and who behaved the way they wanted to behave.

The change in high school in number of teachers and classes, surroundings, and changes in peer groups often presents a challenge to many students, especially the at-risk student. Some respondents identified their personal challenges and limitations and determined what they needed to do to stay on track and reach their goals, despite the challenges they were presented with as 9th graders. The demands of courses increase, student independence increases and academic supports decline which could all lead to greater challenges for 9th graders (Roderick, 2006). One participant stated that she had been classified as an exceptional education student, which to her was a relief, because she knew she needed smaller class sizes and more one-on-one attention from her teachers.

Variations in the discipline data could also be the result of the environmental challenges previously discussed that many at-risk students endure on a day-to-day basis which is played out in the school setting. A decrease in the number of discipline infractions or an improvement

could be attributed to participant maturity, "learning one's lesson," or a conscious effort on the part of the participant to improve his behavior and minimize discipline infractions. Most of the interviewed students stated that they had matured a lot since 8th grade and attributed their personal improvements to "growing up." Many students were placed in the alternative middle school as a result of discipline infractions; either the severity of the infractions or the number of accumulated referrals exceeded what was considered acceptable in a comprehensive setting. Part of the alternative middle school experience included small group discussions about student goals, both short term and long term. Students also discussed their past behavioral challenges and ways they could have reacted differently or ways to alter the outcome of their actions. These experiences could have influenced the change in the number of discipline referrals noted in this study.

History and science SOLs. There was a drop in the number of students who took SOLs in history and science each year due to many reasons including enrollment in SOL courses, student and/or teacher belief that the student could not be successful on the test leading to test anxiety, and student attendance during the testing window. Belief in oneself, that goals are attainable, or self-efficacy, could influence whether or not a student passes standardized tests (Bandura, 2006).

Self-efficacy also influences students' stress and anxiety levels which impairs or enables intellectual performance (Bandura, 2006). As freshmen, students who are already at risk of academic failure are attending a school much larger than the alternative middle school they attended for 8th grade and they are one of possibly 30 or more students in a class instead of the typical 8-10 they experienced at the alternative middle school. They are experiencing new teachers, new peers, and new or additional distractions in each class. The individual attention

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they may have received in the alternative middle school setting may not exist in the high school setting unless the student is proactive and seeks assistance.   This is something students who are deemed at risk may or may not do depending on their level of confidence and level of familiarity with his teachers. The extent to which students are motivated to learn and do well in school, or academic engagement, is another reason students may or may not have done well on their SOLs which also ties in to their relationships and the level of motivation students receive from their teachers (Libbey, 2004).

The pass rates for both history and science SOLs in middle school, 8th grade, were higher than either year in high school. Students could have performed better on the middle school SOLs because of the amount of time spent remediating material and the smaller setting which was more conducive to evaluating individual needs and meeting those needs to ensure success. In the larger high school setting there are typically not enough resources to meet the needs of all students unless they are identified for exceptional education.

Interview participants talked about the after school activities and tutoring programs that were not offered at the high school level as something helpful that they missed from the alternative middle school. Several interview participants mentioned that they worked for teachers they liked and they would concentrate on tests for teachers they liked and those they perceived as liking them. The concept of relationships is interwoven with many facets of student life including academic performance.   Prior to attending the alternative middle school, some students' attendance resulted in poor academic achievement and/or behavior. Academic achievement and behavior are two factors that could have led to student placement or encouragement to attend the alternative middle school.

The percentage of students passing the history SOL in this study remained between 70% - 71% for all three grades, 8-10. The pass rate for students taking the science SOL dropped from 94% to 55% from 8th - 9th grade and rose to 89% in 10th grade. Both history and science showed a slight increase in SOL scores from 9th grade to 10th grade. These increases from 9th grade to 10th grade could be attributed to maturity, student desire to earn a diploma requiring passing SOL scores, or chance.

Attending the alternative middle school appears to have done little to have a long-term improvement in academic performance because of the other challenges that seemed to be the focus of the program. Although SOL pass rates were higher in 8th grade, the impact appeared to be short-term as it did not carry over into 9th grade. Respondents did not feel the transition to 9th grade had the supports needed to continue the success they found at the middle school level. Academics were important at the alternative middle school but, as stated by the students who were interviewed, they did not feel academically prepared for high school as a result of attending the alternative middle school. They felt their greatest lessons learned were not academic but more life and social skills which were cultivated by the relationships formed and communications with the adults at the alternative middle school. Persistence, resilience, and self-efficacy are some of the tools the students gained through the alternative middle school experience.

