ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY

A thesis submitted by

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Abstract

Many educators across the nation are struggling to teach and inspire students who are susceptible to school drop-out. These specific students are commonly dealing with poor parental involvement, low socioeconomic status, substance abuse issues, teenage pregnancy, behavioral infractions, and/or mental health issues, which can affect them socially, emotionally, and academically. As a result, several of these students have difficulties in the general education setting and typically drop-out of school. Due to the serious concern for this at-risk population, numerous school districts have designed and implemented alternative programs to take the place of the traditional education setting to assist this population in meeting academic success. The purpose of this descriptive, qualitative case study was to investigate the perceptions of various educational stakeholders in regard to the components and practices of a southeastern New England alternative program to ultimately determine what works most effectively with the at-risk population. The research questions were guided by the components of Deci and Ryan’s (1985, 2000) self-determination theory: achieving competence, autonomy, and relatedness in order to foster a sense of emotional, social, and academic well-being. The researcher utilized three forms of data collection: surveys, open-ended interviews, and focus groups.

Research Questions:

1. How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

2. How do educational stakeholders perceive the program may be improved to meet the specific social, emotional, and academic needs of the students?

Key words: At-risk, alternative education, motivation, drop-out prevention, academic momentum, personalization, school connectedness, social, emotional, academic, self-determination, self-efficacy, parent involvement
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“It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop.” ~ Confucius

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Nate impresses me every day as the father he is to Shay; she is one lucky little girl to have him! I thank you for standing by my side through everything— I could not have done this without him! Although Shay is too young to remember the many, many hours I spent writing, I promise my time is now devoted to her. She is my world! I hope the one thing that I can teach her from this accomplishment is the importance of perseverance. Things are not always going to be easy, but she can do whatever she puts her mind to as long as she stays focused and works hard. I love all my family.

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Chapter 1

Research Problem Statement

Many educators across the nation are struggling to teach and inspire students who are susceptible to failure and school drop-out. These specific students, who frequently are dealing with poor parental involvement, low socioeconomic status, substance abuse issues, teenage pregnancy, behavioral infractions, and/or mental health issues, are typically dealing with social or emotional concerns in and out of the classroom (Sanacore, 2008; Walsh, 2006; Gobeil, 2010, Massachusetts Department of Education, 2009). Although teachers, counselors, and administrators are able to successfully encourage academic momentum with many of these students, there are still several others that continue to struggle in the general education setting and commonly drop out of school (Strahan, 2008).

Due to the serious concern for this at-risk population and a drop-out rate of 12.2% in 2006 with only 81.8% of students meeting the district graduation requirements within a four year period, it was evident that the traditional educational model was not addressing the specific needs of many students within a large public school district in southeastern New England. Most notably were the proportions of students who were considered low income, special education, and/or of a minority population (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013).

Like most other large schools, the schools within this district were overcrowded and the struggling students did not always receive the individual personalization and support they needed to be successful, including academic, social, and emotional. To give these specific students a chance of meeting academic success and to learn the life skills necessary to contribute effectively
in society, this particular school district agreed that the learning environment for identified at-risk adolescents needed to change.

After countless discussions amongst educational stakeholders, along with collecting substantial research on various educational alternatives and reforms, a high school alternative program was designed with the purpose of “restor[ing] hope that education can make a difference in [the students’] lives” (Gobeil, 2007, p. 3). Through a restructured approach and environment, the program’s intent was to “engage a diverse group of young people in an academic program that will allow them to earn or ‘recover’ credits… and support them in making better decisions” (Gobeil, p. 3). In the fall of 2007, this high school alternative program was fully implemented with the expectation of addressing the social, emotional, and educational needs of the susceptible student population with the ultimate goal being student success.

The initial program consisted of a combination of seven repeating freshmen who varied in academic abilities, behaviors, and socioeconomic statuses, but whom all had the desire to graduate high school. Although the graduation requirements stayed the same when compared to the traditional setting, these seven students were able to receive their education in a small group which took place during after school hours. There was a separate teacher for each core subject, as well as physical education and career preparation components. In addition, there was a full time administrator and part-time counselors and special education support. Each subsequent year, the program has grown in size and faculty. Currently, there are 72 students in the program; 46 of them being full time students and the other 26 taking credit recovery classes in addition to their traditional day school course loads.

Now that the program has been operating for over six years, it is important to know if it is still fully addressing student needs, including their psychological well-being. If not, it will be
imperative to look closely at current practices to see what components should be implemented, restructured or eliminated to enhance student outcomes.

**Significance**

“Some youth thrive at school- enjoying and benefitting from most of their experiences there; others muddle along and cope as best they can…; and still others find school an alienating and unpleasant place to be- a place that is difficult to enjoy and benefit from” (Eccles & Roeser, 2011, p. 225). In today’s educational systems, teachers are expected to teach to a variety of learners and motivations, including students who give up academically in the general education setting. Consequently, many of these struggling students do not always receive the specific supports needed to assist them in persevering through their academic, social, and/or emotional struggles and typically end up dropping out of school (Sanacore, 2008, Walsh, 2006, Gobeil, 2010).

Motivating the at-risk population is significant in the United States of America because there are too many students who give up on themselves and drop out of school; therefore they are unprepared to meet the needs and high expectations of society. Entrance into adulthood without a diploma can then lead to severe economic and occupational disadvantages for their futures (Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenburg, 2008). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), 370,000 students dropped out of high school between October 2011 to October 2012; 49.6% of those individuals were then considered jobless (p. 2).

The U.S. Department of Education states that the purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act enacted in 2001 is “to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (2008). It requires that all students are entitled to equal protection and opportunities for their education in a safe environment filled with academic rigor (Powell,
To assist with this national goal, many school districts have implemented various support systems, including alternative programs for the at-risk student population. Many of these programs are geared to raising student success rates by having the students’ sense of psychological well-being as a focus.

Unfortunately, alternative school programs usually have a maximum capacity or are very specific in their admissions criteria; therefore many at-risk students are still being “left behind”. According to Aron (2006), “These youth need access to high quality alternative education and training opportunities to equip them to compete in today’s labor market” (p. 1). This problem needs to be addressed so the at-risk students receive the education needed to obtain a high school diploma and to function successfully in society. If this does not happen, many students will lack the skills, knowledge, and persistence necessary to succeed in the real world.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

Although there are numerous studies on alternative education and psychological well-being, few studies have examined educators’ perceptions of their educational strategies and the effect those practices have on at-risk students’ personal sense of emotional, social, and academic well-being within the alternative school environment. It was imperative to look closely at current practices to ensure the program was appropriately addressing student needs and to see what components, policies, and approaches needed to be implemented, restructured, or eliminated to enhance student outcomes.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this descriptive, qualitative case study was to investigate the perceptions of various educational stakeholders in regards to the components and practices of a southeastern New England alternative program to determine what works most effectively with the at-risk
population. As a result, this study determined what practices could be added, improved, or eliminated from the program in order to assist the students in achieving a sense of psychological well-being and a variety of successes. These achievements include, but are not limited to: the attainment of a high school diploma, improved social/emotional skills to assist in daily interactions, the completion of college or career preparation programs, and job attainment.

**Research Questions**

1. How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

2. How do educational stakeholders perceive the program may be improved to meet the specific social, emotional, and academic needs of the students?

The research questions were guided by the three components of Deci & Ryan’s (1985, 2000) self-determination theory: achieving competence, autonomy, and relatedness in order to foster a sense of emotional, social, and academic well-being.

**Theoretical Framework**

To better understand the education of at-risk students and the academic components and processes that work most successfully with them, Deci & Ryan’s (1985, 2000) self-determination theory was used as the guiding theoretical framework of this study. Self-determination theory (SDT) is considered a macro-theory of human motivation, emotion, and development that focuses on the importance of meeting three specific psychological needs in order to foster a sense of psychological health and well-being: *competence, autonomy, and relatedness* (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ellerbrook & Keifer, 2010). By framing the research questions around the components of SDT, the researcher aimed to gather information on educational stakeholders’ perceptions of how specific teaching practices and environmental factors within an alternative
school setting could promote and support individual motives, needs, and an overall sense of emotional, social, and academic well-being, which are the key facets to both self-determination theory and student success.

Competence, autonomy, and relatedness are considered “the heart” of self-determination theory because together these components establish the necessary mechanisms for proactivity, optimal development, and psychological health of human beings (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004; Van den Broeck, 2010).

- Competence is defined as “an individual’s inherent desire to feel effective in interacting with the environment” (Van den Broeck, et. al., 2010, p. 982). The basic need for competence is fulfilled when a student is able to execute a specific task to the best of his or her ability, therefore meeting a specific goal (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2002; Brien, Hass, & Savoie, 2012). When students perceive their academic competence is threatened or they are struggling in a specific area (socially, emotionally, or academically), they are likely to disengage within the educational environment. Overtime, this devaluing of education without the right supports can lead to failure or eventually school-drop out (Stephan, Caudroit, Boiché, & Sarrazin, 2011).

- “Autonomy refers to volition—the organismic desire to self-organize experience and behavior and to have activity be concordant with one’s integrated sense of self” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231). In education, it relates to a student’s intrinsic motivation (inherent) verses extrinsic motivation (external, such as a reward) to complete tasks. Although educators cannot directly give their students an experience of autonomy, they can encourage and support this self-sufficiency by promoting an autonomy-supportive environment. This type of environment includes instructional behaviors such as: time
spent listening to students, providing rationales, being responsive to student questions, praising improvement or mastery, and acknowledging student perspectives and experiences. Overall, autonomy support revolves around finding ways to nurture, support, and increase students’ inner endorsement of their classroom activity (Reeve & Jang, 2006).

- “Relatedness refers to the desire to feel connected to others- to love and care, and to be loved and cared for” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231). It is satisfied when there is an established respect and alliance with others, which results in feeling connected, protected, and supported (Deci & Ryan, 2008a; Roffey, 2013). A sense of belonging is a significant protective factor for students experiencing difficulty. Although it can be a challenge to connect with the vulnerable student population, the feeling of connectedness is vital to their success and overall well-being (Roffey, 2013).

Collectively, the achievement of these basic needs can affect a student’s overall sense of well-being and level of functioning (Brien, Hass, & Savoie, 2012).

Researchers over the past three decades have applied self-determination theory across a variety of domains, with education being one of the framework’s most common areas of study. When applied to students, self-determination theory focuses primarily on an interest in learning, a valuing of education, and a confidence one’s capacities and attributes (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Self-determination theorists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, along with many other researchers and theorists, suggest that the school climate and its practices can positively influence student motivation, development, and performance by promoting and supporting individual student’s competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Troum, 2010). The support and fulfillment of these
basic student needs are associated with higher self-esteem, self-worth, and lower levels of depressive symptoms (Véronneau, Koestner, & Abela, 2005).

Social surroundings that facilitate satisfaction of these three basic psychological needs in the school environment can help support student’s inherent activity and motivation, resulting in enhanced psychological, developmental, and behavioral outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Conversely, lack of support in school is likely to negatively impact and diminish student motivation and developmental processes, which can lead to alienation, poorer performance, and school drop-out (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). SDT suggests that people are naturally self-motivated, interested, and eager to succeed, but some individuals can become disengaged overtime due to their inherent nature and/ or unsupportive social environments (Deci & Ryan, 2008a).

On average, a typical student spends approximately 15,000 hours in school throughout their primary and secondary years of education. Therefore, with the amount of time spent together, educators have a huge influence on the ultimate social, emotional, and academic outcomes of their students (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). According to the New England Association of Schools and Colleges accreditation standards for the Commission on Public and Secondary Schools (2012),

Student learning and well-being are dependent upon adequate and appropriate support. The school is responsible for providing an effective range of coordinated programs and services. These resources enhance and improve student learning and well-being and support the school's core values and beliefs. Student support services enable each student to achieve the school's 21st century learning expectations (Retrieved online).

In schools today, a student’s sense of psychological well-being is significant to their success and reliant on a caring, supportive environment where competence, autonomy, and
relatedness can be achieved. The relationship between these tenants posits that educators have a considerable impact on student outcomes and therefore need to support them socially, emotionally, and academically. By exploring this problem of practice through the self-determination theoretical framework lens, the researcher was able to link whether or not the alternative school program is meeting the social, emotional, and academic needs of their student population.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

The education of at-risk students has been and continues to be a challenge in traditional school facilities throughout the country. Due to this concern, many school districts have developed alternative programs to assist their at-risk student population in meeting success. A preliminary survey of literature pertaining to alternative programming was conducted in order to support this study, using Deci & Ryan’s (1985, 2000) self-determination theory as the guiding framework. Through a historical perspective, the evolution of alternative programming will be discussed, in conjunction with best practices and strategies for success that have proven to nurture academic momentum over time for the at-risk student population. In addition, the importance of the development of motivation and self-efficacy, coinciding with the components of SDT (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) will be addressed; all elements being common themes throughout the literature that lead to an increased academic, social, and emotional sense of well-being.

