

A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF THE SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION  
FROM ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS INTO TRADITIONAL  
EDUCATION PROGRAMS

by

ELIZABETH TALBOTT COLE

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This Case Study Analysis is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Review Committee:

Dr. Richard Phillips, Committee Chairperson, Department of Education, Delaware State University

Dr. Patricia Carlson, Committee Co-Chairperson, Department of Education, Delaware State University

Dr. Amystique Y. H. Church, Committee Member, Office of Testing, Delaware State University

Dr. Abdul-Malik Muhammad, External Committee Member, Regional Vice President, Pathways of Delaware

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to the memory of my beloved father, Jack Cole, who inspired my obsession with learning from the moment I was born and was my biggest cheerleader in all things I would ever attempt. He also instilled in me that I can do anything that I want to do with my life, as long as it makes me content. There were no limits on how many ways his little girl could change the world! I love you, always.

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A Comparative Case Study Analysis of the Successful Transition from  
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Education Programs

Elizabeth T. Cole

Faculty Co-Chairs: Dr. Patricia Carlson, Dr. Richard Phillips

**ABSTRACT**

Due to the increasing need to provide educational alternatives for students regardless of their behavioral difficulties, alternative schools are becoming more commonplace in the educational realm. Since many students will become students in these sort of schools, it is important to determine the common experiences of students who were successful in alternative schools. The purpose of this study was to find the commonalities among students who have successfully transitioned from alternative programs back into traditional education programs. A comparative case study analysis was undertaken in which three case studies were analyzed to determine the commonalities among successful alternatives school students.

The three case studies involved in the analysis were: Jones (1999), *Case studies of students transitioning from an alternative school back into high school*; Toliver (2010), *A case study of student and leadership team perceptions of a metro Atlanta alternative school program: selected educational factors which impact student achievement as measured by high school completion*; and Scipio (2013) *Alternative education: A comparative case study of the behavior modification programs of two upstate South Carolina alternative schools for youth who exhibit behavior that is disruptive*.

Each case study found that the most important indicator of student success in alternative schools was the development of a caring relationship with an adult within the school. The

studies also suggested that it was important for an alternative school to remain small with small class sizes as well. Using the commonalities, the researcher developed suggestions for further research as well as recommendations for addressing alternative schools as a whole.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### **1.1 Overview**

Many students who are required to attend alternative schools due to behavioral issues are not successfully performing academically. For most behavioral alternative programs, success is defined as a student transitioning back to their original school, or at least remaining in the alternative school, while making sufficient progress toward the goal of transitioning.

Unfortunately, many students who are sent to alternative programs never return to their original schools, for a variety of reasons, ranging from dropping out to being expelled from school entirely.

Azzam (2007) points out five reasons why students are not successful in schools, including boredom, attendance issues, negative peer influences, too much freedom in their personal lives, and failing academically. According to MacRae (2004), the same can be said of many alternative school students. Regarding boredom, the number one reason stated for not completing high school, students reported little motivation, but felt that teachers did not push them hard enough to do better either. A majority also stated that if they had actually tried, they could have graduated.

Azzam (2007) also determined that many students left school because they had to get a job or take care of family members, including their own children. Forty-five percent of former students surveyed said that previous schooling did not prepare them adequately for high school. Students also reported that their parents were not involved in their education and if they were,

they were mainly involved in the disciplinary aspects of the schooling and not the instructional aspects.

There are five actions that schools could take to improve students' chances of completing school, according to Azzam (2007). First, schools should become more engaging, helping students see the connection between school and work. Secondly, schools must improve instructional supports for struggling learners, increased time with teachers. Next, there should be an improvement in school climate and discipline. Schools should do more to protect students from violence and bullying. Ensuring that students have a relationship with at least one adult in the school is vital as well. Finally, communication should be more open between parents or guardians and schools.

Many of the students who wind up in alternative schools, of course, are the same students who have not experienced success in the traditional school settings. Ruebel and Ruebel (2002) blame the problem with alternative schools on higher levels of student disengagement. They also noted an increased incidence of class cutting, truancy, drug and alcohol abuse, and involvement in criminal activity. Unfortunately, many of the students who struggled in their original schools continue to struggle in alternative programs.

Class cutting is a problem for both teachers and students. According to Duckworth and deJung (1989), teachers' efforts in the classroom are thwarted by students who do not attend the class. Additionally, these students who fall behind require more from the teacher by requiring make up work. Also, students who do not go to class are more likely to become behavioral problems than those who attend class regularly.

DeKalb (1999) indicates that truancy from school is one of the top ten major problems in U.S. schools. In New York City, 15% of the student population is absent each day, and in Los

Angeles, 10% of the students are absent with only half of those bringing in a written excuse when they are absent. Student nonattendance impacts more than just the school; it has an impact on the student, the family, and the community. Truancy is also the most powerful indicator of future or present delinquency among youth.

McNeilage (2014) writes that drug taking and binge drinking have a significant impact on school students, with teachers having to deal with the fallout in the classroom. Issues from the weekend spill over into the class and affect the student's behavior and performance in school. It is hard for teachers to keep up with the new drugs that students use to experiment.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2008) discusses four areas of juvenile crime that are of concern. These include guns, guns and drugs, drugs and delinquency, and youth gangs. By not going to school students have more time on their hands and are more inclined to engage in these sorts of unsafe activities.

For example, at an alternative, behaviorally-driven high school serving 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders in a Mid-Atlantic state, only 29 out of 116 (25%) students successfully returned to their home schools by the end of the 2008-2009 school year. Fifteen (13%) students had dropped out of school before the year ended and 21 (18%) were expelled for behavioral reasons. Fifty-one students had to return to the alternative school for the 2009-2010 school year because they failed to make adequate progress toward transition back to their home schools, but did not have a discipline history that would require expulsion (Cosme, 2009).

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to find the commonalities among students who have successfully transitioned from alternative programs back into traditional education programs.

### **1.3 Need for the Study**

Exploring the transition from alternative to regular schools is an important area of research because the need for alternative education programs is becoming more prevalent in the United States educational system. According to Reimer and Cash (2003), 34% of the school districts in the U.S. have developed alternative programs. As more students are sent to these sorts of programs, it is essential to ensure that the programs are of high quality and do their best to keep students engaged and enrolled. Assisting students in overcoming situations and behaviors that are making success in traditional schools difficult is essential to the students' overall future success in all aspects of life.

Carroll (2009) states that over 100,000 students were expelled during the 2004-2005 school year. More than 50,000 of those students will be totally deprived of access to education and consequently may never return to school. Providing high quality, alternative education options can help students circumvent the cycle of never returning to school after an expulsion.

According to DeLaRosa (1998), there is a financial need for alternative education. There are dire economic consequences brought about by the prevalence of school age individuals who are not in school. They cost the country 77 billion dollars annually in crime prevention, welfare, unemployment, and lost tax revenue. DeLaRosa (1998) also states that providing students with high-quality education and keeping them in school can bring about a \$12.00 return on every \$1.00 invested in keeping students in school. It is financially beneficial to the nation to invest in quality alternative education programs that can help students remain in school, and gain the necessary skills for success.

The focus of this study is not the student transition from their original schools to alternative programs, but the transition from alternative programs back to the original school.



The transition from alternative schools back to original schools is not a topic that has been explored fully in educational research. Since this is a growing issue, the need for this research is evident.

#### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

This study expands the existing body of research on alternative schools. There is not a great deal of research in existence and most focuses on the need for alternative programs, but the research does not speak to the success of the program once it is in existence. Since programs are becoming more common, all schools and students can benefit from increased research by scholars into the quality of alternative programs and transitioning students from alternative programs to their home schools. There is virtually no existing research into the successful transition from alternative programs back into traditional education. This is an especially important component because how and why certain students are achieving success can help to further successful programs in the future. This research study could provide the basis for further research on providing quality alternative education. This study is especially significant to the state and district being studied because, according to Cosme (2009), only approximately 25% of students in alternative schools in the state and district being studied successfully transition out of alternative programs.

#### **1.5 Relevance to Educational Leadership**

The alternative school problem is becoming increasingly relevant in the United States. As the need for alternative education increases, school leaders and educators will need to pay more attention to providing quality academic and behavioral assistance to students. As No Child Left Behind and “zero tolerance” policies push more students out of their initial school settings, there is an increased need for alternative means of education. Carroll (2009) points out a major

increase in expulsions and suspensions in the years since No Child Left Behind, but also mentions that there has been a corresponding increase in alternative schools. As the need for alternative education increases, the need for high quality, effective alternative programs also increase.

Educational leaders have to be proactive, by implementing well researched and structured ideas, when designing alternative educational programs. According to Carroll (2009), due to the mandates on the national level, the number of students in alternative programs will continue to increase. That is a fact that educators have to accept and plan for in advance. Not only will districts have to determine what they are going to do with students with behavioral issues, but they will also have to put strong leadership in place for these programs.

Carroll (2009) also states that there is a significant problem in the United States linked to the increased need for an alternative means of education for students with behavior problems. Many schools are being forced to exclude students from their traditional populations of students who attended regular school because of a variety of offenses. As the need for these programs continues to increase, the need to ensure that the schools are providing a high quality academic and behavioral curriculum is also essential. This could help to ensure a smooth transition back to a traditional school setting.

## **1.6 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is the Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1971). Social learning theory has become one of the dominant theories to describe how people learn and develop. Before Bandura, many theorists believed that people only learned through reinforcement. Bandura added a social element, claiming that people

acquire new behaviors by watching other people, which is known as observational learning or modeling.

According to Cherry, Fletcher, O'Sullivan, and Dornan, (2014), there are three basic social learning concepts. First is the belief that people can learn through observation. In what became known as the "Bobo doll" experiment, Bandura (1977) showed that children often learn to act out behaviors that they see in other people. In this experiment, children watched an adult act aggressively toward a Bobo doll. When the children were allowed to play in the room later, they imitated the violent acts they had previously witnessed on the dolls themselves. However, there does not always have to be a live model for someone to learn through observation. There can be a live model demonstrating the behavior, a verbal model who describes the behavior, or a symbolic model, such as a cartoon, book, or movie.

The second social learning concept is the idea that mental states are critical to learning. According to Cherry et al. (2014), Bandura (1977) believed that intrinsic reinforcement was a substantial reward, causing a sense of pride or satisfaction in an individual. By creating this feeling, the person is more likely to repeat this behavior in the future.

The third social learning concept states that learning does not always lead to a change in behavior. For something to be effectively learning it must be given attention, retained, reproduced, and be motivational (Cherry et al., 2014).

## **1.7 Leadership Framework**

Transformational Leadership theory will guide this research, as the very heart of the study is how a student can transform from troubled to successful. It is equally important to realize how effective transformational leaders create a culture within a school that can lead to the transformation of its students. Transformational Leadership theory was introduced by Burns in

1978. Burns states that transformational leadership is an approach that elicits change in both individuals and social systems. Valuable changes are made which help to develop followers into leaders. It should help with motivation, morale, and performance of followers. This can occur by a change in the follower's sense of self, the view of oneself as a leader, being role models for others, challenged others to take responsibility for themselves, and in several ways.

### **1.8 Definition of Terms**

**Alternative School (Program)** - For the purpose of this study, an alternative school, or alternative program, is a school specifically for students with behavior issues who have been expelled from their home school.

**High School Completion-** High school completion requires that a student earns enough credits for graduation, or completes a high school equivalency test.

**Home School (District)** - The home school or home district refers students who have been expelled to the alternative program.