Student Insights into Their Alternative Middle School Experience

Interview questions were designed to incorporate best practices and strengths found in studies of effective alternative high school programs from the literature. Student responses were similar to those reported in previous studies by Kerka (2005), Tobin & Sprague (1999), Flower, et al (2011), and Ruzzi & Kraemer (2006). The themes gleaned from the interviews with 12 of

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34 participants reflect relationships with teachers and peers, class size, and students' desire to graduate. The participants seemed to emphasize experiences in the middle school program which reflected findings from previous studies of high school programs. Studies on effectiveness of alternative schools tend to focus on three specific areas: first, students' responses to their choices made in school and program flexibility (Lehr & Lange, 2000), second, students' sense of satisfaction and changes in self-esteem (Gold & Mann, 1984; Lange & Lehr, 1997), and third, students' academic achievement (Lange & Lehr, 1999; Knight, DeLeon & Smith, 1999).

Interviews with students revealed that most recognized what choices they had made that resulted in their placement at the alternative middle school. Most students felt that they had matured since attending the alternative middle school and were making better choices or at least were aware of the consequences of their choices even if they chose not to make the right choice. As current 10th graders they realized what influences others had on their behavior and were making appropriate changes to improve their situation. Choosing friends who had similar goals, both academically and personally, seemed to be an underlying theme in interview responses.

Second, interviewed students expressed a satisfaction with their alternative middle school experience and many had stated that their goal of earning a high school diploma had changed as a result of attending the alternative middle school and knowing that they could achieve that goal. Students who had previously considered dropping out or earning a GED had changed their outlook once they tasted success and felt they could now earn their high school diploma. Students felt they had gained the self-confidence and direction needed to finish high school.

Third, although SOL pass rates did not indicate a direct correlation between the alternative middle school and improvements in academic achievement, several students

interviewed stated that their grades had improved in the alternative middle school and had continued to improve after leaving. They stated that because they had found success they knew they were capable of better grades than what they were earning before the alternative middle school experience. Students also expressed that because they could now control and/or redirect their behavior, their grades were improved.

  Student relationships. Participants felt they knew their teachers at the alternative middle school better than their previous or current teachers. The most common reasons given were smaller class size, fewer students needing attention, and more time spent with the teachers having conversations, which were strengths noted by Ruzzi & Kraemer (2006) in their research with high school programs. The participants credited their alternative middle school teachers with helping them "get straight" and do their best. The participants recalled their teachers fondly and expressed how much they missed them and their relationships with their teachers. Feeling close to or valued by teachers and school staff is the most common theme that has emerged from research of school attachment and is one of the markers for students' sense of connection to school (Libbey, 2004). This sense of attachment is often what students need to persist and earn a diploma. The participants who attended a traditional high school noted the biggest difference in their relationships with their current teachers and attributed it to the number of students in their classes who also needed help or attention. Akon (2006) and Lange & Sletton (2002) also found one-on-one interaction between teachers and students and a supportive environment as common characteristics among alternative schools for at-risk students. Likewise, James and Jurich (1999) noted that caring, knowledgeable adults who understand and deeply care about youth and provide significant time and attention to students are among the best practices for alternative programs.

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Raywid (2001) noted that caring adults help establish a climate of trust and support that lets youth know someone is paying attention and "extensive evidence suggests it (personal attention) is clearly essential for those at risk" (p. 583). Many participants believed their alternative middle school teachers really cared if they succeeded or not and some were still maintaining contact with these teachers. They did not have the same opinions of their current secondary school teachers. Some of the participants interviewed stated that they did the work required for the teachers they liked and did not do the work for those they did not like. This attitude could result in poor SOL test scores because students did not pay attention during the year and complete the work in certain classes due to their attitude toward their teachers. Students also may not attend classes for teachers they dislike and may misbehave in those classes for the same reasons which could influence both the attendance and discipline data.