At-risk student

“At-risk” is a term that has become widely used in the past few decades in place of various other labels, including “disadvantaged”, “deprived”, “disengaged” or “disconnected” (Free, 2008, p. 20). For the purpose of this study, “at-risk” refers to a student who is dealing with substance abuse issues, teenage pregnancy, behavioral infractions, social concerns and/or mental health issues, but who is also in danger of failing academically, dropping out, or being expelled from school (Gobeil, 2010; Free, 2008). According to research, there are many school, community, and/or family factors that contribute to likeliness of students being placed in the “at-risk” category, including lack of parent involvement, lack of support (social, emotional and/or
academic), class size, low socioeconomic status, and minority status (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2009; Free, 2008).

Parent involvement is a key factor in student success; it has been linked to stronger academic achievement, higher educational aspirations, more positive perception of education, and stronger self-regulatory skills (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002, p. 2). Unfortunately, many parents do not get involved in their child’s education for a number of reasons. Some parents do not feel comfortable being in contact and involved due to their lack of English language skills, lack of understanding the school system and its home-school partnership, or lack of confidence, while other parents may not be involved due to work interference, negative past experiences with schools, or feelings of insensitivity and hostility by school personnel (Bermúdez & Márquez, 1996). This lack of parent involvement can have a major impact of student performance and is likely to lead to poorer academic attainment and possibly school dropout (White, 2010).

The presence of social support is linked to the likeliness of a healthier development and adaptation in children and adolescents (Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998). The students who struggle making social connections with peers and teachers are less likely to ask for help when they are having difficulty emotionally or academically, which can lead to at-risk behaviors (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994).

Class size is related to a student’s comfort level and therefore student success. Most public education classrooms are congested with students, which frequently leads teachers to follow a more traditional teaching method. As a result, the probability of disciplinary problems and lack of motivation is increased due to the deficiency of a meaningful social location (Salem al-amarat, 2011)
Socioeconomic status and family structure are the strongest predictors of student drop-out rates. These struggling families have insufficient fiscal, human, and social resources to guarantee success in school, which commonly leads to troubled youth who struggle in school (McKeon, 1996).

**Strategies for success with reluctant/at-risk students**

There has been much research on various strategies that can work with assisting at-risk students in achieving academic success. The need for personalization and connectedness, assessing how the individual student learns best, and creating a learning environment that consists of encouragement and challenges are all key factors that educators can provide (Blum, 2005; Walsh, 2006). In addition, educators who stress the importance of goal setting, promote students’ respect for themselves and others, and encourage students to take responsibility for their actions and decisions are more likely to witness students’ achievement (Strahan, 2008). Finding ways to increase parental involvement also plays a large role in enhancing students’ educational outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002). Although most schools strive to implement these suggested strategies, they are not always able to due to class size, support systems, and resources. As a result, many alternative schools purposefully aim to implement these specific approaches to increased student success.

“In recent years, studies have documented ways that students who feel ‘connected’ with other people and school activities perform better academically than do students who feel ‘disconnected’” (Strahan, 2008, p. 21). Students, especially in the years of adolescence, who feel a connection to their school and community are more likely to report higher levels of emotional well-being and less likely to exhibit at-risk behaviors, such as substance use, emotional distress, school truancy, violent and/or deviant behaviors, or engage in sexual activity at a young age.
(Blum, 2005, p. 17; McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002, p. 138). Hirschi (1969) believed that students who have stronger bonds to teachers, school, or other conventional activities are less likely to defy school norms; therefore more likely to have a positive school experience (Free, 2008). Schools can help encourage connectedness and positive bonds by providing a healthy, safe setting that incorporates and encourages cooperative learning and consistency in smaller learning communities (Blum, pp. 18-19).

Students who feel supported by their parents are more likely to experience better relationships and have better academic outcomes (Ryan, Still, & Lynch, 1994). As a result, involving families in their students’ education has become a major focus of educators, particularly those working with at-risk students (Bermúdez & Márquez, 1996). Schools can improve parent involvement and parent support by conveying that parent involvement is expected and wanted, by offering home-based and school based involvement activities, and communicating regularly with parents about the positive influence of their involvement. These strategies offer important school support for parents’ contributions to student learning (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005).

Alternative Education

Alternative education is a broad term that is used to describe all educational activities that are not considered to fall into the traditional realm of education, including GED programs, home-schooling, special programs for gifted children, and charter schools. Most commonly, it is a term used to describe the non-traditional educational setting where vulnerable youth receive their education (Aron, 2006). According to the Massachusetts Department of Education (2008), this type of education “is an initiative within a public school district, charter school or educational
collaborative established to serve at-risk students whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting” (retrieved online).

Alternative school programs differ from the traditional setting in regards to scheduling, administrative structure, setting, and/or curriculum. Typically, the programs include: access to counseling and community resources, strategies to gain parental input and support, low student to teacher ratios, and a flexible curriculum, which are all believed to help foster an improved sense of psychological well-being (Wilson-Murphy, 2007). These programs are challenged to motivate disengaged, at-risk students with the aim of educating each student successfully by focusing on the students’ social, emotional, and academic development (Aron, 2006).

Although programs vary from school to school, Raywid (1994) is credited with grouping alternative school programs into three types: Type I, II, and III.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type:</th>
<th>Characteristics:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type I</td>
<td>Schools of choice, based on themes with an emphasis on innovative programs or strategies to attract students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type II</td>
<td>Last chance schools where students are placed as last resort before expulsion. This program offers few options for students and parents. Emphasis is usually on behavior modification or remediation and basic skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type III</td>
<td>Schools designed with a remedial focus on academic issues, social-emotional issues, or both.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Types of Alternative Schools (Adapted from Raywid, 1994; Wilson-Murphy, 2007)*

The New England alternative program under investigation falls into the “Type I” category, which is known to be the more common, successful option for at-risk youth. Type I programs offer a full-time option for students who have struggled in the traditional setting, but who have the desire to complete school. Characteristically, these programs take place in a
smaller, more flexible environment that focuses on the individual student as a whole. As a result, students can self-pace and receive more individual attention in a caring, safe environment (Aron, 2006).

**Historical Perspective**

While alternative education may seem to be a newer academic initiative, these non-traditional programs have actually existed since the start of public education, dating back to the nineteenth century (Tissington, 2006). John Dewey, known as America’s most renowned philosopher and the father of modern education, stood by the non-traditional slogans “learning by doing” and “child-centered education” (Reese, 2005, p. 137, 140). He spent his years criticizing old education, new education, and presented additional criticisms on public schools, believing that teacher authority and student passivity dominated within (Reese, p. 138). He put his criticisms to the test by opening up his own experimental, non-traditional lab school where children studied and participated in what he thought of as an important and beneficial: gaining insight into the nature of work by being engaged in learning (Reese, 2005, p. 139).

By the 1990’s, alternative programs became more focused on the need to educate a growing number of student dropouts, students struggling to meet academic success in the traditional setting, and an increased number of students in the juvenile justice system (McCreight, 1999, p. 7).

**No Child Left Behind**

NCLB is the principal federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school. NCLB is built on four pillars: expanded local control and flexibility; doing what works based on scientific research; accountability for results; and more options for parents. The main goal of NCLB is to help all students in the Commonwealth [and nationally] to reach proficiency in English language arts/reading and mathematics by the year 2014 (Retrieved online).

Since its inception, NCLB has pushed to strengthen the nation’s schools by implementing standards, high-stakes testing, and a national accountability system. Low performing schools and students are then targeted to assist them in meeting the criteria for proficiency (Aron, 2006). According to Brint (2006), the act’s advocates believed these high expectations and powerful sanctions could get the schools moving in the right direction and that high-stakes will lead to improved progress (p. 260).

Motivation

Motivation is defined as “the influences that account for the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence of behavior” (Bernstein, Clark-Stewart, Roy, & Wickens, 1997, p. A-25). Beginning in the early 1930’s, many researchers, including Kurt Lewin and Edward Tolman, began studying the psychological value attributed to goal setting, along with the motivation needed to attain specific goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It was eventually divided into two terms: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation occurs when a task is interesting, optimally challenging, and spontaneously satisfying, unlike extrinsic, which occurs when there is an external reward or control (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

Lewin’s (1935, 1938) “field theory”, which eventually became known as group dynamics, was one of the first notions to outline motivation. It proposed that various factors within a person’s psychological environment can attract or repel the individual from a final
course of action. (Landy & Conte, 2010, p. 362). Tolman (1932), who is best known for his research on latent learning, sign theory, and cognitive maps, posited similar views to Lewin in terms of learning that takes place without external reward (Weiner, 1990).

Throughout the twentieth century, various theories evolved around the topic of motivation, including self-determination theory. SDT originated in the 1970’s, but became a more comprehensive framework in the mid 1980’s (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Within the past decade, the use of the SDT framework has flourished, especially in the sport, education, and health care fields of research (Deci & Ryan, 2008b). Self-determination theory is considered a macro-theory of human motivation, emotion, and development that focuses on the importance of meeting three specific psychological needs in order to foster a sense of psychological health and well-being: *competence, autonomy, and relatedness* (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ellerbrook & Keifer, 2010). Researchers have applied the self-determination theory framework to intrinsic motivation in educational contexts which have showed that students assigned to autonomy-supportive teachers reported increased intrinsic motivation, competence, and self-esteem (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009, p. 135).

Another major motivation construct, self-efficacy, developed in the late 1990’s. It is a major component of Bandura’s (1997) Social Cognitive Theory which suggests the belief “in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 31). It is a primary determinant of task-motivated behavior and performance, contending that behavior is strongly encouraged by self-influence (Harrison, Rainer Jr, Hochwarter, & Thompson, 1997). The beliefs of self-efficacy provide the foundation for human motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment (Pajares, 2006). Together in the context of
education, self-efficacy and self-determination theory provide the motivational groundwork that students need to reach a sense of social, emotional, and academic well-being.

**Conclusion**

The nation’s at-risk population struggles in many areas, including education. Although many factors are out of the control of educators, such as lack of parent involvement, lack of support (social and emotional), class size, low socioeconomic status and minority status, the school environment and its’ components play a vital role in student outcomes. By focusing in on strategies that work with this susceptible population, many districts have developed alternative programs to assist students in meeting academic success. In these programs, class sizes are smaller, the curriculum is more flexible, and the students feel connected.

By focusing on educational stakeholders’ perceptions in conjunction with the motivation constructs of self-determination theory and self-efficacy in an alternative school setting, the researcher was able to identify a relationship between a student’s social, emotional, and academic well-being and the practices within the educational setting. The evidence provided throughout this review supports this proposal, including the research questions and methodology.

There have been numerous studies and literature on alternative education and psychological well-being, yet few studies have examined educators’ perceptions of their educational strategies and the effect those practices have on at-risk students’ personal sense of emotional, social, and academic well-being within the alternative school environment. Due to the fact that there is no consensus on best practices, it was imperative to look closely at current practices to ensure the program is appropriately addressing student needs and to see what components, policies, and approaches could be implemented, restructured, or eliminated to enhance student outcomes. This problem needs to be addressed so the at-risk students receive
the education needed to obtain a high school diploma and to function successfully in society. If this does not happen, many students will lack the skills, knowledge, and persistence necessary to succeed in the real world.
Chapter 3- Qualitative

Methodology

In order to answer the guiding research questions about educator perceptions within an alternative high school setting, a descriptive, qualitative single case study was selected as the best approach for the purpose of this study (Yin, 2003). According to Creswell (2007), “case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information…and reports a case description and case-based themes” (p. 73). This research project meets the general criteria of case study methodology as it poses “how” questions, the researcher had little control over the events, and the study focused on a contemporary phenomenon within real life context through the theoretical lens of self-determination (Yin, 2009, p. 2).

Site and Participants

The research for this case study was conducted in June and September of 2013 at an alternative public high school in southeastern New England. This comprehensive alternative program consists of a combination of full-time and part-time students who vary in academic abilities, behaviors, and socioeconomic statuses, but who all have the desire to graduate high school. The full-time students take all of their academic requirements within the program, where the part-time students take credit recovery courses in addition to their traditional day school course loads. Although the graduation requirements are the same when compared to the district’s typical high school setting, the alternative school students are able to receive their education in a smaller group that takes place during after school hours (2:45pm-7:00pm). As a result, many of the students are able to work or volunteer during the morning/early afternoon
hours. The students have separate teachers for each core subject, as well as physical education, career preparation, and elective components. In addition, there is a full time administrator and part-time counselors and special education support.

The participants for this study were selected through a purposeful sample, which is when participants are purposefully chosen in order to inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). The participant grouping consisted of six licensed educators from various academic disciplines within the alternative high school who have held positions for 1 to 5 years: an administrator, science teacher, special education teacher, guidance counselor, instructional technology teacher, and a math teacher. This combination represented an educator from various job positions within the program.

In consideration of ethical conduct, each participant was asked to sign a consent form that explained the purpose and procedures of the study, which included a written statement explaining that participation was solely voluntary; therefore participants could opt out at any time. In addition, the site and participant names were left anonymous to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Research bias/ Positionality Statement

“One way to guard against this bias is for the researcher to explicitly recognize his or her presuppositions and to make a conscious effort to set these aside in the analysis” (Gummesson, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In regard to the problem of study, the researcher had prior work experience with this southeastern alternative program. For five years (2007-2012), the researcher worked as a guidance counselor, therefore became familiar with many of the faculty members and school structure. The researcher made a conscious effort to set aside any opinions or other partialities throughout the research process.
All known biases and limitations were presented in writing to the participants at the start of the study. It will be noted that the role of the researcher is solely that of a researcher and not a colleague. As a result, participants responded openly knowing that they were not being supervised or evaluated.