**Traditional Education Program-** For the purpose of this study, a traditional education program can refer to the district high school from which the student originally came, or to a night school program.

**Successful Transition-** For the purpose of this study, successful transition means that a student left the alternative program and returned to, as well as graduated from, a traditional education program.

### **1.9 Limitations**

According to Slavin (2007), limitations are the issues that can arise in a research study that are out of the researcher's control. The major limitation of the case study is the limited research that is in existence regarding a student's success within an alternative program and what

occurs when they return to a traditional educational program. There is a very small pool of studies that match the purpose of this case study from which to choose. Additionally, these studies were all done with students on the East Coast of the United States.

### **1.10 Delimitations**

Delimitations are purposefully placed on the study by a researcher (Slavin, 2007). One of the delimitations in this study is that the researcher is only looking at alternative schools in which a number of students have experienced a measure of success. It has been limited to three cases studies, which could conflict with generalizability to other alternative programs. The only studies that were chosen involved high school students in alternative programs, since they are the closest to graduation. All studies were purposefully selected to help the researcher add to a body of knowledge that is lacking a great deal of information.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Alternative schools are a phenomenon of the last several decades. They first appeared in the American educational system in the 1960s and 1970s (Atkins, 2008). They initially began as an alternative to schools that some thought could not reach all children (McGee, 2001). During times of rebellion by American teenagers, there were those who felt that the traditional school system was to blame for not being able to reach all students. Some felt that those students should not have to conform to norms in order to be successful. Beginning in the mid-2000s, an alternative school can be defined as one that “provides educational experiences that go beyond the norm to serve students with behavioral problems that are not being adequately served by a traditional school setting” (Atkins, 2008, p. 344). This comparative case study analysis will examine three studies that focus on alternative schools that serve the needs of students who have exhibited behavioral difficulties.

This literature review will focus on several topics that deal with alternative schooling and the design of the case study analysis. Research will be presented on the topics of existing alternative schools, referral to alternative programs, the dangers involved with not educating students, equity, teacher-student relationships and student-peer relationships. It will also focus on the leaders of alternative schools, the Transformational Leadership Theory, success after returning to regular school, transitions between schools, the stigma of attending an alternative school and, hope for the future.

#### **2.2 Existing alternative schools**

According to Raywid (1994), there are three main types of alternative schools that are in existence. Type I schools are the choice schools and are similar to magnet school programs,

emphasizing one subject area or one type of pedagogical approach to learning. Type II schools are involuntary programs where students are placed to give them one last chance at schooling before they are totally expelled from school. These types of schools combine discipline with academics and are highly structured. Type III alternative programs provide remediation in academic and social skills, focusing on a school as a community. All three types of programs are similar in that they deviate from traditional schools, usually have a small staff to student ratio, and have limited course offerings.

Numerous studies have looked at the issues associated with alternative education and with the need to keep students enrolled in schools. Reed (1996) describes a situation in Massachusetts whereby the state has alternative programs operating in 67 out of 215 school districts. Only 35 of these programs have been shown to be successful in reaching students who have been suspended or expelled. Although the Reed study is over twenty years old, it is still important to note when examining alternative school programs, because federal mandates have only caused the situations in alternative schools to start to change very recently. Reed also discusses programs in Washington, DC, Maryland, and Minnesota that have seen similar results. Reed concludes that there is no constitutional guarantee to education. However, the increase in behavior issues in US schools has made school systems have to develop other places for these students to go. The idea of expelling a student without providing alternative means to education is no longer a viable option. However, they do need to enact numerous improvements to be considered effective.

The Exploration Alternative School is located in North Carolina and serves between 15 and 20 at risk students who are unsuccessful in traditional educational settings (Rayle, 1998). The students are not successful for a variety of reasons, ranging from familial abandonment and

neglect, drug use, violence, chronic absences, to learning disabilities. Participation in this program, unlike many, is voluntary and students must apply for admission. The school serves students in grades 9-12. Seventy-five percent of students are from low-income homes, and fifty percent have no parent residing in their home. In the almost twenty years that have passed since the Rayle study, many of the same issues and characteristics are facing students presently.

### **2.3 Referral to alternative programs**

Atkins (2008) finds numerous reasons why students are referred to alternative school programs. There are approximately 11,000 alternative education programs in the United States. Because of federal regulations regarding student education, including No Child Left Behind and IDEA, not educating the nation's youth is no longer a viable option. Students simply cannot be removed from schools for extended periods of time and not be given any educational alternatives. The option of placing at risk or violent students in an alternative program is becoming increasingly appealing for many school districts. Those students are removed from the traditional program, but are given a unique way to obtain an education while they are working on their other issues. Students are protected from other students who could become violent, while those potentially violent students are still receiving an education. Additionally, this helps a school district meet state standard requirements and avoid the costs associated with dropouts.

Often, a student begins attending an alternative school after they have been referred by an administrator at a traditional school (Atkins, 2008). A referral is usually based on a behavioral difficulty in a traditional school setting. Attendance at the alternative school is mandatory before a student can return to the mainstream school population. A referral can also be based on a student's involvement in the juvenile justice system and have nothing to do with student behavior



in school. In an ideal situation, the student would complete the prescribed time in the alternative program and then transition back to the referring school.

#### **2.4 Dangers of not educating students**

Student retention, while preventing struggling students from dropping out is a major factor for most schools, but even more so for alternative schools, whose students are at a greater risk of simply giving up. Students who drop out are in danger of becoming members of some of the least desirable groups in society. Cassel (2003) found that over 2 million prison inmates dropped out of high school, nationwide. Of those, 80% are addicted to drugs and alcohol. At risk students must be identified in order to help them avoid that future. According to Carroll (2009), expulsion makes it more likely that a student will become part of the juvenile justice system or drop out of school entirely. They are more vulnerable to involvement in high-risk activities such as drug use, promiscuity, teen pregnancy, disease, and various criminal activities.

#### **2.5 Equity in school discipline**

According to the Center for Public Education (2016), Equality in education is achieved “when students are all treated the same and have access to similar resources” (p. 1). Equity is achieved “when all students receive the resources they need so they graduate prepared for success after high school” (Center for Public Education, 2016, p. 1). Despite the fact that it has been over sixty years since the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case, there appears to be a movement toward re-segregation in the United States. Three-quarters of minority students attend schools where there is a majority of minority students enrolled. Two-fifths of these students are enrolled in schools where Caucasian enrollment is less than 10% total. On average, a Caucasian student attends a school that is three-quarters Caucasian. In addition,

many African-American students attend schools where the poverty rate is extremely high (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012).

There are still achievement gaps remaining in US public schools. Poor students are four times more likely than their wealthy peers to fail math (OECD, 2008). This is due in part to unequal funding, access to differing curriculums, teacher quality, and school discipline. Minority students face these problems at a rate much higher than their Caucasian peers.

Students are also not equitably referred to alternative programs, nor are alternative school students treated the same as students in other schools. According to Carroll (2009), there are severe racial disparities between Caucasian and African American students who are removed from traditional educational programs. Carroll reported that during the 2004-2005 school year African American students made up less than 17% of the national student body, but they accounted for more than 34% of expulsions. On the other hand, Caucasian students made up 58% of the student body, but they only accounted for 41% of the expulsions nationwide.

Tajalli and Garba (2014) studied the overrepresentation of African American and Hispanic students who are referred to alternative programs. Dating back to a Children's Defense Fund study in 1975, it has been noted that minority students were disciplined at much higher rates than their peers. In the Tajalli and Garba study, 3,000 school districts were examined, and two-thirds of the suspended students were African American. Tajalli and Garba focused on data from the Texas Education Agency, to corroborate the 1975 study. An example is that during the 2008-2009 school year, African American students comprised 13.6% of first graders within Texas, but compromised 47.3% of alternative school students in the same time period. Data were gathered through the Texas Education Agency, from the 207 districts that have submitted information on their referrals to DAEPs. The study (Tajalli and Garba, 2014) looked at the

impact of district wealth, the size of enrollment, ethnic distribution, and district type on four dependent variables. The first two dependent variables are the measures of minority disproportionality in DAEP. The second two dependent variables separately measure disproportionality of all minority representation in the discretionary and mandatory parts of DAEP.

The study (Tajalli and Garba, 2014) used an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) multiple-regression. Results of the study bring up questions regarding the fairness of discipline in Texas. This study did find that African American students were consistently overrepresented in Texas alternative schools. African American students are impacted by both mandatory and discretionary discipline procedures, as are their Caucasian counterparts.

The researchers (Tajalli and Garba, 2014) propose an explanation of there being more impact on African American students than their Caucasian counterparts. They believe that there could be prejudice applied when Caucasian administrators deal with Caucasian students as opposed to African American students. They also propose that minority students placed in non-minority schools may act out at a higher rate. They suggest further study on these topics.

In 2011, Phillips studied the disproportionate number of minority students enrolled in disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEPs). This was an exploratory, qualitative case study used to determine the effects of DAEP placement on students in a large, urban school district. The design was used to explore the perceptions of parents of ten students placed in DAEPs during the 2006-2007 school year. Findings from this study discussed the following:

1. The perceptions of parents as analyzed by the parent survey including definitions and clarifications for each question and responses;

2. The demographic similarities among the DAEP families and parent expectations for students' education;
3. The student academic and discipline background using archival data and other documents; and the summary of findings (p. 3).

Findings indicated that parents did not believe that the school understood the unique academic and behavioral needs of their children. Teachers could not advise parents on how to correct their children's misbehavior. The researcher (Phillips, 2011) made the following recommendations:

1. To change discipline policy on a federal level and to provide Title I funding for school districts to expand school district Level I, Level II, and Level III interventions before students are removed from the home school;
2. To expand Title I parental involvement training for grandparents raising school-age children;
3. To expand teacher preparation and development for classroom management for all teachers; and;
4. To develop transitional services to students returning to the home campus (p. 51).

## **2.6 Teacher-Student Relationships**

In alternative schools, as in all schools, the individual that has the most direct impact on students on a day-to-day basis is their teacher. Teachers are the ones most responsible for creating an environment where students are engaged and learning on a regular basis. After interviewing several students who attended an alternative high school, Schussler (2009), proposed that there are three elements to student engagement. First, there are opportunities for all students to succeed in the classroom. Second, learning is flexible. Finally, students are

valued as learners, because teachers make all students feel as though they are capable of academic success.

Teachers who foster student success create a classroom that is academically challenging. They do not bargain or compromise with their students. They hold all students to high standards. The lack of challenge leads to boredom and disengagement in students (Schussler, 2009). The challenge for a good teacher is to determine how hard they can push students before they overwhelm them.

In addition to the challenge, Schussler (2009) maintains that engaging teachers provide academic support to their students. If students feel that only a select few students are capable of success, they tend to give up. Many of the students interviewed revealed that they feel as though they do not belong anywhere. To counteract this, teachers must treat success as an expectation for all. This can be easier if teachers take the time to get to know all of their students individually. They will know how students respond and can help them remain successful and engaged.

In 2006, Arnold conducted a study called “Alternative School Students’ Perceptions of Factors that Result in the Students’ Active Engagement in the Classroom,” that studied alternative school students and what those students perceived to be the characteristics of teachers that best suited their needs. Data were triangulated through the use of 21 student surveys, seven months of teacher observation, and research into the student files. Findings indicated that more than teacher pedagogy influenced whether or not a student was engaged in class.