Relationships with their peers seemed to influence participants' choices in behavior, resulting in discipline referrals and time spent on their schoolwork. Several participants stated that prior negative relationships *assisted* them in their placement at the alternative middle school. Most participants commented that peer relationships had improved as a result of learning to tolerate others, learning how to talk to others, and just growing up. Several participants mentioned that having a lot of friends meant more distractions and they had decided to limit their circle of friends for this reason. Others talked about classroom behavior and distractions from friends. Some were still letting others influence them and others had moved on because they had new goals (graduation) or life changes (children) that took priority. Several participants reported that they chose their friends in high school more wisely than previously because they needed to be around people who had similar goals and who behaved appropriately. The reason for these

changes in attitude toward peers could be attributed to maturity and the life changes that several of these participants had experiences such as teenage pregnancy and parenthood.

All of the participants except one stated that they wanted to graduate from high school and this goal could play a role in their friend selection. Jenkins (1997) and Hirschi (1969) both suggested that the stronger students' bonds to school, teachers, and peers, the less likely they are to engage in misbehavior or delinquency at school. Participants in this study recognized the behavior patterns of their peers or former friends and most chose to follow another path so they could realize their goal of graduation. Participants felt they had learned many skills needed to foster healthy relationships with both peers and adults as a result of attending the alternative middle school. They also felt they knew how to choose friends that were positive influences and how to stay away from those who might negatively influence them and their academic and behavioral success.

Small class size is better. Ruzzi and Kraemer's (2006) research found class size to be one of the most effective practices in alternative education since its inception. Participants in this study repeatedly commented on the difference the smaller classes at the alternative middle school made in what they gleaned from the experience. Class size was a resounding theme during the interviews and one that all of the students interviewed said they missed about the alternative middle school. Smaller class size in the middle school was credited for earning honor roll by some participants to overall academic improvement, fewer distractions, and more attention from the teachers. Kerka (2005) noted a sense of community in her studies of effective alternative programs. Likewise, McDonald (2002) noted that small learning communities had been shown to have an impact on student achievement and youth development. If asked, the participants in this study would agree with these findings as they kept referring to class size as

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having an impact on their grades and their attitude. Smaller class size is noted to promote a high level of interaction between the student and teacher which is essential for the success of an alternative setting (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Interview participants spoke of having the individual attention of the teachers in the small classes that they were not receiving at the high school setting. They felt their current, larger, classes had too many students who needed the teachers' help and they got lost in the crowd. This lack of individual attention was perceived to influence their academic success.

Desire to graduate. Several of the interview participants stated that before they attended the alternative middle school they didn't care if they graduated or not. Some had considered dropping out or pursuing a GED because it was a faster way to get out of school. After attending the alternative middle school they said they had reconsidered and all but one participant stated a desire to earn a high school diploma. Students spent a lot of time in the alternative middle school talking to teachers and counselors about their futures and what they wanted to do and how they could move on from their past performance, both academically and behaviorally. This one-on-one time and group sessions affected many of the participants in a positive manner because they felt someone was interested enough in them to take the time to find out what they wanted out of life. Participants commented on how their peers were acting and how they continued to get in trouble and drop out and that they did not want to follow suit. Libbey (2004) notes that being proud of one's school, feeling respected, being able to talk to teachers, and feeling like school staff are interested in them are all markers for student connections to school which lead to student success both academically and behaviorally.

Although students did not understand the terminology used in the interview questions concerning transition to high school, many mentioned they felt prepared for high school socially.

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Several participants commented that they did not feel prepared academically for high school but were doing *ok*. Some of the reasons students felt more socially/behaviorally prepared rather than academically could be the amount of time spent on discussions and trying to help students with decision making skills. Although academics are very important, most of the students who attended the two alternative middle schools were not there for academic reasons. Most of the students were attending because of discipline reasons and/or the appeal of the small school setting. Throughout the literature, an assets approach, or emphasis on the positive rather than the negative, was noted as one of the best practices for effective alternative programs. Without behavior modification, many of the students who attended the alternative middle school would most likely have transitioned to the alternative high school or continued with inappropriate behavior which could result in intervention from the justice system. Although the literature focused on high school programs, the same themes were found in this study of middle school alternative programs and similar results were found with both academic and interview data. This similarity was found with both the best practices and the strengths of the alternative program.