**Data Collection**

Restatement of Research Questions:

1. How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

2. How do educational stakeholders perceive the program may be improved to meet the specific social, emotional, and academic needs of the students?

The research questions were guided by the three components of Deci & Ryan’s (1985, 2000) self-determination theory: achieving competence, autonomy, and relatedness in order to foster a sense of emotional, social, and academic well-being.

In order to answer the questions of the study, the researcher utilized three forms of data collection: surveys, open-ended interviews, and focus groups. The three datasets were designed to gather data specific to educator perceptions of practices and structures within the alternative program in relationship to student success, including how educators meet the students’ psychological needs of the self-determination theoretical framework (competence, autonomy, and relatedness). The data collected was then analyzed and cross-checked with the themes common throughout the literature, including motivation, self-efficacy, self-regulation, personalization, care, socialization, competence, autonomy, and relatedness.
First, a survey was administered to the participants. Next, open-ended interviews took place. The data collected from the survey and open-ended interviews was then analyzed to help inform the questions for the focus group, which was the last form of data collection.

Survey: This data set was chosen because it allowed the researcher to follow a standard protocol and provide precise data on educators’ perceptions (Butin, 2010). The researcher administered the *Teacher Self-efficacy for Teaching* scale in combination with Cultures Connecting’s teacher evaluation. The self-efficacy likert scale, reported in Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones & Reed (2002), was based on the Teacher Efficacy scale originally reported in Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Brissie (1987). In combination with an educator evaluation survey based on relationships, relevance, rigor, and results of culturally responsive environments, the researcher hoped to assess the participants’ perceptions of current strategies and practices that affect a student’s sense of emotional, social, and academic well-being within the alternative program setting. The data collected was analyzed and presented both narratively and in bar graphs to show the survey results. The researcher had permission to use this scale based on the authors’ statement of use disclaimer. The researcher also sent emails to notify the authors of the use of their scales and the purpose of this current study.

Open-ended interviews (Primary Dataset):

According to Yin (2009), one of the most important sources of case study information is the interview (p. 106). This data set was chosen because open-ended questions allowed the researcher to listen to the participants and let their answers guide new questions, which reflected an increased understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2007, p. 43).

Focus Groups: The third and final data set was the facilitation of a focus group.
The goal of a focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants. Because a group, rather than an individual, is asked to respond to questions, dialogue tends to take on a life of its own. Participants “piggy-back” on the comments of others and add a richness to the dialogue that could not be achieved through a one-on-one interview” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 1).

This data set was selected because focus groups are likely to produce the best information when: interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other, time to collect information is limited, and interviewees interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information (Creswell, 2007, p. 133). The questions for the focus group were based on the outcome of the first two data sets: survey and open-ended questions. The focus group forum allowed the participants to share and discuss their perceptions, opinions, and beliefs about the alternative high school program, which yielded a variety of data and themes.

The various data collected from the three data sources was then triangulated using corroborating strategies so the facts of the study were supported by more than one source of evidence and informed one another through the data collection process (Yin, 2009, p. 116). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation is a mode of improving the probability that the findings and interpretations of the study will be found credible (p. 305).
The three data sets were analyzed and coded individually using a code- recode procedure: descriptive coding followed by pattern coding. The data was then cross-checked for consistency and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Data Analysis**

In order to analyze data as a qualitative researcher using a single case study approach, a linear logic model was used to guide the researcher through the investigation of the alternative school’s practices and outcomes, as perceived by educators (Yin, p. 150, 2009). The logic model showed the progression of data collection and analysis that was followed through the study to assist the researcher in gathering the information needed to gauge educators’ perceptions of students’ well-being. It also helped in determining whether the practices in place were
producing the intended outcomes and addressing the students’ psychological well-being appropriately and effectively.

Once the data was collected (field notes and audiotapes) and transcribed, the information of each data set was coded utilizing a descriptive coding method by hand. The researcher categorized the data in single words or short phrases to help provide an organizational understanding of the study. The data was then re-coded using a pattern coding method, which helped refine the codes and categories into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs (Saldaña, 2013). Based on literature, it was expected that various themes could emerge from all three datasets, including:

- Motivation (Intrinsic and Extrinsic)
- Self-efficacy
- Self-regulation
- Personalization
- Parental support
- Smaller Learning Communities
- Care
- Socialization
- Competence
- Autonomy
- Relatedness

These are significant, common themes throughout the review of literature and are supported by the self-determination theoretical framework. The data collected was then triangulated to see the outcomes of how various educational stakeholders perceive the components and practices of the
alternative high school program. These results ultimately determined what works most effectively with the at-risk population. As a result, recommendations were made to add, improve, and eliminate various practices to enhance the overall program.

**Trustworthiness**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is the role of the researcher to ask specific questions of their inquiry regarding truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality to maintain the trustworthiness and validity of the study (p. 290). With the purpose of following these four criteria and to minimize any threats, the researcher followed the guidelines set forth by Lincoln and Guba in relation to the qualitative approach to establishing trustworthiness through four strategies: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. They were addressed as follows (Krefting, 1991, p. 217):

- **Credibility**: Member checking, triangulation, and interview technique
- **Transferability**: Dense description, member checking
- **Dependability**: Triangulation, code-recode procedure
- **Confirmability**: Triangulation
Chapter 4: Research Findings

Introduction/Purpose Statement

The purpose of this descriptive, qualitative case study was to investigate the perceptions of various educational stakeholders regarding the components and practices of a southeastern New England alternative program to determine what works most effectively with the at-risk population. This inclusive alternative program consists of a population of both special education and non-special education students who all have the desire to obtain a high school diploma, but who have had various difficulties impact their success in the traditional high school setting. There are currently 72 students in the program; 46 of them being full time students and the other 26 taking credit recovery classes in addition to their traditional day school course loads.

The goal of this study was to determine what practices could be added, improved, or eliminated from the current program in order to assist these 72 students in achieving a sense of psychological well-being and a variety of successes. These accomplishments may include, but are not limited to: the attainment of a high school diploma, improved social/emotional skills to assist in daily interactions, the completion of college or career preparation programs, and job fulfillment. This data was obtained through three forms of data collection: surveys, open-ended interviews, and a focus group.

This chapter is divided into six sections, collectively presenting the research findings. The first section, Research Questions, re-states the two questions that guided the study. In addition, Deci and Ryan’s (1985, 2000) self-determination theory is discussed and the researcher describes the significance it played in the data collection. In the second section, Research Design, the researcher reviews the justification behind conducting a single case study as supported by Yin (2009) and Creswell (2007). The third section, Site and Participants, offers a
summary of the school and educators involved in this study, as well as the recruitment process. In addition, it offers the reader demographic information gathered from the surveys, including years of experience, current educator position, and level of education. In the fourth section, *Data Collection*, the researcher explains all three methods of data collection: survey, open-ended interviews, and the focus group. Each data set is divided into a sub-section within this chapter in order to show the analysis of each. The *Survey Results* sub-section presents bar graphs and narrative summaries of data from each survey question as these relate to educators’ current experiences on five difference scales gauging psychological well-being. The next sub-section, *Open-ended Interview Results*, describes the interview, transcription, and coding processes. It also identifies significant findings from the analysis of participant interviews regarding their perceptions of the alternative high school program. In the final sub-section, *Focus Group Results*, the researcher used the research participants’ group discussion to confirm and clarify the data collected throughout the previous data sets and to identify any additional findings. The fifth section, *Trustworthiness*, explains how the findings of this case study were validated. The final section, *Summary of Findings*, presents the results of the various data collected.

**Research Questions**

1. How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

2. How do educational stakeholders perceive the program may be improved to meet the specific needs of the students?

The research questions were guided by Deci & Ryan’s (1985, 2000) self-determination theory. Self-determination theory is considered a macro-theory of human motivation, emotion,
and development that focuses on the importance of meeting three specific psychological needs in order to foster a sense of psychological health and well-being: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ellerbrook & Keifer, 2010). Competence, autonomy, and relatedness are considered “the heart” of self-determination theory because together these components establish the necessary mechanisms for proactivity, optimal development, and psychological health of human beings (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004; Van den Broeck, 2010).

By framing the research questions around the components of SDT, the researcher aimed to gather information on educational stakeholders’ perceptions of how specific teaching practices and environmental factors within an alternative school setting promote and support individual motives, needs, and an overall sense of emotional, social, and academic well-being.

**Research Design**

In order to answer the guiding research questions about educator perceptions within an alternative high school setting, a descriptive, qualitative single case study was selected as the best approach for the purpose of this study (Yin, 2003). According to Creswell (2007), “case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information…and reports a case description and case-based themes” (p. 73). This research study meets the general criteria of case study methodology as it posed “how” questions, the researcher had little control over the events, and the study focused on a contemporary phenomenon within real life context through the theoretical lens of self-determination (Yin, 2009, p. 2).
Site and Participants

The research for this case study was conducted in June and September of 2013 at an alternative public high school in southeastern New England. Once IRB approval was obtained, the researcher recruited participants through a purposeful sample of alternative high school educators. The final grouping consisted of six licensed educators from various academic disciplines within the alternative high school who have held positions for one to six years in the current program and have a range of four to thirty-two years of educational experience: an administrator, special education teacher, guidance counselor, science teacher, instructional technology teacher, and a math teacher. This combination represented a variety of positions within the alternative school program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educator</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Current Assignment</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>6 years (5 years in alternative education)</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>11 years (10 years in alternative education)</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>4 years (3 years in alternative education)</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>31 years (6 years in alternative education)</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>25 years (10 years in alternative education)</td>
<td>Instructional Technology</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>32 years (7 years in alternative education)</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Participant Profiles

This data depicts the participants' profile information. Each of the participants' information has been protected with non-specific names.
Data Collection

The researcher utilized three forms of data collection for the purpose of this research: surveys, open-ended interviews, and a focus group. The three data sets were designed to gather data specific to educators’ perceptions of practices and structures within the alternative program in relationship to student success, including how educators meet the students’ psychological needs which are evidenced throughout the self-determination theoretical framework (competence, autonomy, and relatedness).

In order to analyze data as a qualitative researcher using a single case study approach, a linear logic model was used to guide the researcher through the investigation of the alternative school’s practices and outcomes, as perceived by educational stakeholders (Yin, p. 150, 2009). The logic model below (Figure 1) shows the progression of data collection and analysis that was followed through the study to assist the researcher in gathering the information needed to gauge educators’ perceptions of student well-being. It also helped in determining whether the practices in place are producing the intended outcomes and addressing the students’ psychological well-being appropriately and effectively.

Figure 2. Linear Logic Model (Adapted from Yin, 2009, p.157)
The first phase of data collection was the administration of survey questions/statements to each participant. The survey was divided into five sections in order to gather information on a variety of sub-topics: Self-efficacy; Relatedness; Rigor, Challenge and Engagement; Autonomy and Relevance; and Competence, Authenticity and Effectiveness.

According to Yin (2009), one of the most important sources in case study information is the interview (p. 106). Open-ended interviews were the second phase in data collection, yet served as the primary data set with the goal of gathering data essential to answering the research questions. Each interview was digitally recorded on two devices, transcribed word for word by hand, and then coded and analyzed for emergent themes using MAXQDA 11.

Finally, 5 of the 6 participants participated in a focus group interview to validate and confirm the themes and findings that had emerged in the two previous datasets. One participant was absent from school the day of the meeting, therefore was not able to participate in the focus group.

The focus group was also used as a means of member checking. Each participant had been sent an email prior to the focus group with the transcriptions and findings, which allowed them to check for accuracy. The participants were encouraged to confirm, contest or revise the document based on their perceptions and were able to discuss the document with the researcher, if needed. Upon review of the data, each participant confirmed that the findings of the data collection were a clear and truthful reflection of their perceptions of the alternative high school program. The data collected was then analyzed and cross-checked with the themes common throughout the literature, along with the two previous data sets. The participants were then sent the focus group transcriptions and findings to again confirm that the findings were an accurate portrayal of their perceptions on the alternative program.
Survey

The researcher administered the *Teacher Self-efficacy for Teaching* scale, in combination with four of *Cultures Connecting’s* teacher evaluations. The teacher self-efficacy scale is an instrument that was used to gather the educators’ perceptions of their own self-efficacy when working with the at-risk population. The purpose of *Culture Connecting’s* evaluation was to gather specific data on how educators perceive they relate, challenge, and encourage their students, in addition to assessing the extent of authentic and effective teaching and learning taking place. Although the second instrument, *Culture Connecting’s* teacher evaluation, is more directly related to the research questions than the self-efficacy scale, it was used in combination because the researcher believed it was significant to the study to gauge the educators’ perceptions of how much of an impact they believe they have on their students.

The self-efficacy likert scale, reported in Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones & Reed (2002), was based on the Teacher Efficacy scale originally reported in Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Brissie (1987). In combination with educator evaluation surveys based on relationships, relevance, rigor, and results of culturally responsive environments, the researcher was able to assess the participants’ perceptions of current strategies and practices that affect a student’s sense of emotional, social, and academic well-being within the alternative program setting. The data collected was then analyzed and presented both narratively and in bar graphs below to show the survey results. The researcher received permission to use these scales based on the authors’ statement of use disclaimers. The researcher also sent emails to notify the authors of the use of their scales and the purpose of this study (Appendices G and H).