The study (Arnold, 2006) revealed that students valued personal relationships with teachers. They preferred teachers who were kind, patient, funny, fair, concerned, flexible, and

fun. Students did not want to feel as though their time was being wasted and were most engaged when the time was well spent, and they felt mutual respect with their instructors.

Cordell (2011), in “A Qualitative Study of Relationship Building Between Alternative High School Students and Their Teachers,” completed a phenomenological study to understand that phenomenon of relationship building between teachers and students in an alternative high school. Cordell sought to determine how teachers in an alternative school create positive relationships with students who had not been successful in a traditional school. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What do students and teachers perceive are characteristics that teachers, within an alternative high school setting, need to have to promote positive relationships with students?
2. How do students and educators perceive that program elements, within an alternative school setting, impact the relationship between teachers and students and their connection to the school? (p. 14).

Cordell (2011) found that both students and teachers expressed the need for caring adults in a school in order to help facilitate student success. Three main themes were revealed:

1. Adults relating to their students on a human level with interactions that have relevance,
2. Adults being advocates for academic and behavior expectations,
3. Engagement of students with opportunities provided by the school (p. 95).

## **2.7 Student-Peer Relationships**

Peer connections can be the most influential relationships that a student experiences while in school. Coyl, Jones, and Dick (2004) in their study titled “The Influence of Peer Status and School Relationships on School Based Behaviors, Attitudes, and Interactions Among

Secondary High School Students,” surveyed 75 students and interviewed 21 students about their behaviors, attitudes, and intentions toward school. They found a statistically significant link between peer relationships in alternative schools and student behaviors, attitudes, and achievements. Findings show that students who had weak peer relationships in their traditional school were more likely than others to make the transition to an alternative education program. They also reported that once in the alternative school, the identified peer groupings became less important and there was more intermingling amongst the groups. Overall, both quantitative and qualitative research showed that peer relationships improved when students transitioned from traditional to alternative school programs. Students get along better with others and have less stringent adherence to their former peer group identifications.

## **2.8 Leaders of Alternative Schools**

Leaders of alternative schools often find themselves in the difficult position of acting as a public relations type person for their school in addition to their day-to-day responsibilities as school leaders. McGee (2001) finds that alternative school administrators are the leaders of a campaign for positive recognition for these types of programs. They must inform the public of the important role that alternative schools play in public education. They have the challenge of securing funding for programs that some view as unimportant. They have to solicit community help to address the needs of all students and convince the public that their alternative schools can be a successful learning environment for many different types of students.

In a case study analysis, Lasley, Partin, O’Leary and Kowalski (2012) suggest that there are distinct differences between the leaders of alternative schools and the leaders of traditional schools and as such, leaders must prepare accordingly. Today’s alternative school leaders must encourage inquiry, be decisive, be able to move forward, and be well versed in the skills

associated with networking. They should be transformative leaders who embrace change. Due to the highly transitory nature of alternative programs, change is a constant. Alternative school leaders must be able to react quickly, or they may miss opportunities with students which are critical. For instance, alternative school administrators have to respond in a timelier manner than their traditional counterparts to something as simple as an e-mail or a telephone call, simply because their time with students is more compressed.

According to Price, Martin and Robertson (2010), while there is much research into what effective school leaders in traditional programs need to know, college readiness programs for alternative school leaders are basically nonexistent. After surveying leaders in both traditional and alternative schools, Price found that the needs are basically the same. Improved learning and increased achievement for all students (p.309). However, the survey varied in the need to lead dissimilar schools. Respondents felt there were different needs for those who were leaders in alternative environments. They needed to obtain increased knowledge in the skills critical to unique populations or unusual settings. This needs to take place during leadership readiness programs, which must start to realize that not all situations are the same.

Fears (2016), in “Alternative School Leadership Transformation: A Mixed-Methods Evaluation of Outcomes,” used a mixed-method evaluation of a new student-centered educational model at an alternative school with a first year administrator. The researcher wanted to determine contributions to success, barriers to change, and characteristics of both. The study looked at several goals to measure success. First, after undertaking a new model, it was a goal to decrease disciplinary referrals by 10% per semester. Results indicated a 280% reduction in referrals. The second goal was to increase graduation rates by 2% over the previous year, or they would at least stay the same. Graduation rates increased by almost 1%, so the goal was met. The



third goal was to increase overall attendance by 30% or more, per semester. Attendance increased by 36.2%, so that goal was met as well.

In 2014, Hall studied leaders working in two different alternative school settings in the southeastern United States. These schools were located in districts that had been sued for excessive placement of African American students into alternative programs, due to suspensions, expulsions, and arrests. These two alternative schools were chosen for the study due to their perceived success, as measured by school outcomes, graduation rates, and low suspension rates. Data were collected by participant interviews, construction of portraits of each school principal, and their style of leadership at each school.

The two participants were both found to have a strong ethic of care that focused on positive pro-social relationships between staff and students. Principals were found to make use of servant leadership, situational leadership, compassionate leadership, distributed leadership, and transformative leadership to address problems with discipline based on race or poverty. This study (Hall, 2014) used the Critical Race Theory framework, and it became evident that aspects of CRT were evident in how leadership was enacted in each school.

## **2.9 Transformational Leadership Theory**

Transformational leadership was first introduced by Burns in 1978, but was truly developed as a theory by Bass (Bass and Avolio, 1990) after he read Burns' book on the topic. According to Bass (1985), a transformational leader inspires followers to do more than they had previously thought was possible. This is done by:

1. Raising awareness of what needs to be done and how it can be accomplished.
2. Convincing people to let go of their own self-interest for the sake of the team or organization.

3. Expanding an individual's need level on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (p. 102).

According to Bass (1985), there are four components apparent in transformational leadership, which include:

1. Idealized influence: the leader is an ideal role model who is willing to do the same things that he or she would expect from others.
2. Inspirational motivation: the leader can inspire and motivate followers.
3. Individualized consideration: leaders demonstrate genuine concern for their followers, thus leading the follower to put forth their best effort.
4. Intellectual stimulation: the leader challenged followers to achieve innovations at higher and higher levels of expectation (p. 22).

Bass (1985) determined that a transformational leader has several components. He said that this kind of leader:

- Is a model of integrity and fairness.
- Sets clear goals.
- Has high expectations.
- Encourages others.
- Provides support and recognition.
- Stirs the emotions of people.
- Gets people to look beyond their self-interest, and
- Inspires people to reach for the improbable (p. 14).

There are several steps to becoming a transformational leader. First is the creation of an inspiring vision. It sets the purpose behind the group's entire mission. It is the "why" in the questions of "Why are we doing this?" (Lafley and Martin 2013). Next, the leader must be able

to motivate people to help deliver the vision. The individuals need to realize that the vision will have a positive impact on those the group is trying to help. The next step is to deliver the vision. Assigning each person a role and responsibilities helps to let the group members see themselves as important participants in a bigger plan. There should be goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, results focused, and time bound (SMART).

Another key element is to have strong, trusting relationships between the leader and the group. According to Dunham and Pierce (1989), a leader is nothing without his/her people. Those relationships are crucial to organizational success. Transformational leadership can have an incredible impact on the success of a school, its staff, and most importantly, its students.

Little is known about administering accountability policies for administrators in alternative school programs. While there is a greater need for these types of programs, not much can be said for what goes on in them. Research by Hemmer and Shepperson, (2014) indicates that there is tension between compliance and innovation among alternative school leaders. Due to accountability standards, schools are starting to lose their autonomy to what they think is best for their students.

## **2.10 Success after the return to home school**

In 2003, McCall sought to determine why many students who successfully complete alternative school programs drop out of school eventually. McCall studied students who were referred to alternative programs for five main reasons, including behavioral dysfunctions in school, academic needs, social skill dysfunctions, family disruptions, and chronic absenteeism. Many students arrive with more than one of the issues mentioned above. Since these schools are not meant to be long-term placements, students return to their home schools and experience the same problems.

The students in the study “When Successful Alternative School Students ‘Disengage’ from Regular School” (McCall, 2003), had successfully completed an alternative school that was a consortium of six local schools in mid-Michigan. The students and staff were diverse regarding race and gender. Class size averaged 12, and an annual population of 24-45 students and classes were taught in core subjects, in addition to various life skills courses. They were also provided intense individual and family counseling. Staff attempts to build alliances with the families of their students in order to present a united front. Parents are provided with weekly grade reports and assisted in finding resources. Students are encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities.

The comparative analysis (McCall, 2003) focused on two groups of students who completed the alternative school program. The Stay-in-School group consisted of 16 students who went on to graduate from high school. The School-Dropout group included students who returned to their home schools, but did not complete the educational process. All participants, including students, staff, and parents were asked to respond to surveys. Students rated their experiences in the school. Parents rated the attitude of the school, the influence of peers, and how adequate they viewed the school program. Staff provided insight as to why particular students did not complete school.

Results of the study (McCall, 2003) were divided into two sections, demographic information and data regarding school engagement. Students who did not finish school were two times as likely to be African-American or Latino. They also tend to have been younger when they started the alternative school. They also had lower math, reading, and spelling scores than their peers. Seventy-five percent of the dropout group came from single parent households and in households with low incomes. Many students in both groups had been adjudicated.

Many students in the dropout group did not feel like teachers cared about them. They also left school in order to make money and had students who reported that their friends did not finish

school. These students say that they did not feel accepted by teachers or peers. They reported leaving because of poor treatment, feeling old, not learning, or getting pregnant. When asked how the school could have kept them engaged, the students said nothing or “keep me in the alternative program” (McCall, 2003, p. 116). Parents felt that their children did well in the alternative program because of one on one attention and the support of their teachers (McCall, 2003).

The study (McCall, 2003) concluded that more at-risk students should be allowed to have stayed in the alternative programs or programs standard in the alternative schools should be brought into the mainstream. The researcher suggested competency-based training including:

1. Turning problems into opportunities.
2. Creating cultural safety.
3. Creating respectful school climates (p. 117).

## **2.11 Transitions**

MacIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, and Cochrane in “Relationships Between Academics and Problem Behavior in the Transition from Middle School to High School” (2008) studied the transition between middle school and high school. They examined the risky behaviors associated with this period in a student's life, by examining student records and comparing academics and discipline changes in the eighth and ninth grades. They concluded that there are risks associated with each transition that a student undergoes during the course of their schooling. Along with these risks comes a certain amount of apprehension. Some students may attempt to avoid the transition to avoid the associated stressors.

Transition programs have been examined as a measure of student success in both high schools and colleges. According to Smith (1997), middle school transition programs are a key factor in predicting student retention and performance in high school. Smith and Zhang (2009)

made the same findings about the transition between high school and college. Results of both studies suggest that transition programs such as:

- having students attend classes at the higher school,
- having older students present information to the new students,
- having a mentorship program, having counselors available,
- letting parents visit the school,
- having students meet teachers and;
- having students meet school leadership

can ensure a smooth transition between schools.

## **2.12 Stigma of the Alternative Student**

According to McGee (2001), the perceptions of alternative schools can be improved. Instead of focusing on the difficulties that alternative school students face, focus should be placed on their positive achievements instead. The negative view of these schools and their students can be one of the biggest impediments to the success of alternative programs as a whole. Administrators are faced with enacting a positive public relations campaign for their schools.