Conclusions regarding research question two. The themes that emerged from this study addressed the focal questions of research question two indirectly in some responses. Concerning preparation for high school, students did not feel they were academically prepared however they did feel emotionally prepared to transition to the 9th grade. This preparation was conveyed as possessing the ability to build healthier relationships, both with peers and adults, communicate more clearly, persist to reach their goals and react to situations in a mature manner. This emotional preparation directly ties in to the focus of skills previously taught at the alternative middle school. Although participants did not use the specific vocabulary often associated with the skill sets, their explanation of actions and reactions clearly denoted an

understanding of anger management skills, conflict resolution skills, and relationship building skills. The term *transition* confused the participants because their association of the word was with an event that occurred at the end of 8th grade that was similar to a graduation. They did not relate the term *transition* to the process of changing from one condition to another, middle school to high school. Because of this lack of understanding the responses to the focus question concerning transition did not result in relative data for use in the analysis and discussion. Participants' responses reflected increased growth in the area of relationships. Relationships with both peers and adults had improved greatly and participants felt the alternative setting was conducive to positive interactions with others. Participants felt the relationships they formed with adults had impacted decisions they made both personally and academically.

Researcher's Perspective

I was drawn to this area of research from a professional and personal perspective. From a personal perspective, I have had a lifelong affinity for children who have not had their needs met in the traditional school setting, whether educational or on a personal level. In my professional experience I taught science in one of the alternative middle school settings in this study for eight years. As a result of teaching in the alternative setting I am familiar with the curricular and behavioral goals set by the program. I am also familiar with the type of student that attended the school and their personal journeys and challenges that may have resulted in their placement. Many of the students who were interviewed were former students. These alternative middle schools have since been closed by the county. Knowing that these schools were in jeopardy of closing, influenced my choice of dissertation topic as I felt these students could potentially be lost in the shuffle and not have the support needed to complete high school. By completing this study and giving voice to this population, I gained insight on the influence the alternative middle

school had on its' students as well as the value of our efforts as teachers. To understand and reflect on the possible influence of these perspectives on the data collection and analysis, field notes were taken during all interviews and they were transcribed by a third party to reduce interviewer bias. The probing questions were designed to be as nonbiased and non-influential as possible; however, students that I had previously taught were seeking to answer the questions *correctly* and would look to see if my expression changed or nodded in approval or surprise. As a result, I had to remain as expressionless as possible to not influence responses. Students did not feel pressured to answer questions in a positive manner as we no longer had a direct teacher-student relationship that involved grades but they were interested in making sure they mentioned the classes I had taught as ones they enjoyed. The difference in responses from students I taught and those who attended the other alternative middle school was the program specific questions. Although both schools were designed to follow the same format and offer the same services, there were differences that emerged in the responses from students. The themes did not differ as these were overwhelmingly evident in all student responses but the specific groups and activities varied. Overall, the amount of interviewer bias was reduced because of the time lapse between when I taught students and when they were interviewed. They were all just happy to see me and spend time filling me in on their thoughts and memories.

Limitations

Due to the nature of the study, there are several factors that could limit the external validity, specifically generalizability. This study was limited to data collection and interviews from one cohort of students who attended an alternative middle school for 8th grade during the 2009-2010 school year. Second, additional data from these students could affect conclusions drawn about the effectiveness of these two middle school programs. Third, there was no similar

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group of students from which data could be collected to compare results over the three year period. By studying a group of students who have a similar comparison group the effect of the intervention, in this case the alternative middle school, could be better evaluated as the academic indicators could be compared between the two groups. Fourth, the 20 students that were not eligible for inclusion were overage students during 8th grade which influenced their decision to not continue with traditional public schooling. Lastly, the results of this study are limited to alternative programs or school districts with similar alternative programs and might not be generalizable to the larger population of middle school students.