Self-Efficacy Scale: The self-efficacy scale was adapted from Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones & Reed’s (2002) *Teacher Self-efficacy for Teaching* scale. It consisted of 12 statements
that all aimed to gather information concerning how educators rate their efficacy in student engagement, instructional practices, and classroom management. This scale was based on a 5-point likert scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The results are displayed using a bar graph below; the x-axis shows the participants’ responses grouped together and displayed as percentages, while the y-axis lists each of the 12 statements. The “strongly agree” and “agree” responses were combined into one group, as well as the “strongly disagree” and “disagree” for the purpose of analyzing the data, but the full graph is listed in Appendix I.

**Scale of Self-Efficacy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

12. My students’ peers influence their academic performance more than I do.
11. Most of a student's performance depends on the home environment, so I have limited influence.
10. My students' peers influence their motivation more than I do.
9. I feel as though some of my students are not making any academic progress.
8. I am uncertain how to reach some of my students.
7. I am successful with the students in my school.
6. There is a limited amount that I can do to raise the basic performance level of students.
5. Most of a student's school motivation depends on the home environment, so I have limited influence.
4. I usually know how to get through to students.
3. Children are so private and complex, I never know if I am getting through to them.
2. If I try really hard, I can get through to even the most difficult and unmotivated students.
1. I feel that I am making a significant educational difference in the lives of my students.

*Figure 3: Educators’ Perceptions on Self-Efficacy*
Summary of Self-efficacy scale:

There was consistency in responses among many of the statements confirming that the alternative school educators do collectively believe they are making a significant educational difference in student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management.

100% of the participants believe that if they try hard, they can get through to even the most difficult, private, or complex students and that they are ultimately successful with them. All participants also perceived themselves as having an impact on raising the basic performance level of their students. This continuity is significant and consistent in showing that each educator believes he/she is making a difference in students’ education.

The researcher did notice some discontinuity in responses regarding the influence that the students’ home environment and peer groups had on academic performance and motivation. 50% neither agreed nor disagreed that their students’ peers influence their academic performance more than the educator, while the other 50% disagreed and therefore perceived that they do have an impact as well. In similar fashion, 50% neither agreed nor disagreed, 16.7% disagreed, and 16.7% agreed that their students’ peers have more of an influence on motivation than the educator. The “neither agree nor disagree” response option added to the possibility of disjointedness of responses by giving each participant the option to not choose one end of the likert scale over the other. The discrepancies among these responses show that there is disparity in how educators perceive their influence on student performance, which could be due to the specific role the educator has within the alternative high school program.

The researcher also noticed a discrepancy between two of the survey statements: statement #4 “I usually know how to get through to students” and statement 8 “I am uncertain how to reach some of my students”. 100% of participants agreed with statement 4, showing that
they each believes he/she has the ability to get through to students, but only 66.7% responded similarly on statement #8.

Overall, the participants did rate their self-efficacy higher rather than lower, which indicates that these educators believe they often succeed in meeting the challenges of educating at-risk students. At times, home issues and peer influences do affect the students, but the educators believe they collectively have a positive impact on their students’ learning and that they ultimately are successful in getting through to most of the student population. According to Pajares (2006), the beliefs of self-efficacy provide the foundation for human motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment. If educators portray their efficacy in the classroom, it is hoped that the students will relate and hopefully increase their own self-worth.

The second survey, *Scale of Relatedness*, was designed to gather data on educators’ perceptions of how well they relate and connect with their students. There were 11 statements within this survey category, each rated on a 5-point likert scale using: “rarely”, “sometimes”, “frequently”, “always”, or “does not apply”. The results are displayed below using a bar graph; the x-axis displays the participants’ responses grouped together and shown as percentages, while the y-axis lists each of the 11 statements. The “sometimes” and “frequently” were combined into one group for the purpose of graphing and analyzing the data since the two both gathered similar information on the participants who rated themselves in between “rarely” and “always”. The full data is available in the appendices (Appendix J).
The purpose of statements #1, #3, and #7 was to gauge participants’ perceptions of the genuine care, time, and encouragement offered to their students. Statement #1, “I show genuine care for each student” resulted in 33.3% answering “always”, with the other 66.7% responding “sometimes/frequently”. Statement #3, “I take time to help students individually” had 50% of
participants stating that they always take the time to help students individually, with the other 50% responding with frequently. Similarly to statement #3, statement #7 “I encourage and listen to student feedback, even when I disagree” resulted in 50% responding “always” and the other 50% “frequently”. The responses of these three statements are significant in showing that alternative educators perceive they more often than not show genuine care for the students within the program, take time to help them individually, and encourage and listen to student feedback.

Statement #2, “I express high expectations for each student” was to gauge each educator’s perception of the level of expectation for each student. 83.3% answered that they frequently express high expectations for each student, while 16.7% of participants answered always. This data is significant in evidencing that the participants collectively express high expectations for their students.

Statements #4 and #5 focused on students’ genuine efforts in the classroom and learning from their mistakes. The results from statement #4, “I encourage students to make mistakes and learn from them” varied among participants with 66.7% responding “sometimes/frequently” and 33.3% “always”. Statement #5, “I openly commend students’ genuine efforts and excellent work” was geared to having each educator assess if students are commended on their efforts and great work. 50% perceived themselves as always praising their students, with the other 50% responding “frequently”. Although there was some variation in participant responses along these two statements, the results are still significant in showing that the educators do believe they openly commend students’ efforts and encourage the students to learn from their mistakes.

Statement #6, “I welcome others to observe in the classroom” did not apply to all participants (N=2), but did result in significant data from the other participants (N=4). 75% of the teacher participants responded “sometimes/frequently” and the remaining 25% answered
“always”. According to this outcome, the participants welcome others to observe regularly, which demonstrated both comfort and confidence in their teaching abilities.

Statements #8 and #11 both resulted with the same data percentages: 50% responded “always” to having clear, consistent, and equal consequences, in addition to using culturally appropriate language and encouraging students to do so as well. The other 50% choose “sometimes/frequently” on both statements resulting in the substantiation that the participants often perceive the classroom environment to be a consistent, appropriate environment.

When it comes to respectfulness in the program between students and faculty, the participants perceived that the “students are respectful to each other and me” most of the time. 83.3% responded “sometimes/frequently”, with the other 16.7% answering “always”.

Lastly, “I utilize students as learning aids for each other” was answered harmoniously by 100% of the participants. This significant data suggests that the participants frequently use their students as assistants for others to learn and relate to.

The scale of relatedness did not produce any responses in the “rarely” category, which demonstrates the educators overall perception that they effectively relate and connect with the at-risk student population in order to assist them in meeting academic success. This data, which is directly associated with research question #1 and the self-determination theory, adds significance to the study by supporting the documentation in the literature review on the importance of relatedness and connectedness in education. “Relatedness refers to the desire to feel connected to others- to love and care, and to be loved and cared for” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231). It is satisfied when there is an established respect and alliance with others, which results in feeling connected, protected, and supported (Deci & Ryan, 2008a; Roffey, 2013). A sense of belonging is a significant protective factor for students experiencing difficulty. Although it can be a
challenge to connect with the vulnerable student population, the feeling of connectedness is vital to their success and overall well-being (Roffey, 2013).

The third survey, *Scale of Rigor, Challenge, and Engagement*, was designed to gather data on educators’ perceptions of how learning is presented and the extent of rigor and engagement within the lessons. There were 9 statements within this survey category, each rated on a 5-point likert scale using: “rarely”, “sometimes”, “frequently”, “always”, or “does not apply”. The results are displayed using a bar graph below; the x-axis shows the participants’ responses grouped together and shown as percentages, while the y-axis lists each of the nine statements. The “sometimes” and “frequently” were combined into one group for the purpose of analyzing the data since the two both gathered information of the participants who rated themselves in between “rarely” and “always”. The full data is available in the appendices (Appendix K).
Although this sub-survey did produce significant data, it did not acquire a consensus in participant responses. It is believed this disparity was due to the specific educational roles that two of the participants hold within the program: administrator and guidance counselor. This

*Figure 5: Educators’ Perceptions on Rigor, Challenge, and Engagement*
scale was more specific to the expectations of a classroom teacher and therefore resulted in numerous “does not apply” responses from the non-teacher participants. The responses from the teacher participants were the focus when analyzing the data gathered from these nine survey questions.

100% (N=4) of teacher participants believed that they often present challenging topics for students to analyze, explore, and discuss in order to come to new views and understandings. These same participants are in agreement that they do their best to ensure students of all learning levels understand the educational material more often than not.

80% of teacher participants often encourage students to articulate and share their ideas with one another in an active learning environment. The other 20% responded “always”. Although there was some variation in responses, the results are significant in demonstrating that the alternative school teachers do provide an encouraging, active, and collaborative environment for their students the majority of the time.

Statement #8, “I choose books that allow students to more deeply examine global issues” did not produce significant data because 83.3% of participants responded with “does not apply”. Again, this could be due to the specific role of the educators taking into consideration that specific subject areas, such as math, do not examine global issues within the explicit curriculum. Similarly, statement #6, “I plan activities that are thinking centered and engaging” varied in responses with 33% responding with “sometimes/frequently”, 16.7% responding “always”, and the remainder responding “does not apply”.

Overall, the teacher participants perceive their alternative classrooms to be engaging, challenging environments where learning is taking place the majority of the time. Due to the focus on classroom teachers in this sub-survey, it is not clear how administration and guidance
perceive the extent of rigor, challenge, and engagement within the alternative school environment.

The fourth survey, *Scale of Autonomy and Relevance*, was designed to gather data on how educators’ perceive their ability to relate the lessons to their students in order to increase understanding. In addition, the scale assesses the extent to which educators encourage self-sufficiency among their students. There were nine statements within this survey category, each rated on a 5-point likert scale using: “rarely”, “sometimes”, “frequently”, “always”, or “does not apply”. The results are displayed using a bar graph below; the x-axis shows the participants’ responses grouped together and shown as percentages, while the y-axis lists each of the 9 statements. The “sometimes” and “frequently” were combined into one group for the purpose of analyzing the data since the two both gathered information of the participants who rated themselves in between “rarely” and “always”. The full data is available in the appendices (Appendix L).
Similar to the previous sub-survey, Rigor, Challenge, and Engagement, the responses on the Scale of Autonomy and Relevance were affected by the specific educational roles the participants assume in the alternative program. For the purpose of analyzing the data listed in the above table, the researcher focused on the responses of the teacher participants (N=4).
100% of teacher participants perceive that they often make sure students are engaged in their work by connecting the lessons to culturally relevant resources and strategies. This data is significant because the teacher participants responded consistently on the three specific statements that supported this conclusion.

100% of teacher respondents also responded that students pursue their own learning and understanding of the topic because it is often made relevant to them. Although 100% of respondents were in agreement, one participant did not respond. It is not obvious whether this was purposeful or unintentional.

The two statements that focused on encouraging students’ autonomy, “I encourage students to ask meaningful questions” and “I encourage students to give input on my instruction”, produced the same data responses. 25% of the teacher participants answered “always”, with the other 75% responding “sometimes/frequently”. With the corresponding responses between the two statements, the researcher presumes that all teacher participants are striving to encourage autonomy in the alternative program.

Statements #4, #6, and #7 resulted in a higher “does not apply” response rate than expected. It is believed that this is once again due to the specific educational roles of the participants. Statement #4, “I make activities for learning motivating and intellectually engaging” produced a 50% “does not apply” response rate, with the other 50% answering “sometimes/frequently”. Statement #6, “I provide choices for students in learning topics and styles” and statement #7, “I display diverse cultural materials, photos, words, art, etc. that represent cultural diversity” both resulted in 66.7% “does not apply” and 33.3% “sometimes/frequently”. Due to the “does not apply” option, the researcher was not able to gather significant data on these three statements, but is able to infer from the data that the
participants who did respond do believe they are often providing choices for students in learning topics and styles, making activities for learning motivating and intellectually engaging, and that they are displaying cultural materials that represent diversity.

Although there was some inconsistency in responses due to job expectations and duties, the scale of autonomy and relevance demonstrated the teacher perception that the alternative program is an educational environment encompassing both self-sufficiency and significance.

The fifth and final survey, *Scale of Competence, Authenticity, and Effectiveness*, was designed to gather data on educators’ perceptions of their students’ academic proficiency in addition to assessing the extent of authentic and effective teaching and learning taking place. There were ten statements within this survey category, each rated on a 5-point likert scale using: “rarely”, “sometimes”, “frequently”, “always”, or “does not apply”. The results are displayed using a bar graph below; the x-axis shows the participants’ responses grouped together and shown as percentages, while the y-axis lists each of the 10 statements. Similarly to the previous survey scales, the “sometimes” and “frequently” were combined into one group on the bar graph for the purpose of graphing and analyzing the data since the two options both gathered information of the participants who rated themselves in between “rarely” and “always”. The full data is in the appendices (Appendix M).
Figure 7: Educators’ Perceptions on Competence, Authenticity, and Effectiveness
Similarly to some of the previous sub-scales, specific job roles unrelated to teaching did cause an increase in the “does not apply” response rate, but only affected a few of the statements. Overall, the participants’ responses corresponded with one another. This consistency is significant in showing that the participants do perceive their styles to be conducive to creating a competent, authentic, and effective environment in the alternative school program.