McNulty and Roseboro, in the case study “‘I’m Not the Bad’: Alternative School Students, Stigma, and Identity Politics (2009), determined through student interviews that students in alternative schools feel as though they are facing a severe stigma. Because alternative schools are attended only by students who are considered “deviant”, the deviance is often reinforced rather than eliminated. Additionally, because they are removed from the traditional school and placed in alternative locations, those students can be at risk of losing their sense of identity, both in school and personally. Also, students view alternative schools as unjust, so they feel as though they are no longer able to make decisions for themselves.

McNulty and Roseboro (2009) also found that there was a stigma attached to alternative school students when they returned to the traditional school. A student that they interviewed shared that he was treated differently upon returning to his referring school. He felt as though he was “picked on” and sent to the administrator’s office more frequently than his peers because his teachers thought that he was bad. Another former student related that his experience upon returning to the home school included having to explain to both students and staff that it was not like prison and that there were not people in the school with guns shooting at each other every day. Both students felt as though people at the traditional school hated them because they had been in alternative school.

### **2.13 College and Career Readiness**

Changing federal education mandates over the years have impacted education at all levels. According to the US Department of Education, President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds ACT (ESSA) on December 10, 2015. It reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which has been in place for over 50 years and replace No Child Left Behind from 2002. ESSA put an increased focus on ensuring that all students in the United States leave school ready for success in college or in a career. ESSA includes several aspects of education, including:

1. Protections for disadvantaged and high-need students.
2. Requires all students be taught at high academic standards.
3. Requires statewide testing yearly to gauge progress on those standards.
4. Helps to support and grow local innovations.
5. Expands access to high quality preschool, and;
6. Accountability in low performing schools.

This can have a tremendous impact on the quality of alternative school education, as focus will have to shift from simply changing social unacceptable or criminal behaviors, to changing behaviors as well as provide a high quality, rigorous curriculum for students who are enrolled. Students will be expected to perform at the same level on statewide assessments as their same aged peers in traditional school settings.

#### **2.14 Hope for the future**

Belaney, (2008), conducted a qualitative study, "Alternative School Students' Perceptions of Their Life Journeys," the intent of which was to determine how urban adolescents with disabilities in an alternative setting make sense of their lives. Belaney used the grounded theory as the research methodology. Ten 11<sup>th</sup> grade male students were observed weekly during a year-long group that focused on planning for the future. Each student was individually interviewed after the school year ended. The research determined a student's elements of resiliency, self-efficacy, and how they see their futures.

A student's perception of the future was influenced by current realities, including living in a dangerous place, having a disability, and inability to thrive in a regular school environment (Belaney, 2008). Despite their problems, these students showed that they had a resiliency that allowed them to have hopes and dreams for their futures still. They were also very self-aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. Each student believed that they were capable of having a career in the future. Further study should be done to determine if those thoughts would become actions in the future.

#### **2.15 Summary**

Alternative education programs are increasing in number and popularity across the United States since their inception in the 1960s and 1970s (Atkins, 2008). They are essential in



reaching those students who cannot be reached in a traditional education program (McGee, 2001). Although they have taken many shapes and forms, alternative programs are now most often defined as fulfilling the needs of students who are not adequately served by traditional school settings (Atkins, 2008)

The literature on alternative schooling is increasing in availability, but there is still important information missing from the body of knowledge. This literature review concentrated on topics pertinent to alternative schools. Literature was presented on the topics of existing alternative schools, referral to alternative programs, the dangers involved with not educating students, equity, teacher-student relationships and student-peer relationships. Studies were also presented that focused on the leaders of alternative schools, the Transformational Leadership Theory, success after returning to regular school, transitions between schools, the stigma of attending an alternative school and hope for the future.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

By examining three existing case studies relating to successful alternative school students or programs, this comparative analysis sought to uncover themes as to what has assisted with the success of the students who have transitioned back into traditional education programs from an alternative program. This researcher used the phenomenological research method of appreciative inquiry to uncover the themes for comparison, develop a matrix based on the emergent themes, and will then relate those themes to the conceptual framework of Social Learning Theory and the Transformational and Participative Leadership Theories.

In order to maintain relevance, the literature selected for the comparative case analysis was limited to studies that examined alternative school programs and the link between them and traditional education programs. The majority of existing literature focuses on students who are removed from traditional education and sent to alternative education programs, but does not focus on what happens afterward. This study means to fill the gap in literature by adding to the body of knowledge about the transition from alternative education programs back into the traditional educational system.

This research was framed as a comparative case study analysis. Yin (1981) proposes that comparative case study analysis, or multiple case study, lets a researcher explore both the differences and similarities amongst cases. The intention should be to find similarities among the cases. It is important that cases be chosen purposefully, so that predictions can be made about the results across the different cases.

Conducting a comparative case study analysis allows a researcher to look for commonalities within each setting and across each of the settings. When completing this type of study, a researcher aims to predict similar results or contrasting results but for a reason that can be predicted (Yin, 1981, p.47). Once the cases have been chosen, the following components should be considered:

1. propositions (which may or may not be present) (Yin, 1981; Miles & Huberman, 2002);
2. the application of a conceptual framework (Miles & Huberman, 2008, p. 111);
3. development of the research questions (generally “how” and/or “why” questions);
4. the logic linking data to propositions; and
5. the criteria for interpreting findings (Yin, 1981, p. 65).

Comparative case study analysis gives a researcher the opportunity to answer questions in regard to the “how” and “why” of a phenomenon, while also recognizing how that phenomena is influenced by situational factors (Baxter and Jack, 2008). A researcher can gain a great deal of insight about a topic through a variety of sources, broadening the body of knowledge on that topic.

The overarching goal of the study is deriving the significant components of an alternative school program that are vital to student success. Research in this study was guided by the main question: “What are the commonalities among students who have successfully transitioned from alternative educational programs pack into traditional education programs?” This question is broken down into several sub-questions, including:

1. What experiences in the alternative program do students credit as essential components of their successful transition back to traditional education?

2. What does the teaching staff credit as essential components of students' successful transition back to traditional education?
3. To what do alternative school administrators ascribe the success of their alternative school programs?
4. What factors helped motivate the students to complete the alternative program?
5. How were relationships with adults in the alternative school building important to student success?
6. How were relationships with parents/mentors important to student success?
7. How were relationships with peers in the alternative school building crucial to student success?
8. What do students report could help create even greater success for students in alternative programs?

The case studies chosen for this comparative case study analysis were a result of purposeful sampling. Each case was required to involve high school students who have been successful in alternative schools. The researcher read several studies about alternative schools and their students before winnowing it down to the three that are included.

Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis strategy of data organization. The data were coded and segregated into similar clumps for further analysis and description. With the assistance of the Atlas.ti 8 program, the researcher organized the data into common and emerging themes for comparison. Validity of data were established by peer review and debriefing and clarification of the research bias. The common and emerging themes identified were used to develop recommendations for helping students experience increased success in alternative schools and improve their opportunities for returning to a traditional school setting.

Using the databases available through the library at Delaware State University, including the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), the researcher began by searching the term “alternative schools.” This resulted in thousands of results, so the research began to focus the search by adding the words "behavior," "graduation," "leadership," and "transition." The researcher was then able to narrow the search further by limiting the studies to alternative schools within the United States. From the remaining results, the following case studies were selected.

## **CASE STUDY ONE**

### **3.2 Jones (1999). Case studies of students transitioning from an alternative school back into high school.**

#### **3.2.1 Context**

While this study is quite dated, it provides a solid foundation from which to build upon the importance of the transition from alternative school back into traditional schools, which is the very heart of this comparative case study analysis. The researcher (Jones, 1999) in this study sought to identify elements that had a critical impact on a student who transitions from an alternative program back into their high school. Several research questions were investigated including:

- a. What are the critical elements that are reported as having impacted students’ success or failure in making the transition from an alternative program back into high school?
- b. What types of intervention strategies occur when students return to high school from alternative programs?
- c. How are students returning from alternative programs achieving in terms of their grades, attendance, and behavior? (p. 55).

This study (Jones, 1999) collected information from students, parents, administrators, counselors, and teachers to attempt to answer these questions. The goal was to determine why some students were successful and some failed upon their return to the traditional high school setting.

### **3.2.2 Methodology**

In this study, the researcher (Jones, 1999) employed a purposeful sampling of students who had been enrolled in alternative schools and had returned to a traditional school to compile case studies. These students had been sent to alternative school because of their behavior problems including fighting, open defiance of authority, and possession of drugs or weapons. Administrators, teachers, and counselors also participated in the study, as did parents when possible. Responses from staff and parents were used to validate the responses of the students. A case study was compiled for each student, and once completed, was examined for common themes and patterns. Additional data from staff and parents helped to explore the range of assistance that students were provided upon their return to their home schools.

Students who had been enrolled in an alternative school for at least one semester and who had been re-enrolled in their home schools for at least one semester were invited to participate in the study. Each student was enrolled in a regular education program. Special education students could not participate, since they were not being sent to alternative school in the school district involved in the study. Nineteen students qualified to participate as of the fall of 1998. Of those, eight students agreed to participate. Each student attended a preliminary interview in which goals were discussed, and informed consent was signed. The researcher (Jones, 1999) provided the interviewees with confidentiality agreements.

Preliminary data collection took place through semi-structured interviews. The study (Jones, 1999) was limited to one school within one district. Approval was granted by the superintendent, and a schedule was devised to visit the school and interview participants. Open ended questions were asked in a semi-structured manner. A pilot of the questions was done beforehand with six students at a different high school. This pilot allowed the researcher feedback regarding changing the length of the questions and the order in which they were presented, as well as gave practice with follow up questions. Interviews were recorded and supplemented by note taking. Each interview was conducted in a quiet area, convenient to the respondent. Sessions lasted from thirty to forty-five minutes for each participant.

Data analysis focused on the research questions at the heart of this study (Jones, 1999). Excerpts from each interview were placed into broad categories such as adjustment of expectations, encouragement, and adjustment of instruction. A matrix was developed to code the data. Patterns, themes, and connections among the excerpts within the categories were identified, as were connections between the various categories.

When patterns and themes emerged, the researcher (Jones, 1999) used informed judgment as to their significance. Categories were developed into which data were interpreted. The final step of analysis was the development of a theory to explain the data's meaning and relationships.

Reliability was determined through triangulation. In this study, data were compiled from primary and secondary participants, field notes, and documents. Validity was determined through follow up interviews and repeated questions. Internal validity was checked with the participants and by feedback from colleagues (Jones, 1999).

### **3.2.3 Findings**

After data had been collected and analyzed, several critical elements were determined to have impacted a student's success or failure after returning to their home school. Three elements emerged as having the most impact. Those were: a positive relationship with an adult in the school, parental involvement, and encouragement and positive peer assistance. Elements that contributed to a student's failure were: the lack of counselor initiated advisement, lack of student involvement in school activities and the absence of a formal transition program. It was important for students returning to have positive day to day interactions with an adult that they could trust. Students also depended on their parents to support them through the transition process. One student reported knowing that he mother would be following up with her teachers as a factor that led to her success. Students also indicated that having a positive peer network helped them during their transition (Jones, 1999).

Implications of the study (Jones, 1999) included the need for a formal transition program for students returning to the home school from the alternative school. If not given a program of some sort, the fear is that students will continue their old patterns of behavior, including failing classes, poor attendance, and behavior issues. There is also a need for coordination between the alternative school and the home school. Students need to be made to feel as though they are part of the school, through invitation to and participation in school activities. Peer counseling and a meaningful relationship with an adult within the building are crucial. Time must be allotted for relationship building.