Implications and Recommendations

Alternative programs will continue to evolve to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population so it is essential to evaluate program effectiveness to continue to adjust the goals and/or delivery methods to best meet the needs of the population being served. As alternative settings adjust their programs to meet the needs of their target audience, best practices that have been shown to be effective should be reviewed. Although most of the research on alternative settings has been at the high school level, the results of this study show similar findings. Interview data indicated that students valued their relationships with their teachers and small class size fostered these relationships because there was perceivably not as much competition for the teachers' attention. Students felt more successful academically because they received more individual attention and felt valued as individuals because they had a closer relationship with their teachers. Successful alternative programs in the literature have been noted to include the themes found in this study such as small class size and teachers that care. These practices, typically employed by alternative schools, would be beneficial for *all* students at all schools but, are often not practical because of the resources required for implementation.

Statistically the only two observable factors that have been found to consistently lead to higher student achievement are class size and teacher experience (Lazear, 2001). Neither option is entirely feasible. Decreasing class size across an entire school system would require not only additional teachers, which are becoming harder to find, but additional classrooms. Both of these require a substantial budget increase. Finding teachers who genuinely care about their students could prove a more difficult task because statistically, 30% of new teachers leave after just three years of teaching and more than 45% leave after five years (Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp, & Tahan, K. (2011). Typically teachers who have been in the field longer than five years are vested in their career and probably *like* their job which would indicate they like children and more than likely care about their students. Thirty-seven percent of the teaching workforce is over 50 years old and considering retirement (Aud, et al., 2011). Hence, finding enough experienced teachers will become increasingly difficult.

One viable recommendation is to better evaluate students before entry into an alternative program. Student evaluation before alternative program entry allows districts to better measure the individual academic and/or behavior growth of the participants. When a district considers implementing an alternative program, evaluation procedures should be considered which include alternative methods for measuring program success, keeping in mind the differing starting points of the participants.

The district in this study closed the two alternative middle schools at the close of the 2009-2010 school year due to budget cuts and merged them into a single program that is housed at the district's alternative high school. The new program only serves over-age 8th grade students. Students in 6th and 7th grade when the two schools were closed were transitioned to their zoned middle schools. An alternative program for disciplinary placements was outsourced

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and is currently housed at the county's adult education center. Outsourcing of the disciplinary program was discontinued after two years at the close of the 2010-2011 school year and the district then created a similar program for students needing alternative placement for disciplinary reasons. This program is currently housed at the county's adult education center and another location the county secured for alternative programs. There remains a need in this district for a setting for the student population that the schools in this study served. Although there was no clear target population, many students who attended the alternative middle schools could not be adequately served at the traditional setting and could have been educationally lost if no intervention existed. The social benefits of attending the alternative middle school far outweighed the academic benefits; however, these schools provided the self-confidence and persistence students needed to continue with their education and pursue a high school diploma.

Finally, once students transition to a comprehensive setting, school counselors should understand the importance of supporting students who are at-risk and might need preferential scheduling and individual or group meetings to encourage their success and keep them on track and accountable. A transition program and/or quarter evaluation of students who had previously attended the alternative middle school would be helpful in evaluating current needs and areas of needed support essential for student success.

Suggested Studies for Further Research

Though research in this area can be beneficial to those who seek information on implementation, improvement and evaluation of alternative programs, research on graduation rates and post-secondary education and/or training could indicate whether skills learned extend four years post alternative middle school experience. Collection of baseline data to better evaluate student gains both academically and behaviorally is essential for program improvement.

In addition to baseline data, collection of data on all students within a cohort, including those who have moved, placed in other programs or retained could provide a better evaluation of the programs' effectiveness. Another area for further research could look at programs that are similar in their organization and program goals and the type of student served to provide information that would be generalizable to a larger population. Additional suggestions for further study could include parents or guardians of students who attended an alternative middle school program and their perception of its effectiveness. Parent perception of behavioral changes and changes to self-esteem resulting in academic performance improvement would be an area to explore that could offer insight into how behavior modification carries over into the home environment. Often, the perceptions of the participants are quite different from those of the adult. Parent evaluation could also include details regarding their child's relationships with their teachers and/or school counselor.

Another area of study that could be considered in this area is the amount of follow-up performed by both the district and the adults with whom students formed relationships. In this study several participants mentioned they still talked to and met with some of their teachers from the alternative middle school program. Surveys of participants concerning proactivity on their part to remain in touch with former teachers or seek out new teachers who could continue to provide positive influences could provide insight into the long term effects of healthy adult relations.