100% of participants are in agreement that the alternative students are often able to demonstrate their skills and understanding through various means, are able to think, reflect and communicate effectively in a variety of ways, are able to make connections between themselves and people who are different, and can understand and use culturally appropriate language. These parallel responses are significant in showing the overall perception of alternative school educators is that their students are competent and therefore able to learn, connect, think, and communicate appropriately.

Three of the statements had an 83.3% “sometimes/frequently” response rate, with the other 16.7% choosing the “does not apply” option. The majority of participants believe the students often read fluently, are able to reflect on higher level questions posed to them, and have their work displayed. This response rate is significant in demonstrating the competency of alternative school students. Although 16.7% chose the “does not apply” response option, most likely due to the specific educational role, it is believed that these specific statements could have been answered with a more specific option because the statements were not specific to teachers.

Statement #2, “students are able to use graphic organizers to help them explain their thinking in writing” was equally split between “sometimes” and “does not apply”. This is most likely due to the participants’ specific job role. 80% of teacher respondents have their students using graphic organizers the majority of the time in order to help them explain their thinking.
Similarly, statement #6, “Students are able to develop multiple solutions to problems in class and clearly explain how they solved the problem” had a 33.3% “does not apply” rate, with the other 66.7%, all who were teacher participants, respond with the “sometimes/frequently” option.

All the statements from this sub-scale collectively confirm that the participants, especially the teacher participants, perceive their students have the ability to be effective and successful in the classroom. There were no “always” responses on any statement, which shows that there are some improvements to be made to better assist the student population in achieving competence, authenticity, and effectiveness in the alternative program.

Summary of Surveys

Together, the *Teacher Self-efficacy for Teaching* scale and *Cultures Connecting’s* teacher evaluations contributed valuable data in support of answering research question #1: How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

The self-efficacy scale indicated that the participants believe they succeed in meeting the challenges of educating at-risk students and they are successful in reaching most of the student population. It is important for educators to have confidence in their own abilities when working with at-risk students because this self-worth and assurance can positively impact students’ psychological well-being by showing the students that the educators are fully invested in making significant educational difference in their lives.

*Cultures Connecting’s* four sub-scales were directly related to the first research question. The scale of relatedness provided valuable data on the educators’ perceptions of how well they connect and understand the at-risk student population with ten of eleven statements receiving a “sometimes” or “always” rating, evidencing that the participants do perceive they are
successfully relating to the student population. The results from the scale of rigor, challenge and engagement confirmed that teacher participants perceive their alternative classrooms to be an engaging, challenging environment where learning is taking place. Although there was some inconsistency in responses due to job expectations and duties, the scale of autonomy and relevance demonstrated the perception of teacher participants was that they have created an educational environment encompassing both self-sufficiency and significance. Finally, the results from the scale of competence, authenticity, and effectiveness suggest the participants perceive their students have the ability to be effective and successful in the classroom. Together, these four sub-scales validate that the alternative school educators strive to impact their students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness in a variety of ways.

**Open-ended Interviews:**

According to Yin (2009), one of the most important sources of case study information is the interview (p. 106). This primary data set was chosen because open-ended questions allow the researcher to listen to the participants and let their answers guide new questions, which reflect an increased understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2007, p. 43).

The open-ended interviews were conducted separately by the researcher for each participant. The interviews took place in a quiet office setting away from distractions and other individuals, which helped ensure confidentiality. Before the interviews began, each participant was reminded of his/her right to discontinue with the research at any time and the right to decline any questions throughout the interview. The open-ended interviews consisted of twelve primary questions designed by the researcher, along with additional sub-questions, each pertaining to the alternative high school program (Appendix D). All participants were asked the same questions and were able to ask for clarification if needed. After the six interviews were conducted, the
researcher transcribed each digitally recorded interview word for word by hand. These were then analyzed and coded using MAXQDA 11.  

**Coding**

The open-ended interviews were analyzed and coded using a code-recode procedure in MAXQDA 11: descriptive coding followed by pattern coding using thematic reduction. Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were uploaded into the MAXQDA data analysis software. The researcher coded the transcriptions with an alpha-code system based on the common themes throughout the literature (Table 2). Throughout this analysis, other themes emerged which were then coded as well. This first-cycle coding method resulted in 23 initial codes. These codes were then re-coded using a pattern coding method through a matrix system in MAXQDA 11, which helped organize and refine the codes and categories into a smaller number of sets, themes, and constructs (Saldaña, 2013). This second-cycle coding procedure reduced the 23 original codes into 6 specific themes: *Alternative Education, Psychological Well-Being, Relatedness, Smaller Learning Communities, Parental Involvement,* and *District Support* (Table 7). In addition, the researcher was able to identify the frequency of each specific theme throughout the transcriptions (Table 8). This data was then cross-checked for consistency and credibility (Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E., 1985). As supported by the review of literature, the themes coincided with the research questions and the constructs of the self-determination theory.
Table 3: Coding System Used for Open-ended Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme (Pattern Code- Second Cycle)</th>
<th>Initial Alpha-Code</th>
<th>Research Question(s) Addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Alternative Education          | 1.1 AP (Alternative Program)  
|                                   | 1.2 SE (School Environment)  
|                                   | 1.3 IMP (Improvements)  
|                                   | 1.4 FP (Future Program)  
|                                   | 1.5 PP (Program Purpose)  
|                                   | 1.6 PD (Program Design)  | 1. How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?  
|                                   | 2. How do educational stakeholders perceive the program may be improved to meet the specific needs of the students?  |
| 2. Psychological Well-Being       | 2.1 SOC (Social)  
|                                   | 2.2 EMO (Emotional)  
|                                   | 2.3 AUT (Autonomy)  
|                                   | 2.4 MOT (Motivation)  
|                                   | 2.5 ACA (Academic)  
|                                   | 2.6 FAI (Failure)  
|                                   | 2.7 SS (Student Success)  
|                                   | 2.8 COM (Competence)  
|                                   | 2.9 BEH (Behavior)  
|                                   | 2.10 SI (Student Issues)  
|                                   | 2.11 SE (Self Esteem)  | 1. How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?  
|                                   | 2. How do educational stakeholders perceive the program may be improved to meet the specific needs of the students?  |
| 3. Relatedness                    | 3.1 CNCT (Connectedness)  
|                                   | 3.2 COMM (Communication)  | 1. How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?  
|                                   | 2. How do educational stakeholders perceive the program may be improved to meet the specific needs of the students?  |
| 4. Smaller Learning Communities   | 4.1 CS (Class size)  
|                                   | 4.2 PS (Program Size)  | 1. How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?  |
| 5. Parental Involvement           | 5.1 PI (Parent Involvement)  | 2. How do educational stakeholders perceive the program may be improved to meet the specific needs of the students?  |
| 6. District Support               | 6.1 DS (District Support)  | 1. How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?  |
Data Analysis

As a result of the preliminary survey of literature pertaining to alternative programming and self-determination theory that was collected prior to the research (Ryan, Still, & Lynch, 1994; Bermúdez & Márquez, 1996; Strahan, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002; Blum, 2005; Walsh, 2006; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), various themes were expected to emerge. The themes of Alternative Education, Psychological Well-Being, Relatedness, Smaller Learning Communities, and Parental Involvement all transpired through the coding process. District Support was also consistent throughout the transcriptions. The evidence collected throughout the open-ended interviews supports both the research questions and self-determination theory. These themes identified educational stakeholders’ perceptions of how the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness, in addition to their perceptions of how the program may be improved to meet the specific needs of the students.

Themes

Alternative Education:

Due to this case study topic, alternative education had the highest frequency of use throughout the open-ended interviews. The data gathered throughout these transcriptions provided significant contributions in answering the two research questions, as well as offering much insight concerning the alternative program’s strengths and weaknesses.

The participants all presented with a positive outlook on the topic of alternative education and believed the “alternative setting is a huge need”. They each seemed proud to be a part of that “community”, as numerous participants phrased it, and believed that the program is able to
“reach some of the kids that we weren’t able to reach before [in traditional school]”. Another participant phrased it as “a second chance”.

According to the participants, the alternative high school setting addresses student needs that were not met during traditional school. The program was designed in a way that allows the class sizes to be smaller, connections to be stronger, the time frame to be different, but ultimately, the graduation requirements to be the same. With “the number one goal [being] to prevent drop out”, the participants perceived there to be a “great success rate with a number of students” and that they are able to “give them an opportunity to achieve success”.

With the many positive perceptions of this southeastern New England alternative program, there were some weaknesses and suggestions identified as well. The “stigma” that comes along with alternative education was one concern. It is hoped “to move away from having ‘alternative’ in the name” in order to have that stigma removed. Another concern that emerged was the curriculum. “I think we need to look at the curriculum, which I think they are starting to do, and tailor it for kids… to go forward and meet success”. In addition to re-designing the curriculum, a few participants mentioned the need for staff meetings and additional mental health support. “I do wish that there was more time for the faculty to meet, I mean on a regular basis. I think that’s really key…”.

All feedback considered, the research participants each perceived the alternative program to positively impact students in a variety of ways, including socially, emotionally, and academically.

**Psychological Well-Being:**

According to the literature on *psychological well-being*, social surroundings that facilitate satisfaction of competence, autonomy, and relatedness in the school environment can help
support student’s inherent activity and motivation, resulting in enhanced psychological, developmental, and behavioral outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2008). All the students who enter the program have struggled “socially, emotionally, or behaviorally” in the past; therefore the program is designed to assist these students in finding success. “If they’re feeling good about their school setting, they are going to be doing a lot better academically and emotionally.”

All participants’ perceptions of psychological well-being within the alternative program aligned with Deci and Ryan’s (2008) self-determination theory. Each participant perceived the alternative program environment to be one that offers the resources and supports necessary to improve the students’ overall well-being. “If you like doing something and feel like you’re really getting some kind of success… your self-esteem is going to go up”. By offering “small classes”, “emotional supports”, “guest speakers”, individual and group meetings, opportunities for “social development” and ultimately a “second chance”, the alternative program is able to assist many students in meeting various successes.

There were many excerpts throughout each transcription to support the collective perception that the alternative program design is increasing the overall well-being of many students. “Seeing the kids come out of here graduating from alternative school is amazing. Just for them internally; they just feel so good”. “When you see an alternative student reach success, however small it may be on the big scale, when you see them start to get it, it’s so satisfying”. One recommendation that did emerge was the need for a consistent mental health counselor.

I have heard of other programs that have a school adjustment counselor working directly with mental health. This is so huge when it’s prevalent because you get those one or two students in your classroom and it is affecting everybody within the class. There needs to be more attention paid to the mental issues that some of these students have.
Based on the data collected, there are counselors available part time but the teachers perceived that there could be more involvement in the classroom environment in regard to teacher support.

The participants overwhelmingly perceived the alternative program to be positively impacting the students overall psychological well-being with the many supports embedded. As a result, these students are beginning to find success.

*Relatedness:*

The theme of relatedness, which is one of the key facets of self-determination theory, could have been thematically reduced to fall under either the *Psychological Well-Being* or *Smaller Learning Communities* theme, but the researcher believed it would serve as a great source of information as an entity of its own due to the high frequency it appeared throughout the transcriptions.

According to a variety of sources in the literature, “relatedness refers to the desire to feel connected to others- to love and care, and to be loved and cared for” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231). It is satisfied when there is an established respect and alliance with others, which results in feeling connected, protected, and supported (Deci & Ryan, 2008a; Roffey, 2013). A sense of belonging is a significant protective factor for students experiencing difficulty. Although it can be a challenge to connect with the vulnerable student population, the feeling of connectedness is vital to their success and overall well-being (Roffey, 2013). Each participant mentioned the importance of connections and how those relations positively impacted students. Their perceptions are evidenced by the many comments made on the topic; “The number one thing that I love about the alternative program is our sense of community”; “You know, we really pull together as a program”. 
The participants perceived the alternative program to be a supportive environment that the students “feel at home…and they feel like they belong to something”. “The fact that they can feel that people support them and they can support people. It’s a huge lesson that they learn out of alternative”. Schools can help encourage connectedness and positive bonds by providing a healthy, safe setting that incorporates and encourages cooperative learning and consistency in smaller learning communities (Blum, pp. 18-19).

**Smaller Learning Communities:**

Consistent in each of the participants’ interviews was the mention of the importance and influence of smaller learning communities. The participants collectively perceived the various small settings within the alternative program to be a positive aspect for both the students and faculty in regard to social, emotional, and academic well-being. “The faculty and staff…know exactly what is going on with each student during each day”. Accordingly, “It is a setting that addresses their needs”.

According to one participant, “[students] can feel overwhelmed in traditional day school with the number of students…[the alternative program] lowers their school anxiety… it also lowers the possibility of those students to get in trouble”. Correspondingly, another participant believed “the small group design definitely speaks to some of the social and emotional needs”. As a group, the alternative students and staff are able to check in together daily. “We are together as a group for the first ten minutes. We kind of check in with one another. We see where everyone is at”. Ultimately, this small group setting allows the educators to assess where each student is emotionally each day; therefore giving both the students and faculty a better idea of various supports that may be needed for that particular afternoon. The students can then receive
any specific one-on-one support they may need. “The alternative program is something that focuses on the individual student”. “The program doesn’t let anyone fall through the cracks”.