Recommendations were that a formal transition program be developed for these students. It should involve key components such as: employ individuals to serve as transition specialists at the alternative school and at the base school, develop a formal transition team, define the roles of



the team members and set expectations for students and parents. In addition, each transitioning student should have at least one adult mentor, either in the school or, in the community (Jones, 1999).

## **CASE STUDY TWO**

### **3.3 Toliver (2010). A case study of student and leadership team**

#### **perceptions of a metro Atlanta alternative school program: selected educational factors which impact student achievement as measured by high school completion**

##### **3.3.1 Context**

Toliver (2010) conducted a case study of student and leadership team perceptions of factors that influenced student achievement at a metro Atlanta alternative school, as measured by high school completion. Toliver completed a descriptive case study of 102 subjects to gather information as to how each of them perceived that alternative program that they were associated with and how those perceptions impacted high school completion. Students and leadership staff were surveyed, invited to participate in a focus group, and interviewed, and their responses were examined for themes. The fundamental issue that was examined by Toliver was how perceptions of an alternative program impacted graduation from high school.

The purpose of the study (Toliver, 2010) was to explore educational factors within one metro Atlanta alternative school that had a significant impact on the rate of high school completion. A variety of research methods were used to support or challenge the researcher's presumed factors that impacted the graduation rate. The factors included in the study were attendance, parental involvement, school climate, teacher expectations, teacher methodology and

test preparation programs. Further study could help to develop positive factors across other alternative programs nationwide.

### **3.3.2 Methodology**

This descriptive case study (Toliver, 2010) used the idea of observing participants in the environment where they function on a daily basis, and then triangulating data with three sources, including surveys, focus groups, and document reviews. Instruments and materials used to collect data included surveys, interview protocols, and analysis of reports. Data were triangulated to control for validity and reliability. The study was set in a school that had three hundred forty-six students during that school year. Students were enrolled in that school due to a variety of factors including: student choice, recommendation of home school to catch up on credits or change environment to improve behavior, graduate on time or increase chance of becoming a high school graduate. The students who were chosen to be a part of the study were prospective high school graduates who had not completed the requirements for earning their high school diploma. The researcher also interviewed the school principal, the graduation coach, and the school counselor to gain information as to how the school process assisted students in achieving their goal of high school graduation. Sampling was purposeful.

The school had one hundred and two prospective graduates in 2009. All students in this category were selected to participate in the study (Toliver, 2010). Leadership team participants were selected purposefully as well, based on the contact that they had with the prospective graduates. Permission to conduct the study was gained from the school district and the school principal. Participants were assured anonymity by being assigned a number that represented them. There were 99 total student participants and 3 participants from the leadership team. The location of the research was at the alternative campus of a school in metro Atlanta. Surveys were

administered to during the students' check out session and on the day of graduation practice. Surveys were conducted by the graduation coach and the counselor and returned to the researcher.

Focus groups and individual interviews occurred after graduation in the 2008-2009 school year. The focus group was located at a local library and interviews took place at the school. These locations were chosen due to convenience for the participants. This helped to ensure maximum participation of the graduates (Toliver, 2010).

Instrumentation included the researcher (Toliver, 2010) giving participants a survey that was developed by the researcher and approved by university faculty. The survey consisted of thirty items on a five point Likert scale as well as seven demographic items. Participants were asked to choose from the following responses: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, three = undecided, two = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. Demographic information was used for descriptive purposes. The survey was pilot tested and received a .74 alpha coefficient using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computing program. The items on the survey related to the researcher's presumed factors impacting graduation, including attendance, parent participation, school climate, teacher expectations, teacher methodology, and test preparation programs.

Other instruments used included a set of interview questions for students and staff. The researcher constructed the questions and university staff approved them. Answers to interview questions were used to support survey results.

### **3.3.3 Findings**

After compiling data from the research, the researcher was able to determine themes from the data. Significant findings included the existence of educational factors within the school in

questions that had an impact on high school completion. Students and staff both reported the need for a caring environment. School climate and teacher expectations were the factors most commonly reported. A theme that emerged was the success of students in small learning communities. In a smaller setting, students reported the ability to build closer relationships with school staff. These relationships gave students someone to talk to the entire time they were enrolled.

Recommendations for further research included the proposal of conducting more research in alternative schools in Georgia and throughout the nation, focusing on the evaluation and common structures across all programs. There should be comparisons among schools that focus on changing behavior and those that push academic achievement. It was also recommended that gender specific studies be conducted to compare male and female students. Research was suggested that monitored students throughout their enrollment to determine why they are leaving, returning, or remaining in the alternative school. Research could also be conducted to examine the postsecondary outcomes of these students. It was also recommended that the investigation be undertaken to compare nontraditional schools that focus on behavior and nontraditional schools that emphasize academic achievement (Toliver, 2010).

### **CASE STUDY THREE**

#### **3.4 Scipio (2013) Alternative education: A comparative case study of the behavior**

**modification programs of two upstate South Carolina alternative schools for youth who exhibit behavior that is disruptive.**

##### **3.4.1 Context**

This study (Scipio, 2013) was designed to examine behavior modification programs in two behavior oriented alternative schools. It was a comparative case study of two schools in Upstate

South Carolina. The aim was to expand the research base regarding the practical implementation of behavior modification programs in alternative schools. The primary goal was to determine the most effective components of these programs. Exploration was done regarding the perspectives of two alternative school principals and their staffs regarding the programs implemented in their school and their effectiveness. It also studied the various uses for the behavior modification strategies and the ten indicators of success identified by Reimer and Cash (2003). These included:

1. student accountability measures,
2. administrative structure & policies,
3. curriculum & instruction,
4. faculty & staff,
5. facilities & grounds,
6. school leadership,
7. student support services,
8. learning community (staff, students, parents, & community),
9. program funding, and;
10. school climate.

The purpose of the study (Scipio, 2013) was to determine what the principal and the staff at two alternative schools considered to be the most effective parts of their behavior modification programs. One school was located in an urban location and the student population ranged from 70 to 300 students per semester, in both middle and high school. The other school was located in a rural area, and served between 20 and 70 students per semester in both middle and high school.

### 3.4.2 Methodology

Research in this study (Scipio, 2013) was guided by the question: “What are the perspectives of two Upstate South Carolina Type II alternative school principals and their staffs regarding the behavior modification program implemented in their schools and its effectiveness?” (p. 10). The sub-questions were:

1. How do these Type II alternative school principals and their staffs define effectiveness when assessing their schools’ behavior modification strategies?
2. What do these Type II alternative school principals and their staffs consider to be the effective components of their schools’ behavior modification strategies?
3. How do these Type II alternative school principals and their staffs cultivate the effective behavioral components of their schools?
4. In what ways are those components identified in the literature as essential for a successful alternative school program reflected in the participants’ articulations about their programs? (Scipio, 2013, p.12).

The focus of the study (Scipio, 2013) was the exploration of characteristics of organizational and managerial processes of the two schools for students with behavior problems and to help determine how the administration assessed the effectiveness of each school. A goal was to derive the meaningful components to the behavior modification programs that are essential to effectiveness.

Two theories were utilized within the study (Scipio, 2013), the Principal Leadership Theory and the Behaviorist Theory. Research design involved use of a comparative case study. Two alternative school sites were chosen using typical case sampling. Both schools had common characteristics in regard to discipline, teacher/student ratios, enrollment reasons, and

graduation rates. Twenty-four participants were a part of the study, based on criterion sampling. Each person chosen had a role in implementing the behavior modification program within the school. Participants included administration, guidance, student services, students and some of the teaching staff. Students had to have been enrolled in the school for at least one semester.

Data were acquired using typical case sampling. Data were collected using interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis. Each was recorded with a digital recorder and notes were taken. Interviews were conducted in private offices. Focus group interviews were held with staff at each school. Administration at each school provided the researcher with documents for analysis, such as faculty handbooks, reports to the South Carolina Department of Education, and the dress codes. Observations were also conducted at each school in classrooms, to observe teacher-student interactions (Scipio, 2013).

Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis strategy of data organization. This requires coding and segregating data into data clumps for further analysis and description. This allows for easier comparisons. Themes emerge and are able to be compared. Validity of data was established utilizing triangulation, peer review, and debriefing, clarification of research bias and member checking (Scipio, 2013).

### **3.4.3 Findings**

Results of the study (Scipio, 2013) indicated that each school utilized the ten essential components, but to varying degrees. It was determined that the most significant components were:

1. Positive behavior supports,
2. Teacher capacity building,
3. Progress assessment,

4. Student empowerment,
5. Transition, and;
6. Core values.

One of the themes that emerged was the need for a transition program, so that a student does not feel “thrown in” and set up to fail. These programs help a student orient themselves to the school and to learn policies and procedures. Transition was seen as a buffer between the regular and alternative school environments (Scipio, 2013).

Another theme was support. This involved services that were provided for students in both of the schools. Guidance departments sought to support students in getting on track for graduation. Career planning helped these students create a plan for the future. Counseling was provided for students with emotional problems and crisis intervention was also in place. Support was also in place from administrators toward their staff, making the staff feel valued (Scipio, 2013).

Strong teacher-student relationships emerged as key. A small teacher-student ratio makes it easier to build strong relationships. This is due in part to the fact that teachers are able to give students more individual attention. The students felt important and were inspired to work for those teachers (Scipio, 2013).

One school supported character education and parental involvement. They also thought that a 90-minute block schedule was critical to academic success, due to uninterrupted academic time and eliminated many transitions in the hall. The other school valued the use of School Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) as key to their behavior modification. They also nurtured and grew their character education program (Scipio, 2013).



Review of the data led the researcher (Scipio, 2013) to determine three other themes: progress assessment, student empowerment, and positive reinforcement. Progress assessment involved the continual assessment of behavior strategies in order to improve them. They determined that inconsistency could destroy the credibility of a behavior modification program. Students were allowed choices within the school to promote empowerment and to help curb disenfranchisement. They were learning to become productive, contributing members of the school environment.

Recommendations for further research include a study on the implementation of a transition/reintegration program at the home schools. A study should be done of the perceptions of home school administrators on their role in supporting the transitioning student. Another study could focus on the perceptions of a student who returned to their home school but was sent back to the alternative school. A future study could focus on the parents' perceptions of the supports available to their transitioning student. Finally, a study could be conducted that looks at the impact of a mentoring program as a component of a transition program (Scipio, 2013).

### **3.5 Summary**

The purpose of this comparative case study is to discover patterns within phenomena and make recommendations based on the emergent patterns. Each of the three case studies provided insight into what can make an alternative school and its students successful. All the information gathered is key to student success when returning to a traditional educational program. Themes are emerging among each case to support the idea that there are universal factors that contribute to student success within and after their transition from alternative schools. Case studies were placed in chronological order to show a progression of how things have changed in alternative schools, and how they have remained remarkably the same as well.

Each of the studies in the chart below will help to unpack evidence demonstrating similar experiences between students who successfully transition from alternative programs back to traditional educational systems. Chapter IV will include a comparison and contrast analysis to identify emerging themes.