Studies exploring student changes in self-efficacy as a result of an intervention program to encourage persistence or resilience would be another area for future study. Students who were interviewed for this study expressed a desire to finish high school as a result of the feeling that they actually could find success. This was directly related to the alternative middle school

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experience and the relationships they formed with adults and the success they found and felt while attending the school. This area of study could lead to a long-term follow up of a cohort of students and their post-secondary choices of academics, workforce, or military.

Conclusion

Alternative programs provide an environment that many children who have not found prior success behaviorally and/or academically, are given the opportunity to experience learning in a different way. Whether the mode of delivery is via an online curriculum, in small settings with more student-centered, hands-on activities, or in an exploration setting, all students deserve the opportunity to learn and find success. The themes that emerged from this study included improved student relationships, both with peers and adults, a preference for small class sizes, and students had a desire to graduate and earn a diploma, as a result of attending the alternative middle school. Academic success is often measured as a certificate of completion, such as a diploma although many other measures of success exist but are not as tangible. Additional successes could be: improved relationships, decrease in outbursts, improvements in attendance and/or grades or a change in attitude toward school. As the needs of society changes, public schooling must evolve to meet these needs and offering nontraditional approaches to learning is one way to accomplish educational goals.

Every student can learn, just not on the same day, or the same way. ~George Evans

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Appendix A

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

To be completed by Researcher prior to Interview: *Fictitious Name:* _____

Participants current school: _____   **Cell Phone #:** _____

Current grade level?   repeat 9th   10th

Gender: Male   Female

Ethnicity:

American Indian/Alaskan Native   Asian   Black   Hispanic   White   Other

Which alternative school was attended? _____

How long did you attend the alternative middle school? (circle one)

  Less than one year   One year   More than one year

To be asked by Researcher at time of Interview:

Do you plan on going to college?   YES   NO

In no, what are your future plans?

  Military   Employment   Trade School   Other _____

Appendix B

1) Describe the alternative middle school you attended.

- How did it make you feel?

- What was a typical day like?

- What did it look like?

2) How did your experience at the alternative middle school prepare you or not prepare you for your current high school?

- What would have made the transition better?

- Can you give me examples?

- How satisfied were you with your alternative middle school experience?

3) How does class size differ from the alternative middle school classes and your current high school classes?

- How has this difference, if there is one, affected your academics – both in class and on assessments?

- Give specific examples.

4) Let's talk about relationships – How well did you get along with your parents/guardians and teachers before you went to the alternative middle school?

- How well do you get along now?

- If improved, how have these relationships improved?

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- How are these relationships influencing your behavior and/academics at your current school?

- How did your relationships with adults/teachers at the alternative middle school make you feel?

- How does that compare to how you feel about your relationships with adults/teachers at your current high school?

- How have you identified adults at your current school that you can turn to when you are really down and upset?

5) How well did you get along with your peers before you went to the alternative middle school?

- Describe your relationship with your peers.

- How well do you get along now?

- How are these relationships influencing your behavior and/academics at your current school?

- Give specific examples of how your relationships have improved, if they have, since attending the alternative middle school

6) How did your counselor and/or teachers at the alternative middle school prepare you or not prepare you for your transition to your current school?

- What could have been done to better prepare you for transition to your current school?

7) What are some aspects of the alternative middle school that you miss at your current high school?

- Give specific examples.

- How is your current high school similar to the alternative middle school?

- Give specific examples.

8) What non-academic services or benefits did you receive at the alternative middle school that you may or may not be receiving at your current high school?

- Give specific examples.

9) Is completing high school something you see in your future?

- How did your experience at the alternative middle school influence, or not influence, this decision?

- Give specific examples.

10) What would you like to share about your experience in the alternative middle school that was not covered in these questions?

VITA

Theresa Marcelle Kilmer was born on December 16, 1967 in Loudoun County, Virginia. She graduated from Mills E. Godwin High School in Richmond, Virginia in 1985 and received a Bachelor of Science degree in Animal Science from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia in 1990. She received her Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia in 1992. Theresa taught for ten years at Varina High School as a Biology teacher, eight years at New Bridge Middle School as a Life Science and Greenhouse teacher and is currently an online Credit Recovery teacher at JR Tucker High School in Richmond, Virginia. Theresa received her Post Master's Certificate in Administration and Supervision from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2003.