In addition, this alternative school program “provides [the students] with a relatively small, safe environment”. The students “have pride in their little group” and “feel like it’s a community”.

In terms of academics, “the small class sizes…help that population concentrate a little better and it takes a crowd away from them which is where they really thrive”. These small classes provide “the ability for teachers to be able to work so much more individually with these students”. “If you see someone struggling, it’s easier for you to go ahead and address that”.

All participants portrayed very positive thoughts on the benefits of smaller learning communities. It was a consistent theme throughout each transcription. The researcher was able to determine that the participants perceive smaller learning communities to positively impact students socially, emotionally, and academically.

*Parental Involvement:*

Parent involvement is a key factor in student success and emerged throughout the interviews; it has been linked to stronger academic achievement, higher educational aspirations, more positive perceptions of education, and stronger self-regulatory skills (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002, p. 2). The participants’ perceptions aligned with the review of literature. “Parent involvement goes hand in hand with student success”. “I think they have to be involved with it because…so they also understand what the kids are doing and in turn they can take pride when they see their kids meet success”.

Although all participants agreed with the importance of getting parents involved and that the students of involved parents have more success, they did not all have the same perception of
how involved parents are in this specific southeastern New England alternative program. Some of the participants believed the alternative program design allowed educators to contact parents more often and have meetings, yet one participant stated “I ended up not really knowing the parents of alternative kids any better than parents of day school kids”. This data shows that some of the parents are involved, yet others are not at all. As one participant stated, “Some of them are awesome and some of them are non-existent”.

Based on the data gathered from the six interviews, all participants perceive parent involvement to be a key component in student success, but there is room for improvement in regard to expanding the means of parent/teacher connections. Currently, the alternative school program allows the chance for the administrator, counselors, and special education liaison to make connections with many of the parents via phone and meetings, but there is not as much opportunity for teachers to do that.

District Support:

*District support* emerged as the final theme. Five of the six participants mentioned the support of the district and how the alternative high school would not be possible without this support of various district stakeholders.

Having it here has been very welcoming. The administration always helps out if we need anything here. It’s tough to have an alternative school in a traditional high school and I think that we are pulling it off pretty well because of the staff members at [traditional school name] who don’t look upon the alternative program as a negative aspect, but more as a positive aspect - the [district] in general.

In addition to the moral support offered by various district personnel, the budgetary support was frequently mentioned as well. “The [name of school district] did their best to provide funds”. These funds were built right into the fiscal year budget due to district
stakeholders seeing the need for this program. “Someone made it work because they saw the real need so they found the monies”.

This data showed the participants’ appreciation for the district support in order for the alternative program occur and run effectively. Without these various supports, the alternative program would not be in existence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples of Excerpts (Descriptive)</th>
<th>Frequency of Theme Throughout Transcriptions</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Education</td>
<td>“It really speaks to the needs of the kids and getting that one on one attention”</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Participants perceived the alternative program to positively impact at-risk students in a variety of ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Well-Being</td>
<td>“It they’re feeling good about their school’s setting, they are going to be doing a lot better academically and emotionally”</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>Participants perceived the alternative program improves students’ sense of their psychological well-being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatedness</td>
<td>“Kids in the alternative program start feeling like people know them as individuals and I think once you start making connections with kids, they tend to feel a little bit more motivated”</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Participants believe that they are able to reach their students by relating and connecting with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller Learning Communities</td>
<td>“We’re able to head off some of the issues, the drama, the problems that the students might get into in traditional day school [because of the smaller learning community]”</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>The SLC environment plays a primary role in student success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Involvement</td>
<td>“[The alternative program] supports whole family situations and not just the kids itself”</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Parent involvement is a key factor in assisting at-risk students in meeting academic, social, and emotional successes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Support</td>
<td>“All the funding that we used this year was right in the fiscal year budget”</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>The participants believe the program is able to run successfully due to district support.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4: Coding/Conclusions of Open-ended Interviews by Theme*
The following conclusions emerged based on the data collected on perceptions of alternative high school educators:

1. Participants perceived the alternative program to positively impact at-risk students in a variety of ways.
2. Participants perceived the alternative program improves students’ sense of their psychological well-being.
3. Participants believe that they are able to reach their students by relating and connecting with them.
4. The SLC environment plays a primary role in student success.
5. Parent involvement is a key factor in assisting at-risk students in meeting academic, social, and emotional successes.
6. The participants believe the program is able to run successfully due to district support.

Focus Group

A focus group was selected as the third and final data set because this type of forum was likely to produce valuable information because the interviewees were comparable with one another and they may have been hesitant to provide specific information in the one on one open-ended interview setting (Creswell, 2007, p. 133).

The focus group was held after school in a secluded conference room, which allowed the participants to share and discuss their perceptions, opinions, and beliefs about the alternative high school program in a private setting. Five of the six participants were in attendance for the focus group meeting and presented as relaxed, yet eager to participate in this final phase of research. The sixth participant was absent from school so was unable to attend.

The questions for the focus group (Appendix E) were created by the researcher based on the outcomes and themes of the first two data sets: survey and open-ended interviews, with the
goal of affirming those prior conclusions. These focus group questions also tied into the self-determination theoretical framework and specifically addressed both research questions.

Similar to the open-ended interviews, the data for the focus group was analyzed and coded using MAXQDA 11. Once the focus group was transcribed, it was uploaded into the MAXQDA data analysis software. The researcher coded the transcriptions by color based on the themes which surfaced in the previous data sets. Throughout this analysis, five of the six expected themes emerged, Alternative Education, Psychological Well-Being, Relatedness, Smaller Learning Communities, and Parental Involvement. District Support did not re-emerge in this data set, most likely due to the focus of the questions. As supported by the review of literature and the previous data sets, the themes that were evidenced coincided with the research questions and the constructs of self-determination theory.

Themes

The emergent themes, as in the previous data set, were abundant throughout the full transcription and all linked together to create what was perceived as a successful alternative high school program. The data collected throughout this focus group affirmed the conclusions of the research study thus far and added pertinent information as well by delving deeper into each theme.

Alternative Education

Participants collectively discussed their perceptions of alternative education and its impact on at-risk students by answering questions specific to the topic (Appendix E). They first conversed about what factors lead to not only the success of the student, but the success of the program. “School culture” was mentioned as a positive, as well as offering a “controlled”, “consistent”, “small setting” where “accountability” is immediate.
It was perceived by the participants that the alternative environment includes a variety of students, yet it provides an individualized environment for the various needs specific to each. “We have mothers in the program. We have working fathers in the program. We have students who are working to help their family financially. We have an assortment of students”. In order to meet the individual needs and graduation requirements explicit to each student, the program offers a range of many academic courses. There are also elective offerings, with the hope of adding technical studies programs at some point in the future. As a result, “the kids are getting that, you know, real world stuff”.

There was much focus put on improvements needed within the alternative setting, which is specific to research question #2. Participants discussed an assortment of improvements that they perceived as currently deficient. One concern that was weighed in on heavily by participants was the need for faculty meetings. In the previous alternative high school model, there was time set aside for all the staff to gather together to discuss various topics, such as “talking about what’s working and what isn’t. What kids are not getting along with whom and how, how you’re seeing a kid versus how I would be seeing him, which is huge”. “It was a wealth of information. I loved going to those staff meetings”.

Another concern that was discussed at length was the need for a full-time school psychologist/adjustment counselor to not only work with students, but to assist teachers in dealing with specific behaviors and going over “case histories”. In addition, it was noted that it would be helpful for the teachers to receive “special training in behavior management”.

Transportation, which was also mentioned in the open-ended interviews, was another concern that was discussed. “The transportation is always an issue in [town name] because it
happens to be a big town”. This problem often leads to “kids getting here a little bit late…we’re continuing to look into better ways. The transportation is a problem.”

During one of the participant’s open-ended interviews, faculty pay was brought up as a concern. The focus group forum allowed the group to collectively discuss the current means of payment and had suggestions for the future. According to one participant, faculty pay is currently the hourly district-wide tutoring rate, which does not go into retirement. “Coaches are getting stipends and other positions, but then the alternative school… you’re not getting that stipend; that does affect things”. As a result, the alternative program may not always “get that quality teacher”.

This evidenced the final conclusion of the study, in addition to specifically addressing research question #2: *There are specific improvements that participants perceived could assist the alternative school program in meeting the specific needs of the students.*

**Psychological Well-Being**

The focus group was able to affirm the previous conclusion that participants perceived the alternative program to improve students’ sense of *psychological well-being*, as well as closely explore the topic to discover some specifics as to how the program achieves that goal. One participant stated that it is the “…support and life skills. It’s reinforcement of them all the time. So, it’s having the right people working and making sure that their biggest goal is that these kids are going to leave and be positive members of society”. Another participant supported that by saying “I think that’s a big piece…they need life skills. That’s why they’re here, because they were lacking”.

Another factor that affects students’ sense of well-being is seeing graduation as a viable option. “Seeing that [the opportunity to graduate] is a real possibility for them, I think, becomes
a motivator as well, opposed to when they thought whatever they did wouldn’t help them”.

Students see this “light at the end of the tunnel” and start to feel hopeful about their futures and more confident in their own capabilities. More and more students who originally thought they would never graduate are inquiring about “the next steps” after graduation, including college, work, and the military.

**Relatedness**

The participants were able to discuss the various ways *relatedness* is incorporated into the program. According to one participant, “It’s personalization all over the place”. Another participant went on to say,

> At the start of the school day, we’re always in the hallway to greet [the students] on their way in. Each kid at least gets a ‘hello’ on their way in… we try to have a brief conversation with them. It doesn’t take much out of the day for us to do it and it could mean a lot to them.

The design of the program allows the educators to get to know the students on a more individual basis. “If you make a connection with a kid, they will be more accountable across the board”.

“You know, it’s true of all of us. I mean, we as adults, if we felt we had a connection to someone, chances are you’re going to be able to do a little bit better”. Each participant perceived that connectedness is a key part of the program and believed those relations are positively impacting student success.

**Smaller Learning Communities**

Although not as much data emerged on *smaller learning communities* in this third phase of collection, the information given was consistent with the previous data collected and therefore confirmed the conclusions from the open-ended interviews. Smaller learning communities proved to be a key factor in the success of alternative education. “It’s the small classes. The set
up now of alternative in general; I think it speaks to [the students] overall sense of well-being in a positive light. I absolutely do”.

**Parental Involvement**

Coinciding with the data collected in the open-ended interviews, the focus group highlighted the perception that parental involvement is an integral component in student success. The emphasis was put on the current practices of the alternative program and how parents contribute to their students’ education. According to one participant, there is “constant contact with parents”. “I try to have as many phone calls made home to parents as possible. We’ll call for grades. We’ll call for attendance. “We try to make good phone calls, too”. Another participant went on to say, “I think the students get a sense of it by now. They know that if they don’t come to school, their parents are going to get a phone call…if they skip a class, their parents are going to get a phone call”.

In addition to phone contact, there are meetings as well. “Last year…we met with every parent in the entire program, and obviously its expanded, but I think the parent connection is huge…we can’t control anything at home so having them be a partner…I think is huge”. In the future, it is hoped that meetings will occur “with every family of potential graduates. We’ll sit down with them. We’ll talk about their next steps individually and then we’ll go from there. So, it makes a huge impact to have parent involved”. It is also a program goal to “have a parent night and have guest speakers come in to talk about imperative topics that the parents should be made aware of…like the negative sides to Facebook, signs your kid is doing drugs or alcohol…” With the many parental involvement efforts, “some [parents] don’t respond at all. But on the whole, I can see an improvement over the last couple of years”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples Of Excerpts (Descriptive)</th>
<th>Original Conclusions From Surveys and Open-Ended Interviews Confirmed?</th>
<th>Additional Conclusions (if any)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Alternative Education        | “I heard that today from a kid… He said ‘I wouldn’t be in school now if it weren’t for that[alternative school]’”
                               | “It was a wealth of information. I loved going to those staff meetings”                                                                 | YES                                                                                           | There are specific improvements that participants perceived could assist the alternative school program in meeting the specific needs of the students |
| Psychological Well-Being     | “A big part of their well-being come from them seeing a light at the end of the runnel…some kids thought graduation wasn’t possible” | YES                                                                                           | N/A                                                                                           |
| Relatedness                  | “It is personalization all over the place!”                                                                 | YES                                                                                           | N/A                                                                                           |
| Smaller Learning Communities | “It’s the small classes. The set up now of alternative, in general, I definitely think it speaks to overall sense of well-being in a positive light. I absolutely do” | YES                                                                                           | N/A                                                                                           |
| Parental Involvement         | “I think the parent connection is huge. Because again, we can’t control anything at home so having them be a partner in trying to instill the life skills, instill the education, I think is huge and one of our biggest goals” | YES                                                                                           | N/A                                                                                           |

*Table 5: Coding/Conclusions of Focus Group by Theme*
Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is the role of the researcher to ask specific questions of their inquiry regarding truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality to maintain the trustworthiness and validity of the study (p. 290). With the purpose of following these four criteria and to minimize any threats, the researcher followed the guidelines set forth by Lincoln and Guba in relation to the qualitative approach to establishing trustworthiness through four strategies: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. They were addressed as follows (Krefting, K., 1991, p. 217):

- Credibility: Member checking, triangulation, and interview technique
- Transferability: Dense description, member checking
- Dependability: Triangulation, code-recode procedure
- Confirmability: Triangulation

Member Checking

As a means of ensuring credibility of the study, each participant was emailed the focus group transcription, along with the research findings. This process allowed them to check for accuracy. The participants were encouraged to confirm, contest or revise the document based on their perceptions and were able to discuss the document with the researcher, if needed. Upon review of the data, each participant confirmed that the findings of the data collection were a clear and truthful reflection of their perceptions of the alternative high school program.