Title and Categories	Jones (1999)	Toliver (2010)	Scipio (2013)
Purpose	Identify elements that had a critical impact on a student who transitions from an alternative program back into their high school	Exploration of educational factors within one metro Atlanta alternative school that had a significant impact on the rate of high school completion.	Determine what the principal and the staff at two alternative schools considered to be the most effective parts of their behavior modification programs
Conceptual Framework	Phenomenological Approach	Theory of Cognitive Development, Existence, Relatedness and Growth Theory, Attrition Theory, and Attribution Theory	Principal Leadership Theory and the Behaviorist Theory.
Analysis	Case Study Analysis	Multilevel Examination	Thematic analysis strategy
Findings	Positive relationships with adults, parental involvement, and positive peer encouragement.	Need for a caring environment, School climate, small school setting were key	A need for a transition program between schools, support, strong student-teacher relationships
Missing Information/ Assumptions	How can a relationship with an adult mentor be forced if there is no rapport or chemistry?	This information is true for one primary ethnic group in an urban setting, but could the same be applied to other groups in other settings?	How will all of these programs be implemented in schools with little money for extra things?

Table 1: Case Study Matrix

In summary, each of the three case studies will assist with unpacking evidence about commonalities among alternative schools and their students that assist with their transition back to and graduation from traditional education programs. This researcher proposes that there are commonalities among schools and students that assist students to be successful.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### 4.1 Introduction of Comparative Analysis

The purpose of this comparative case analysis was to discover patterns and make recommendations based on what was discovered. The three cases, Jones (1999) , “Case studies of students transitioning from an alternative school back into high school,” Toliver (2010) “A case study of student and leadership team perceptions of a metro Atlanta alternative school program: selected educational factors which impact student achievement as measured by high school completion” and Scipio (2013), “Alternative education: A comparative case study of the behavior modification programs of two upstate South Carolina alternative schools for youth who exhibit behavior that is disruptive,” provided information into the phenomena of student success upon transitioning from alternative schools back to traditional school settings. Each of the studies selected provided information from a different perspective. The findings revealed by each case align with earlier literature regarding student success in schools. Each case found that students can be successful upon their return to a traditional school, granted that they had a good support system. This chapter provides a comprehensive comparative analysis of each of the three studies in an attempt to identify common themes, similarities and differences, outcomes, and findings.

The Jones (1999) study, “Case studies of students transitioning from an alternative school back into high school” gave insight into the phenomenon of successful study transition from an alternative school setting back into a traditional high school. The Toliver (2010) study “A case study of student and leadership team perceptions of a metro Atlanta alternative school program: selected educational factors which impact student achievement as measured by high school completion,” provided a groundwork for the analysis by examining what lead students to be

successful high school completers at an alternative school. Scipio (2013), in “Alternative education: A comparative case study of the behavior modification programs of two upstate South Carolina alternative schools for youth who exhibit behavior that is disruptive,” discussed his findings in regard to the success of behavior modification programs in alternative schools and the success of the students after they leave these programs.

The following information in this chapter is intended to outline the major components of analysis and interpretation. With the presentation of each case study, the detailed descriptions of each uncovered details pertinent to the research study. Through comparative analysis, common themes were uncovered that identify common themes and outcomes in relation to each of the case studies. Components are key to cross analysis.

#### **4.2 Research Study Design**

All three of the selected case studies utilized a qualitative approach to uncover the desired phenomenon. Jones (1999) conducted semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and administrators for 30-45 minute interview sessions at the school building during the fall semester of 1998. Of the 19 students invited, 8 agreed to participate. He then coded all the data verbatim from a recording, in order to look for commonalities and then analyze to make recommendations. Tolliver (2010) conducted structured interviews at a small Atlanta alternative school in the spring of 2009 using a Likert scale and followed up with a focus group in the summer of 2009 using semi-structured interview questions. Surveys were given to 102 students, of whom 39 returned them. Twelve students agreed to report to the focus group, and five attended. Three members of the leadership teams were also interviewed. The researcher calculated averages for the Likert scale survey and transcribed verbatim recordings of her interviews. After finding commonalities, Tolliver was able to draw conclusions and make recommendations. Scipio

(2013) conducted a comparative case study of two behavior (Type II) alternative schools in South Carolina, regarding the effectiveness of each school's behavior modification programs. Twenty four individuals participated, including administration, teachers, guidance, and students. Each person was part of an interview, using semi-structured questions that took place in the school building in a private office. The interviews were recorded and transcribed afterward. The researcher also used document review and observations to gather more information. Scipio collected and coded the data, so they could be separated into clumps of like items, so that theories and recommendations could be made.

#### **4.2.1 Case One-Jones (1999)**

**Transition from Alternative Schools to High School** Jones (1999) collected data about the transition from alternative school back to the home school by conducting interviews with students at an urban school in a small city in Virginia. Additional data were collected from administration, teachers, and other staff to validate the information gathered from the students. Parents were invited to participate as well, but were not able to. Interviews took place in a quiet, semi-quiet area, where each interview was recorded and notes were taken. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Confidentiality was assured because no identifying information was disclosed about any of the respondents or the school itself.

Jones was interested in identifying the critical elements that made it easier for some of the students to transfer back to their home school, while others continued to struggle. He sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the critical elements that were reported as having impacted students' success or failure in making the transition from an alternative program back to high school?

2. What types of intervention strategies occur when students return to high school from alternative programs?
  - a. Existence of programs.
  - b. Availability of staff resources.
  - c. Instructional strategies.
3. How are students returning from alternative programs achieving in terms of grades, attendance and behavior? (Jones, p. 5, 1999).

Using interview transcripts and field notes, Jones (1999) created categories into which he arranged it all. Jones was able to create categories by noticing repetition in the answers that he received. After creating categories, Jones was then able to create a theory to explain the phenomena, Results were thought to be valid because data were triangulated.

#### **4.2.2 Case Two-Toliver (2010)**

**Alternative School Student Success:** Tolliver conducted a descriptive case study that sought to determine what factors led some of the students at a Metro Atlanta alternative school to complete high school. At the time the study was conducted in the spring and summer of 2009, there were 346 students enrolled in this alternative school. Students were enrolled for many different reasons, including:

1. Student choice
2. Recommendation from home to catch up on credits or improve behaviors
3. Increase chances for graduation (Tolliver, p.6, 2010).

Tolliver handed out surveys to 102 graduating seniors, of which 39 were returned, and set up a focus group with 12 students, of which 5 attended. Tolliver also interviewed three staff members who work directly with the students.

Tolliver's research was guided by the following:

1. To what extent does attendance of students in a metro Atlanta alternative school impact high school completion?
2. To what extent does parental involvement in a metro Atlanta alternative school impact the high school completion?
3. To what extent does school climate of the metro Atlanta alternative school impact high school completion?
4. To what extent do teacher expectations impact the high school completion?
5. To what extent does teacher methodology impact high school completion?
6. To what extent do test preparation programs impact high school completion?
7. Based on the students and leadership team's interviews, how is the metro Atlanta alternative school meeting the needs of students in the district? (Tolliver, p.5, 2010).

After the surveys, focus groups, and interviews were complete, Tolliver transcribed all the data and divided them into categories with which she could answer the research questions above. The answers to the research questions constituted the study findings and drove the conclusions and recommendations that were made.

#### **4.2.3 Case Three-Scipio (2013)**

**Behavior Modification Programs** Scipio (2013) studied behavior modification programs at two type II alternative programs in South Carolina. Scipio completed a comparative case study of these schools, which were chosen using typical case sampling. One school was in an urban setting and one was in a rural setting, but they were vastly similar in their process for enrolling students and requirements for earning their way back in to a traditional school. Each school also had a behavior modification program in place.



Scipio (2013) sought to answer the following research questions over the course of the research study:

Q1: What are the perspectives of two Upstate of South Carolina Type II alternative school principals and their staffs regarding the behavior modification program implemented in their schools and its effectiveness? The sub-questions were:

- a. How do these Type II alternative school principals and their staffs define effectiveness when assessing their school's behavior modification strategies?
- b. What do these Type II alternative school principals and their staffs consider to be the effective components of their school's behavior modification strategies?
- c. How do these Type II alternative school principals and their staffs cultivate the effective behavioral components of their schools?
- d. In what ways are those components identified in the literature as essential for a —successfull alternative school program reflected in the participants' articulations about their programs? (Scipio, 2013, p. 62).

Data were gathered using interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis. All interviews were recorded and took place in a private office. Likewise, the focus groups were recorded and held in a private office. The privacy of the interviews allowed the participants to speak freely. The principals of both school provided Scipio (2013) with documents to review that included handbooks, reports, and dress codes. Scipio then completed observations at each school site, including watching various classes to observe interactions between students and teachers and vice versa.

Scipio (2013) used thematic analysis to organize data that were collected. Data were coded and sorted into like topics, which made comparisons easier to complete. Similar data were put together into data clumps. These data were then used to answer the research questions.

#### **4.3 Cross-Analysis of Study Design**

Each study employed a qualitative research design to discover phenomena common to each of the alternative schools that was studied. The Jones (1999) study took place over the course of the 1998-1999 school year. The Toliver (2009) study took place during the spring and summer of 2009. The Scipio (2013) study did not make mention of the time period that was studied, noting only that it took place during one school year. Each study was able to determine the essence of the lived experience of a student enrolled in an alternative school. Each of the studies was able to claim validity and reliability by triangulation of multiple data sources.

#### **4.4 Common Themes in Study Design**

Each of the three cases studies that were chosen used a qualitative research design. Each study was attempting to find commonalities among alternative schools and how they impacted the success of students who had been enrolled there. Each researcher used purposeful sampling to ensure they were studying those who met the criteria that they had laid out. Each of the studies drew on information provided by students and staff to develop a picture of life in an alternative school. Each of the studies took place within a single state, which would be a weakness when it comes to generalizing to other alternative schools.

#### **4.5 Study Participants**

Creswell (2014) determined that the purpose of sampling within qualitative research is not the ability to generalize to the larger population, but instead to look for a deeper meaning among the profound experiences of each individual. Creswell explained that this occurred when

sampling was purposeful and participants were asked open ended questions that allowed them to convey their true feelings to the researcher.

#### **4.5.1 Case One-Jones (1999)**

**Transition from Alternative Schools to High School-** Jones (1999) selected each of the participants in a purposeful manner. Each of the high school students selected to participate had to have been enrolled in the alternative school for at least one semester and had returned to their home school for at least one semester. These students were enrolled in the alternative school due to their disruptive behaviors, including, but not limited to, fighting, defiance, or possession of drugs or weapons. Adults who interacted with these students while at school were also interviewed for the study.

Each student became a case study. Each case study provided evidence as to the types of interventions that were helpful in assisting students to transition back to their home school. Adults in the school were interviewed about what assistance each student received to help them adjust when they returned to their home schools (Jones, 1999, p. 22).

#### **4.5.2 Case Two-Toliver (2010)**

**Alternative School Student Success:** Toliver (2010) used purposeful sampling to choose participants to study. Each of the students invited to participate in the study had to be enrolled in an alternative school and be in their senior year. Students had been placed at the alternative school in order to catch up on credits or to change their environment in order to increase their chances of graduating. Each student chosen had to be completing their credits required for graduation and be eligible for passing the Georgia High School Graduation Test. Toliver also interviewed the principal, graduation coach, and the school counselor to gather information on the students.

Each prospective graduate was invited to participate in the study. Of the 102 students that were invited, 39 agreed to participate in an interview and 12 agreed to take part in a case study, but only five students arrived to take part in the focus group. All of the students and staff attended or worked at the same school in metro Atlanta.

#### **4.5.3 Case Three-Scipio (2013)**

**Behavior Modification Programs:** Scipio (2013) studied 24 participants within two Type II behavioral alternative schools in North Carolina. Each participant was chosen using criterion sampling. Patton (2002) states that criterion sampling means to only use participants who meet predetermined criteria that is important to the researcher. The criterion in this study was an individual's role in the behavior modification program within the school. Participants included administration, guidance, student services, students, and teaching staff. Student participants had to be in grade 8-12 and have been enrolled in the alternative school for at least one semester.

Three teachers were chosen from the first school and each had over 15 years of teaching experience. The other participants at the first school included two guidance counselors, a Medicaid funded counselor, and four students. Students were enrolled for reasons including truancy, fighting, school disruption, and drug activity.

The participants at the second school included four teachers, including one teacher who used to function as the principal of the school. There were six students included in the study from the school site, who were at the school for reasons similar to those of the students at the first school. The final participant at the second school was a teacher/director. She was in charge of the entire school, but also taught one class so she could model to her staff the best way to deal with challenging students (Scipio, 2013, p. 64).

#### **4.6 Cross Analysis of Participants**

Each of the studies used purposeful sampling to choose participants. Scipio (2013) used criterion sampling, in that each of the participants was involved in a behavior modification program within one of the schools being studied. Each of the researchers chose their sample due to the school's accessibility to the researcher. Due to the fact that none of the samples in any of the studies were truly random, each could be seen as having a weakness. The researchers used who was available, which may not have been who was most representative of the phenomena being studied.

#### **4.7 Common Themes in Participants**

A commonality among the participants was that each was either a student or an employee of a Type II alternative school. Jones (1999) used only alternative school students to develop case studies, but also interviewed staff at the school to further identify supports that assisted each student in being successful in the alternative school. Toliver (2010) and Scipio (2013) included both students and staff in their sample in order to get a clearer picture of what assisted students in experiencing success at the alternative school.

#### **4.8 Data Collection**

According to Creswell (2014), data collection relies on information gathered from individual participants. Information can be collected through a variety of means, including observations, interviews, focus groups, ethnographic, field, and autobiographical notes. All of the data collected helps a researcher understand a phenomenon experienced by multiple people.

##### **4.8.1 Case One-Jones (1999)**

**Transition from Alternative Schools to High School:** Jones (1999) used semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. The study only involved students

and staff at one high school in one school district. The researcher got permission to study that school by contacting the superintendent and following up with a letter to the administrator in charge of research and testing. Once permission was granted, a schedule was developed to interview students, principals, teachers, and counselors. The initial intent was to include parents as well, but, for the most part, they were not available.

The researcher asked each participant open ended questions that allowed them to answer in any manner that they chose. The questions were semi-structured, in that they were developed beforehand, but allowed the researcher to follow up when he felt it was necessary. The researcher conducted a pilot of the questions in November 1997 at a different high school. Six students, eight teachers, two administrators, and three counselors took part in the pilot. Their responses helped the researcher hone the questions and practice their delivery.

All of the interviews were recorded and notes were taken for clarification. The interviews were conducted in an area that was both quiet and somewhat private. Each interview lasted approximated thirty to forty-five minutes. Each of the interviews were transcribed word for word by the researcher.

#### **4.8.2 Case Two-Toliver (2010)**

**Alternative School Student Success:** Toliver (2010) used a survey and focus group to gather data from prospective graduated at a metro Atlanta alternative school. All of the students and staff were located at one school. The survey was handed out to 102 prospective graduates. They were given the survey from the school counselor and the graduation coach and instructed to complete it prior to graduation practice. Students who were unable to be reached in this manner received the survey through the mail.

Of the 102 surveys distributed, 39 were returned. Each of those students was invited to participate in a focus group interview. Five students participated in the focus group interview at a local library. Individual interviews were conducted with the building principal, the graduation coach, and the head counselor. These interviews took place at the alternative school.

To ensure the validity of the survey, it was piloted with another group of students at the alternative school, but not students who were nearing graduation. After the pilot, university staff made suggestions and the survey was revised by the researcher. To ensure reliability, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

#### **4.8.3 Case Three-Scipio (2013)**

**Behavior Modification Programs:** Scipio (2013) collected data through a variety of methods, including interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis. First, the researcher interviewed the principals of each school. Each interview was recorded and notes were taken for clarification. These interviews took place in complete privacy, since they were in the principals' offices. The principals were able to speak candidly when answering each question. Next, the researcher conducted interviews with teachers. These interviews were recorded and notes were taken.

On another day, focus groups and student interviews were held. At the first school, focus group participants included three teachers, three counselors, and a special education administrator. The focus group members at the second school consisted of two teachers. The focus groups were recorded, as were the student interviews. Students at each school were interviewed in privacy so they could be honest with their answers. Afterward, each principal gave the researcher written documents to analyze, including faculty handbooks, reports that were sent to the South Carolina Department of Education, and dress code descriptions. Finally, to

wrap up data collection, the researcher conducted observations in several places throughout the school, including classrooms, hallways, and offices.

#### **4.9 Cross Analysis of Data Collection**

Each of the three case studies used a qualitative method. They did so to include the voices of the most important stakeholders in each study, the students. Each study backed up the experience of the students by including supporting data from staff within the schools. Each of the case studies used interviews and focus groups to collect data, although Toliver (2010) used a survey method with the student participants initially. Each of the studies gathered data from a variety of different sources instead of relying on just one source.

#### **4.10 Common Themes in Data Collection**

Each of the researchers used interviews that were based on their research questions to gather data. All of the researchers used semi structured interviews so that they were free to ask follow up questions as needed. Each of the researchers spoke with both students and staff members at the alternative school.

#### **4.11 Findings**

##### **4.11.1 Case One-Jones (1999)**

**Transition from Alternative Schools to High School:** After reviewing the transcribed interviews of students and staff, Jones (1999), determined several factors that were important in determining if a student was a success or failure when transitioning from an alternative school back to a traditional school. Three elements that stood out as contributing to success the most were:

1. A positive relationship with an adult at the school,
2. Parental involvement, and;



3. Encouragement and positive peer assistance (Jones, 1999, p. 38).

Elements that led to failure upon return to traditional school included:

1. Lack of counselor initiated advisement,
2. Lack of student involvement in school activities, and;
3. Absence of a formal transition program.

Seven of the eight students who participated in the study identified a positive relationship with an adult in the school as an important factor leading to a successful transition. When an interested staff member initiated a relationship with a returning student, it helped create a feeling of trust and care. It could be a teacher, a counselor, or an administrator. The common factor was that they made a student feel valued as a person.

Each of the eight students felt that parental involvement was an important part of their successful transition back to the traditional high school. When the student felt like there was a possibility of their parent randomly checking on them, or having conversations with their teachers, they reported that they tried harder to do better.

All eight students also felt that it was hard to get used to the larger class sizes at the traditional high school, but seven of the eight said that the encouragement and positive interactions with peers helped with their transition. They reported starting to hang out with peers who were doing the right thing, instead of the wrong thing.

In terms of elements that made transition difficult, seven of the eight students reported that they had met with their counselor only once or twice since their return. The students did not feel valued or that the counselors were available to help them. The counselors were unsure of their place in the process, since there were no standards in place as to how to help the transitioning students.

Seven of the eight students were not involved in any school activities. The student who was reported by staff as the most successful was the one student who was involved in a school activity. The other students were ineligible or uninterested in participating.

Each of the individuals interviewed, students, teachers, administrators, and counselors, all reported that the lack of a formal transition program was the biggest factor that contributed to student failure. However, the staff does not feel equipped to deal with the extra needs of the transitioning students. As a result, there are few intervention strategies in place for these students. All of the students were receiving lower grades at the high school than they were receiving at the alternative school. While absences are still high, there is an overall decrease in disciplinary referrals.

#### **4.11.2 Case Two-Toliver (2010)**

**Alternative School Student Success:** Toliver (2010) used the data collected from a metro Atlanta alternative school to determine what factors assisted with student success, as measured by high school completion. One of the first things that Toliver found was that attendance had no direct impact of school completion. Toliver also found that parental participation does have an impact on high school completion of alternative school students. This can take many forms, including simply asking about a student's day at school.

Toliver also found that school climate, namely positive relationships with caring staff members, had a large impact in school completion. The same could be said for the small class sizes. These staff members motivated the students to want to do better and also provided them an outlet when they became frustrated. Students were more likely to complete school when they felt as though teachers held them to high expectations, but the teacher's particular methodology did

not really matter. Students were also more likely to complete school when they took part in the test preparation program that was made available to them.

#### **4.11.3 Case Three-Scipio (2013)**

**Behavior Modification Programs:** Scipio (2013) gathered data at two Type II alternative programs in South Carolina. Using data collected from interviews with the principals of each school, the researcher determined that each school had the same three primary goals, which included:

1. To improve student academic performance;
2. To improve student behavior, and;
3. Improve student attendance.

The researcher (Scipio, 2013) found that the principals emphasized academics over behavior. However, improved behavior was an important component of improving academics. Each principal wanted to see their students return to their home school and graduate. Each administrator viewed instructional strategies as essential in preventing problem behaviors.

The researcher (Scipio, 2013) determined that each school supported the idea that having a common approach to behavior management was more effective than dealing with behaviors on an individual basis in each classroom. The first school had an orientation program that assisted students with the shift towards proper behavior and the prevention of crisis behaviors. The second school used a program known as Professional Crisis Management (PCM) to assist teachers with tools to prevent crisis behaviors and address behaviors in a positive manner. Both schools used School Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) to encourage reinforcement and modification of disruptive behavior.

Positive school climate was viewed as very important in both schools. Some students had even decided to stay at the alternative school because they felt better in that environment. The staff provided attention and caring relationships with their students, even more so than at their home schools. All students felt that alternative school teachers were very caring and went further to make sure they understood the academic lessons.

Both schools were positive in nature instead of only punitive in nature. While each could enact punitive measures when appropriate, they made a greater effort to focus on a positive, recognition based environment for students who followed the rules. That way, there is a focus on doing the right things, instead of all the focus on those who are doing the wrong thing.

The researcher found that both schools had a foundation built on flexibility. For example, both school leaders believed in a flexible behavior strategy that did not remove the student from the school and kept them in class as much as possible, and helped them to work on their behaviors. Teachers should also have a flexible mindset. They should be trained in a manner that helps them help at risk students.

Finally, the researcher found that alternative schools should stay small in size. These programs can be expensive, but are effective because staff and students can build critical caring relationships. The teachers in the larger schools cannot devote the same amount of time to individual students.

#### **4.12 Common Findings and Analysis**

Upon examination of each of the three case studies, common themes began to emerge. First, each of the case studies found that the relationship between staff and students was important to the success of alternative school students. Students were more likely to return to

their home school, graduate high school, and experience overall success when they developed a caring relationship with an adult in the school.

#### **4.13 Similarities and Differences**

Each of the case studies focused on success at alternative schools. Jones (1999) was more focused on the successful transition from an alternative school back to a traditional high school setting. Toliver (2010) focused on alternative school student success as measured by high school completion. Scipio (2013) sought to determine how to best modify the behavior of students in alternative schools.

#### **4.14 Recommendations**

##### **4.14.1 Recommendations for Case One-Jones (1999)**

The main weakness of the Jones (1999) study regarding the transition from alternative schools back to traditional schools is its age. The study is nearly twenty years old and was one of the first of its kind to be written. It would be interesting to see if any of the suggestions that Jones made based on the findings of the study have been enacted and how they have impacted the success of students who have transitioned back to the traditional high school. Since Type II behavior alternative schools were a fairly new concept in 1998 when data were collected, things have likely changed at the school that was the initial focus of the study.