Triangulation of Data

The various data collected from the three data sources were then triangulated using substantiating strategies so the facts of the study were supported by more than one source of evidence and informed one another through the data collection process (Yin, 2009, p. 116).
According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation is a mode of improving the probability that the findings and interpretations of the study will be found credible (p. 305).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Source 1: Surveys</th>
<th>Source 2: Open-ended Interviews</th>
<th>Source 3: Focus Group</th>
<th>Final Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Education</td>
<td>Participants perceived the alternative education environment has an impact on the students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness</td>
<td>Participants perceived the alternative program to positively impact at-risk students in a variety of ways</td>
<td>There are specific improvements that participants perceived could assist the alternative school program in meeting the specific needs of the students</td>
<td>Educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program positively affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Well-Being</td>
<td>Educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program positively affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness</td>
<td>Participants perceived the alternative program improves students’ sense of psychological well-being</td>
<td>Affirmed prior conclusions</td>
<td>Educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program positively affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatedness</td>
<td>Educators overall perception was that they effectively relate and connect with the at-risk student population in order to assist them in meeting academic success</td>
<td>Participants believe that they are able to reach their students by relating and connecting with them.</td>
<td>Affirmed prior conclusions</td>
<td>Educators overall perception was that they effectively relate and connect with the at-risk student population in order to assist them in meeting academic success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller Learning Communities</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>The SLC environment plays a primary role in student success</td>
<td>Affirmed prior conclusion</td>
<td>The SLC environment plays a primary role in student success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Involvement</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Parent involvement is a key factor in assisting at-risk students in meeting academic, social, and emotional successes</td>
<td>Affirmed prior conclusion</td>
<td>Parent involvement is a key factor in assisting at-risk students in meeting academic, social, and emotional successes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of Findings:

The purpose of this descriptive, qualitative case study was to investigate the perceptions of various educational stakeholders regarding the components and practices of a southeastern New England alternative program to determine what works most effectively with the at-risk population. The goal of this study was to determine what practices could be added, improved, or eliminated from the current program in order to assist alternative school students in achieving a sense of psychological well-being and a variety of successes. This data was obtained through three forms of data collection: surveys, open-ended interviews, and a focus group. Based on the data collected from the various educational stakeholder participants regarding the current components and practices, the researcher was able to delve into the two overarching research questions, which were guided by the self-determination theory:

1. How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

2. How do educational stakeholders perceive the program may be improved to meet the specific needs of the students?

The following findings were significant:

1. *Educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program positively affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness.*
1a. Educators believe they have a positive impact on their students’ learning and that they ultimately are successful in getting through to most of the student population.

1b. Educators overall perception was that they effectively relate and connect with the at-risk student population, which assists the students in meeting academic success.

1c. Teacher participants perceive their alternative classrooms to be an engaging, challenging environment where learning is taking place.

1d. The alternative program is perceived as an educational environment encompassing both self-sufficiency and significance.

2. Smaller learning communities play a primary role in student success

3. Parent involvement is a key factor in assisting at-risk students in meeting academic, social, and emotional successes

4. The participants perceive district support to positively impact the success of a program

5. There are specific improvements that participants perceived could assist the alternative school program in meeting the specific needs of the students

These findings were significant in answering the guiding questions of the study, as well as identifying strengths and weaknesses of the current program. According to the participants’ perceptions, this southeastern New England alternative program has a positive effect on its’ students social, emotional, and academic well-being, including their achievement of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. As a result of the specific components and practices encompassed within this educational setting, it is believed that these at-risk students are meeting a variety of
successes, including social, emotional, and academic. This study also determined a variety of suggestions that could be added, improved, or eliminated from the program in order to further enhance student outcomes and successes, and ultimately, the students overall sense of psychological well-being.

In the following chapter of this dissertation, the findings and implications for future research will be discussed.
Chapter 5

Discussion of Research Findings

In chapter five the researcher provides a summary of the essential findings, while connecting these findings to both the theoretical framework and the review of literature. Additionally, there is a discussion of implications for current educational practices and for future research. This study contributes to the existing body of literature in the following areas: alternative education, psychological well-being, smaller learning communities, and parent involvement.

This descriptive, qualitative case study allowed the researcher to investigate the perceptions of various educational stakeholders regarding the components and practices of a southeastern New England alternative program to determine what works most effectively in assisting the at-risk population in achieving a sense of social, emotional, and academic well-being (Yin, 2003; Creswell, 2007).

Research Questions:

1. How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

2. How do educational stakeholders perceive the program may be improved to meet the specific needs of the students?

By framing the research questions around the components of self-determination theory, the researcher aimed to gather information concerning educational stakeholders’ perceptions of how specific practices and environmental factors within an alternative school setting promote
and support individual motives, needs, and an overall sense of emotional, social, and academic well-being.

Self-determination theory is considered a macro-theory of human motivation, emotion, and development that focuses on the importance of meeting three specific psychological needs in order to foster a sense of psychological health and well-being: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ellerbrook & Keifer, 2010). Competence, autonomy, and relatedness are considered “the heart” of self-determination theory because together these components establish the necessary mechanisms for proactivity, optimal development, and psychological health of human beings (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004; Van den Broeck, 2010).

Competence is defined as “an individual’s inherent desire to feel effective in interacting with the environment” (Van den Broeck, et. al., 2010, p. 982). The basic need for competence is fulfilled when a student is able to execute a specific task to the best of his or her ability, therefore meeting a specific goal (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2002; Brien, Hass, & Savoie, 2012). When students perceive their academic competence is threatened or they are struggling in a specific area (socially, emotionally, or academically), they are likely to disengage within the educational environment. Over time, this devaluing of education without the right supports can lead to failure or eventually to school-drop out (Stephan, Caudroit, Boiché, & Sarrazin, 2011).

“Autonomy refers to volition—the organismic desire to self-organize experience and behavior and to have activity be concordant with one’s integrated sense of self” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231). In education, it relates to a student’s intrinsic motivation (inherent) verses extrinsic motivation (external, such as a reward) to complete tasks. Although educators cannot directly give their students an experience of autonomy, they can encourage and support this self-sufficiency by promoting an autonomy-supportive environment. This type of environment
includes instructional behaviors such as: time spent listening to students, providing rationales, being responsive to student questions, praising improvement or mastery, and acknowledging student perspectives and experiences. Overall, autonomy support revolves around finding ways to nurture, support, and increase students’ inner endorsement of their classroom activity (Reeve & Jang, 2006).

“Relatedness refers to the desire to feel connected to others- to love and care, and to be loved and cared for” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231). It is satisfied when there is an established respect and alliance with others, which results in feeling connected, protected, and supported (Deci & Ryan, 2008a; Roffey, 2013). A sense of belonging is a significant protective factor for students experiencing difficulty. Although it can be a challenge to connect with the vulnerable student population, the feeling of connectedness is vital to their success and overall well-being (Roffey, 2013). Collectively, the achievement of these three basic needs can affect a student’s overall sense of well-being and level of functioning (Brien, Hass, & Savoie, 2012).

Alternative education is an example of an environment where students’ well-being is a primary focus. Alternative education is a broad term that is used to describe all educational activities that are not considered to fall into the traditional realm of education, including GED programs, home-schooling, special programs for gifted children, and charter schools. Most commonly, it is a term used to describe the non-traditional educational setting where vulnerable youth receive their education (Aron, 2006). According to the Massachusetts Department of Education (2008), this type of education “is an initiative within a public school district, charter school, or educational collaborative established to serve at-risk students whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting” (retrieved online).
Although there have been numerous studies on alternative education and psychological well-being, few studies have examined educators’ perceptions of their educational strategies and the effect those practices have on at-risk students’ personal sense of emotional, social, and academic well-being within the alternative school environment. In order to examine this, a descriptive, qualitative single case study was selected as the best approach (Yin, 2003).

The research for this case study was conducted at an alternative public high school in southeastern New England. The participants for this study were selected through a purposeful sample, which is when participants are purposefully chosen in order to inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). The participant grouping consisted of six licensed educators from various academic disciplines within the alternative high school who have held positions for 1 to 5 years.

The researcher utilized three forms of data collection for the purpose of this research: surveys, open-ended interviews, and a focus group. The three data sets were designed to gather data specific to educators’ perceptions of practices and structures within the alternative program in relationship to student success, including how educators meet the students’ psychological needs which are evidenced throughout the self-determination theoretical framework (competence, autonomy, and relatedness).

The first phase of data collection was the administration of survey questions/statements to each participant. The survey was divided into five sections in order to gather information on a variety of sub-topics grounded in the self-determination framework: Self-efficacy; Relatedness; Rigor, Challenge and Engagement; Autonomy and Relevance; and Competence, Authenticity and Effectiveness. Open-ended interviews were the second phase in data collection and served as the primary data set with the goal of gathering data essential to answering the research
questions. The emergent themes were *Alternative Education, Psychological Well-Being, Relatedness, Smaller Learning Communities*, and *Parental Involvement*. The final data set was the focus group interview. This was used to validate and confirm the themes and findings that had emerged in the two previous data sets. The three data sets were analyzed and coded individually using a code-recode procedure: descriptive coding followed by pattern coding. The data collected was then triangulated to see the ultimate outcomes of how various educational stakeholders perceived the components and practices of the alternative high school program affects students’ overall social, emotional, and academic well-being.

**Findings**

**Research Question #1:** How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

- *Finding #1:* Educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program to positively affect students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness.
  - *Finding #1a:* Educators believe they have a positive impact on their students’ learning and that they ultimately are successful in getting through to most of the student population.
  - *Finding #1b:* Educators overall perception was that they effectively relate and connect with the at-risk student population, which assists the students in meeting academic success.
  - *Finding #1c:* Teacher participants perceive their alternative classrooms to be an engaging, challenging environment where learning is taking place.
  - *Finding #1d:* The alternative program is perceived as an educational environment encompassing both self-sufficiency and significance.
Implications of findings for the theoretical framework

These findings align with the facets of the self-determination framework. The participants all perceived the alternative program under investigation to encompass the components necessary to assist at-risk students in achieving autonomy, competence, and relatedness; therefore a sense of psychological well-being. Through the smaller learning community embedded within the alternative program design, the participants perceived the program practices to engage and challenge the student population. As a result, the faculty and students are able to build connections that are not always present in the traditional education setting. The combination of these factors was perceived to lead to higher rates of social, emotional, and academic successes.

Self-determination theory, when applied to students, focuses primarily on an interest in learning, a valuing of education, and a confidence in one’s capacities and attributes (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Self-determination theorists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan suggest that the school climate and its practices can positively influence student motivation, development, and performance by promoting and supporting an individual student’s competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Troum, 2010). The support and fulfillment of these basic student needs are associated with higher self-esteem, self-worth, and lower levels of depressive symptoms, which were highlighted in both the open-ended interviews and focus group (Véronneau, Koestner, & Abela, 2005).

Social surroundings that facilitate satisfaction of these three basic psychological needs in the school environment can help support student’s inherent activity and motivation, resulting in enhanced psychological, developmental, and behavioral outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Conversely, lack of support in school is likely to negatively impact and diminish student
motivation and developmental processes, which can lead to alienation, poorer performance, and school drop-out (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Self-determination theory suggests that people are naturally self-motivated, interested, and eager to succeed, but some individuals can become disengaged over time due to their inherent nature and/or unsupportive social environments (Deci & Ryan, 2008a). The alternative program is designed to try and re-engage and support students who lost motivation and interest over time with the ultimate goal of assisting these at-risk students in meeting the goal of graduation, in addition to a variety of other successes.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the alternative school educators’ perceptions coincide with the theoretical framework positing that a student’s sense of psychological well-being is significant to his/her success and reliant on a caring, supportive environment where competence, autonomy, and relatedness can be achieved.

**Implications of findings for the literature**

According to the participants’ perceptions and the program description of this southeastern New England alternative school, the components and practices currently implemented are aligned with suggestions within relevant literature on the topics of alternative education, at-risk students, and psychological well-being. Like many other successful alternative programs, this particular program provides access to counseling and community resources, strategies to gain parental input and support, low student to teacher ratios, and a flexible curriculum, which are all believed to help foster an improved sense of psychological well-being (Wilson-Murphy, 2007).