##### **4.14.2 Recommendations for Case Two-Toliver (2010)**

Toliver (2010) measured success in the alternative school by the number of students who ended up graduating. However, it could be said that success does not necessarily correlate to graduation. Students who are sent to alternative schools are sent because they are exhibiting behaviors that are not conducive to being productive in society. Could another measure of

“success” be a more accurate measure of how useful alternative schools are to students who have maladaptive behaviors?

#### **4.14.3 Recommendations for Case Three-Scipio (2013)**

Scipio (2013) focused on behavior modification programs in alternative schools. However, the study does not really speak to what makes students in alternative schools successful. It is more focused on how the administration views the behavior modification programs. More of a focus could be placed on how the students, the most important stakeholders, view the behavior modification programs and how they contribute toward making the student more successful in returning to traditional schools and completing school.

#### **4.15 Synthesis of Outcomes**

All of the research studies of Jones (1999), Toliver (2010), and Scipio (2013) indicated that the caring relationship between staff and students in a small alternative school setting is key for a student to experience success. These results support the theoretical framework, the Social Learning Theory of Albert Bandura (1971). The social learning theory states that people learn behavior through watching other people, or modeling. Students in alternative schools who have close caring relationships with adults in the building are able to observe those adults and learn pro-social behaviors that assist them in being successful. Maintaining small class sizes helps the students retain the behavior, which is an essential element in the social learning theory, if the wish is that the behavior remains changed.

#### **4.16 Implications for Alternative School Leaders**

Leaders of alternative schools are tasked with assisting students to experience success in both academics and behavior. This is a population that will continue to increase as regulations require that insufficient educating of students with behavior problems is no longer an option.

This study indicates that there are students who experience success at alternative schools, but it is not always the norm. Support of alternative school leaders is essential to ensure that students experience behavioral and academic success. If school districts are going to continue to invest valuable student dollars into these schools, it is important that they be run in a manner that will be beneficial for the students, both in the alternative school and upon their transition back to their home schools.

Alternative schools could best be led by a transformational leader, who views these students as important and imparts that to all of their staff members. Those staff members, in turn, create these essential relationships that have been proven to help alternative school students experience success. These students can then reenter the traditional school and a contributing member of the school environment.

#### **4.17 Summary**

In summary, each of the case studies provide an insight into what helps alternative school students successfully transition back into the traditional school setting. Measures of success can include going back to the home school, graduating from high school, or experiencing a change in overall problem behaviors. Each study focused on the positive aspects of alternative schools. The three case studies were able to reveal how these types of schools had a positive impact on the lives of their students. All three of the cases analyzed utilized a qualitative methodology.

Strengths and weaknesses were addressed in each of the case studies. All three case studies were limited to schools in the Southeastern United States. Jones (1999) studied a single high school in Virginia. Toliver (2010) studied a school in metro Atlanta. Scipio (2013) studied two alternative schools in South Carolina. Jones and Toliver were more focused on the voices of

the students, while Scipio was more focused on how administrators viewed their alternative schools.

Each study provided information for discussion in Chapter Five. This investigator analyzed three case studies that provided insight into the experiences of the participants in order to provide a description of the phenomenon. Research data included multiple descriptions of the phenomenon in order to achieve triangulation. This led to the development of common themes.



## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

#### 5.1 Introduction

The focus of this comparative case study analysis was to answer the questions “What are the commonalities among students who have successfully transitioned from alternative educational programs back into traditional education programs?” The journey toward answering this question was guided by the following sub-questions:

1. What experiences in the alternative program do students credit as essential components of their successful transition back to traditional education?
2. What does the teaching staff credit as essential components of students' successful transition back to traditional education?
3. To what do alternative school administrators ascribe the success of their alternative school programs?
4. What factors helped motivate the students to complete the alternative program?
5. How were relationships with adults in the alternative school building important to student success?
6. How were relationships with parents/mentors important to student success?
7. How were relationships with peers in the alternative school building crucial to student success?
8. What do students report could help create even greater success for students in alternative programs?

Once common phenomena were uncovered, this comparative case study analysis sought to make recommendations based on these commonalities. Each of the three case studies

examined transition and alternative schools. The findings from each study suggest that positive adult supports and small class sizes had a positive impact on an alternative school student's transition from the alternative school back into their home school.

Each of the three cases chosen provided insight into the inner workings of an alternative education program, including how these schools assist their students toward working their way back into the traditional education programs. Each of the cases presented findings that indicate that positive adult relationships in the school, small class sizes and personal attention, and positive support assist these students with learning the pro-social skills necessary to return back to a larger traditional school setting. Additionally, it was determined that the lack of adult support for transitioning students can lead to an unsuccessful transition. Using these commonalities, this researcher is able to determine suggestions and recommendations.

This investigator would recommend that all alternative programs ensure that their staff is interested in cultivating meaningful relationships with their students. As this was shown to be a key to student success at alternative schools in all three case studies, it is important that any alternative school make a true effort to ensure that this occurs. Jones (1999) and Toliver (2010) both found that parental involvement was important to student success; therefore, it is recommended that every effort be made to involve parents in the school environment. This does not have to involve parents volunteering or coming to the school, but parents should be in communication with the school and with their students, as well.

Jones (1999) and Toliver (2010) also pointed to the lack of a transition program as one of the elements that can lead to the downfall of an alternative school student. Although educational dollars are scarce, it is not fair to cite lack of resources as a reason to let these students fall behind and not succeed once they have earned the privilege of returning to their home school. If

the home school is not going to do their part to ensure that every student has a chance to succeed, then there is no point for a student to even want to leave the alternative school. These schools should not be a place that a student wants to stay for the duration of their school career. A formal transition program should be put into place between each alternative school and the home school from which the students originate and to which they will return.

Chapter One set forth the purpose of the case study analysis. The purpose of this study was to find the commonalities among students who have successfully transitioned from alternative programs back into traditional education programs. The research analyzed three qualitative case studies that provided information about the experiences of students within alternative schools.

Chapter Two consisted of a literature review that discussed the components of the alternative school experience, as well as introduced the Social Learning Theory and the Transformational Leadership Theory....

Chapter Three is the methodology that laid the groundwork for a comparative examination of the three case studies that were chosen for comparative analysis. Each of the case studies provided insight into the experiences that helped an alternative school student achieve success.

Chapter Four used a comparative analysis of the three case studies to find similarities amongst experiences of students in different alternative school environments. Common themes were extracted, compared and contrasted in order to determine what factors were most important to student success at alternative schools. Chapter Four gave insight into the data which were helpful for making recommendations in Chapter Five.

## **5.2 Proposed Solutions**

Each of the case studies analyzed the experiences that were common to students who were successful in alternatives schools. The studies all found that the most important element impacting student success in alternative schools was the development of a caring relationship with an adult in the alternative school, which could be anyone from a teacher, administrator, to a cafeteria worker, paraprofessional, or a custodian. The important element is that this adult helps the student feel capable of success and is a sounding board for when the student experiences frustrations. Another important factor was the small school and class sizes that allowed these relationships to develop and thrive. Therefore, there is a suggestion that alternative schools devote themselves to fostering these relationships and creating an environment conducive to doing so.

### **5.2.1 Implications for Building Leaders**

Building leaders are faced with providing educational services to all students, regardless of behavioral difficulties, as state and federal mandates limit the amount of time that students can miss school as a result of disciplinary measures. Students who have trouble in traditional school settings are being sent to alternative schools in increasing numbers. While behavioral concerns must be addressed, academic pursuits cannot be ignored. With increasing support from educational leaders, alternative schools can grow and thrive, despite limited resources.

By observing successful alternative schools, leaders can help to advocate the adoption of similar programs in their districts. School leaders must value these students as much as any others and strive to assist in their success in school, to help them become functioning, contributing members of a greater society. In order to be a better advocate for alternative schools, school leaders have to understand the inner workings of alternative schools and what

makes them work. It is important that school leaders value equipping students with skills to make them successful upon return to traditional schools, behaviorally and academically. Since these students tend to drop out of high school, learning how to assist them with gaining skills and confidence within school could help to alleviate the numbers of students leaving prior to completion. Keeping students in school helps to avoid costs associated with crime and social welfare programs. The future could depend on helping behaviorally challenged students get back on the right track.

### **5.2.2 Recommendations for future research**

Each of the studies explored elements of success at alternative schools. Jones (1999) studied transition from alternative back to traditional schools. Toliver (2010) studied success as measured by completion of high school, and Scipio (2013) studied behavior modification the alternative schools. Future studies should take a look at the transition from alternative schools back into traditional schools in a more recent framework. This study should provide a starting point to future research with more current alternative school students, since Jones' study is nearing two decades old.

Research should focus on how to enact the commonalities uncovered between successful students in each of these studies in a broader sense. Studies should be conducted on students who would make up a more diverse and complete picture of students in alternative schools, and not simply those that are the most conveniently accessible to researchers. More in depth research could be conducted on how to develop programs that help ease the transition between alternative and traditional schools and how to best allocate resources for these students. It would also be interesting to determine if there should be additional training specifically for teachers and

administrators in alternative schools, since these students have specialized and specific needs that are not always the same as other students.

### **5.2.3 Personal Practice**

Over the course of nine years of involvement in an alternative school, it was important to me to determine how to assist students in these types of schools to experience success in transitioning back to their home schools. Too often, students are sent to alternative schools and it seems as though they have reached the end of the road. The year that I decided to embark on this topic of study, less than 25% of the students in the school successfully completed the alternative school program and transitioned back to the home school. Due to the lack of a formal transition program, I am not certain how many of those students remained in the home school and went on to complete high school. Due to a personal passion for at risk students, it is important to me to help determine how to assist students to be more successful in these schools or programs. One of my goals is to help each alternative school to become a place in which a student feels like they are empowered and armed with the skills essential to transition back as a functioning member of a larger school. Students should leave these schools feeling capable of success once there are fewer supports in place.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

The purpose of this comparative case study analysis was to determine the commonalities amongst students who were successful in alternative programs, in order to inspire further research into how to enact these elements into all alternative schools, so that more students can experience similar success. Each of the three case studies provided insight into the lived experiences of students in alternative schools. Current information suggests that success in alternative school is not the norm. In order to make these schools more useful to the educational

system, it is important to determine how to make the experience of success more common to all students

One of the most conspicuous commonalities among all of the studies was the deep need for positive relationships between staff and students. Part of this can be explained by the conceptual framework of the study, Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977). Bandura stated that individuals learn the best through observation, imitation, and modeling. Developing a positive relationship with a role model in the school allows each student to have someone from whom to model prosocial behaviors. Implications for educational leaders include developing opportunities for staff to devote time to relationship building, keeping schools and classes small, and using the Transformational Leadership Model in order to create real change in these schools, by inspiring followers become the leaders that these students need. This study could be the basis for important changes that ensure that all students are afforded the opportunity to succeed.

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## DELAWARE STATE UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board – Human Subjects Protection Committee

March 15, 2017

Elizabeth Cole  
Department of Education  
Delaware State University  
1200 N. DuPont Highway  
Dover, Delaware 19901

Ms. Cole,

Delaware State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB)-Human Subjects Protection Committee has reviewed your project "**A Comparative Case Study Analysis of the Successful Transition from Alternative Programs into Traditional Education Programs**". After review of application, the Committee has granted an **exemption** from the IRB as it meets a Category of Exempt Research specified in 45 CFR 46.101(b).

Please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs at [REDACTED] if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Chairperson, Human Subjects Committee (IRB)

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