There has been much research on various strategies that can work with assisting at-risk students in achieving academic success, including the need for personalization and
connectedness, assessing how the individual student learns best, and creating a learning environment that consists of encouragement and challenges (Blum, 2005; Walsh, 2006). “In recent years, studies have documented ways that students who feel ‘connected’ with other people and school activities perform better academically than do students who feel ‘disconnected’” (Strahan, 2007, p. 21).

Students, especially in the years of adolescence, who feel a connection to their school and community are more likely to report higher levels of emotional well-being and less likely to exhibit at-risk behaviors, such as substance use, emotional distress, school truancy, violent and/or deviant behaviors, or engage in sexual activity at a young age (Blum, R., 2005, p. 17; McNeely, C., Nonnemaker, J. & Blum, R., 2002, p. 138). When students feel that their teachers genuinely like and respect them, they are more likely to be involved in the learning environment (Niemiec, C. & Ryan, R., 2009). Hirschi (1969) posited that students who have stronger bonds to teachers, school, or other conventional activities are less likely to defy school norms; therefore more likely to have a positive school experience (Free, 2008).

According to all the participants of this study, along with Blum (2005), connectedness and positive bonds are encouraged in the educational setting by providing a healthy, safe setting that incorporates and encourages cooperative learning and consistency in smaller communities. Educators who stress the importance of goal setting, promote students’ respect for themselves and others, and encourage students to take responsibility for their actions and decisions are more likely to witness student achievement (Strahan, 2008). The establishment of these connections has been an essential factor in the success of the alternative high school program.
Finding #2: Smaller learning communities play a primary role in student success

Implications of findings for the theoretical framework

Smaller learning communities (SLC) are directly related to the facets of self-determination theory. The SLC environment is designed in a way to assist students in achieving a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness through a small group setting. According to the self-determination theory, a student’s sense of psychological well-being is significant to his/her success and reliant on a caring, supportive environment where competence, autonomy, and relatedness can be achieved (Deci and Ryan, 2000). The relationship between these tenets and the environment created through the implementation of smaller learning communities positively impacts student outcomes. The social surroundings embedded in the SLC environment facilitate satisfaction of the basic psychological needs and can help support student’s motivation, resulting in enhanced psychological, developmental, and behavioral outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Implications of findings for the literature

The participants collectively perceived the various small settings within the alternative program to be a positive aspect for both the students and faculty in regard to social, emotional, and academic well-being. This finding is supported by an abundance of literature on smaller learning communities.

According to Lee and Friedrich (2007), “SLC refers to an ‘individualized learning unit within a larger school setting where students and teachers are scheduled together and have a common area of the school in which to hold most or all of their classes” (p. 262). One reason for this particular design is because many public education classrooms are congested with students,
which frequently leads teachers to follow a more traditional teaching method. As a result, the probability of disciplinary problems and lack of motivation is increased due to the deficiency of a meaningful social location (Salem al-amarat, 2011). When compared to the traditional large, impersonal setting, the SLC structure is able to focus more on the individual student, which has beneficial effects on student achievement and psychological well-being. It allows site-based management, heterogeneous student groups, and a feeling of belongingness (Oxley, 2001). Based on the participants’ perceptions, the size of the learning community within the alternative program is one of the main reasons of its success.

- **Finding #3: Parent involvement is a key factor in assisting at-risk students in meeting academic, social, and emotional successes**

**Implications of findings for the theoretical framework**

Participants perceived parent involvement to be a significant factor in assisting students in achieving academic, social, and emotional successes. Parents play an essential role in their child’s successes, specifically by offering autonomy support. According to self-determination theory, autonomy support is a crucial element in the parent-child relationship. When parents take the time to support their children’s need for autonomy, it is associated with positive outcomes, including better motivation, social adjustment, and academic benefits (Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner 2008)

**Implications of findings for the literature**

Parent involvement is a key factor in student success; it has been linked to stronger academic achievement, higher educational aspirations, more positive perception of education,
and stronger self-regulatory skills (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002, p. 2). Unfortunately, many parents do not get involved in their child’s education for a number of reasons. Some parents do not feel comfortable being in contact and involved due to their lack of English language skills, lack of understanding the school system and its home to school partnership, or lack of confidence, while other parents may not be involved due to work interference, negative past experiences with schools, or feelings of insensitivity and hostility by school personnel (Bermúdez & Márquez, 1996). This lack of parent involvement can have a major impact of student performance and is likely to lead to poorer academic attainment and possibly school dropout (White, 2010).

Students who feel supported by their parents are more likely to experience better relationships and have better academic outcomes (Ryan, Still, & Lynch, 1994). As a result, involving families in their students’ education has become a major focus of educators, particularly those working with at-risk students (Bermúdez & Márquez, 1996). Schools can improve parent involvement and parent support by conveying that parent involvement is expected and wanted, by offering home-based and school based involvement activities, and communicating regularly with parents about the positive influence of their involvement. These strategies offer important school support for parents’ contributions to student learning (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005).

This particular alternative high school utilizes a variety of strategies to get parents involved, including frequent updates via phone and email, parent meetings, open-houses, and college/career planning meetings, yet parent involvement is still not 100%. Based on the literature, finding ways to increase parental involvement plays a large role in enhancing students’
educational outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002). With some of the suggestions stated by participants, such as the implementation of parent workshops, parent involvement can be increased even more.

- **Finding #4: The participants perceived district support to positively impact the success of a program**

**Implications of findings for the literature**

“Some youth thrive at school- enjoying and benefitting from most of their experiences there; others muddle along and cope as best they can; …and still others find school an alienating and unpleasant place to be- a place that is difficult to enjoy and benefit from” (Eccles & Roeser, 2011, p. 225). In today’s educational systems, teachers are expected to teach to a variety of learners who have different motivations, including students who give up academically in the general education setting. Consequently, many of these struggling students do not always receive the specific supports needed to assist them in persevering through their academic, social, and/or emotional struggles and typically end up dropping out of school (Sanacore, 2008, Walsh, 2006, Gobeil, 2010). Entrance into adulthood without a diploma can then lead to severe economic and occupational disadvantages for their futures (Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenburg, 2008). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), 370,000 students dropped out of high school between October 2011 and October 2012; 49.6% of those individuals were then considered jobless (p. 2).

The U.S. Department of Education states that the purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act enacted in 2001 is “to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (2008). It requires that all students are entitled to equal protection
and opportunities for their education in a safe environment filled with academic rigor (Powell, 2003). To assist with this national goal, many school districts have implemented various support systems, including alternative programs for the at-risk student population. Many of these programs are geared to raising student success rates by having the students’ sense of psychological well-being as a focus.

District personnel and community members within the southeastern New England school district under study saw serious concern for this at-risk population. With a drop-out rate of 12.2% in 2006 with only 81.8% of students meeting the district graduation requirements within a four year period, it was evident that the traditional educational model was not addressing the specific needs of many students within this large public school district. Most notably were the proportions of students who were considered low income, special education, and/or of a minority population (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013).

After countless discussions amongst educational stakeholders, along with collecting substantial research on various educational alternatives and reforms, a high school alternative program was designed with the purpose of “restor[ing] hope that education can make a difference in [the students’] lives” (Gobeil, 2007, p. 3). Through a restructured approach and environment, the program’s intent was to “engage a diverse group of young people in an academic program that will allow them to earn or ‘recover’ credits… and support them in making better decisions (Gobeil, p. 3).

In the fall of 2007, this high school alternative program was fully implemented with the expectation of addressing the social, emotional, and educational needs of the susceptible student population with the ultimate goal being student success. According to the participants, this
would not have been possible without the support of the superintendent, school committee, and various other educational stakeholders within the community.

Research Question #2: How do educational stakeholders perceive the program may be improved to meet the specific social, emotional, and academic needs of the students?

- Finding 5: There are specific improvements that participants perceived could assist the alternative school program in meeting the specific needs of the students

Implications of findings for the literature

Alternative school programs differ from the traditional setting in regard to scheduling, administrative structure, setting, and/or curriculum. Typically, alternative programs include: access to counseling and community resources, strategies to gain parental input and support, low student to teacher ratios, and a flexible curriculum, which are all believed to help foster an improved sense of psychological well-being (Wilson-Murphy, 2007). These programs are challenged to motivate disengaged, at-risk students with the aim of educating each student successfully by focusing on the students’ social, emotional, and academic development (Aron, 2006).

Based on the overall findings of this study, the particular alternative program researched incorporates many of the recommendations from the literature into its structure and practices, but the participants perceived some improvements are needed to increase the program’s success. They identified the need for full time staff members, more time for collaboration and professional development, the need to track students post-graduation, to address student
transportation, and to change the current faculty pay scale to a stipend in order to allow remuneration to be applied to retirement earnings.

**Implications of Findings for Educational Practice**

The findings of this research project determined that the current components and practices in place within the alternative high school setting are positively impacting students’ sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness; therefore their overall sense of psychological well-being. Although this study was based on an alternative high school setting, these findings are transferable to a variety of educational programs. Below are implications of findings for other schools and districts, as well as the alternative high school program researched:

- By designing programs as smaller learning communities, students and staff are able to foster an environment of relatedness where students are able to feel comfortable, valued, and capable.

- Students can achieve a sense of well-being in an atmosphere where competence, autonomy, and relatedness can be achieved.

In addition to the implications of findings for what is currently working well in the alternative setting, there were identified improvements suggested as well to increase program success. The researcher was able to gather various recommendations from the participants based on the current educational practices that could assist this school and district, as well as others, in better assisting students in attaining social, emotional, and academic successes.

- Educational staff benefit from consistent faculty meetings, along with appropriate trainings and professional development, in order to learn and collaborate on a variety of educational topics, including student concerns and classroom management.
• Tracking of a variety of data on the post-graduate students, such as post-secondary career or college placement, will assist in gathering statistics of the possible successes of the graduates, in addition to earning their high school diplomas.

• The need for full time positions.

Currently, the director of the alternative program is the only full-time staff member. All other faculty members work part-time at the alternative program in addition to their full-time positions in the tradition day school. As a result, the students do not have consistency each day with the faculty they see.

• Students benefit from consistent, timely transportation

• The need for the faculty to have their pay included in retirement in order to keep strong faculty members on staff.

At this time, the alternative program faculty is paid hourly, which is not included in their retirement contributions. Suggestions were made for faculty to be paid stipends, similar to how coaches are paid, which is included in retirement contributions.

**Implications of Findings for Future Research**

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher was able to identify educator perceptions of the current components and practices encompassed within this southeastern New England alternative school program, including how the participants perceived they impact at-risk students’ sense of psychological well-being. An implication for future research would be to gather students’ perceptions as well. This student-based research would identify the extent to which at-risk students perceive the alternative program meets their social, emotional, and academic needs compared to the traditional school setting. In addition, the researcher would be able to gather data concerning any specific gains and successes since their inception into the
program. The data gathered could identify factors of the program that are effective, as well as others which are unfavorable and in need of improvement. The goal would be to identify what aspects of the program are perceived as helpful, motivating factors which ultimately assist in increasing the students’ sense of psychological well-being and success rates. The following questions could be asked:

1. How do students perceive the alternative education program affects their competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

2. How do students perceive the alternative program may be improved to meet their specific needs?

Determining the answers to the above questions would be significant in evaluating the alternative program because it would allow the researcher to have a better understanding of the program as a whole since there would be substantial data collected on student and educator perceptions.

Another suggestion for future research would be to determine various key topics that alternative school educators would benefit from learning more through professional development opportunities. Information gathered from this type of study would be useful not only to alternative school educators, but educators working with at-risk students within the traditional setting as well.

3. What types of professional development do alternative school educators perceive is necessary when working with the at-risk student population?

Conclusion

In the era of No Child Left Behind (2001) and many other educational initiatives, schools are being held accountable for students’ academic ability evidenced through high stakes testing and graduation rates. Although many students are proficient, the traditional educational setting
cannot always demonstrate that due to other factors that may contribute to a lack of achievement. As a result, many districts implement various programs to assist these struggling students in meeting success.

In order to support both the student and faculty populations in the southeastern New England school district under investigation, an alternative program was implemented to target the at-risk student population in achieving proficiency, in addition to many other social, emotional, and academic successes. By guiding this research through Deci and Ryan’s (1985, 2000) self-determination theory and a review of relevant literature on alternative education, the researcher was able to gather educators’ perceptions of the alternative program to gauge the usefulness of the components and practices in place and how these factors impact the at-risk student population.

As evidenced in all three data sets, the participants collectively perceived the program to effectively assist students in achieving academic success, as well as make social and emotional gains. The educators felt as though they have created an environment where students are making progress. This setting consists of smaller learning communities where students and faculty are able to relate and connect. As a result of the atmosphere generated from a specific program design and faculty staff, teacher participants perceived the educational environment to be an engaging one; encompassing self-sufficiency, significance, and challenges.

Overall, the findings of this research are promising. Although there were some concerns noted along with suggestions for improvements, the alternative program is effectively assisting the at-risk student population in achieving a sense of psychological well-being by creating an environment encompassing competence, autonomy, and relatedness. It is hoped that this
research will add to the existing literature on alternative education by connecting the facets of self-determination theory to the needs of the at-risk student population.
References


Gobeil, J. (2010). *Plymouth after-school alternative program*.


Appendices

Appendix A

Permission Letter: Superintendent of Schools

Dr. Gary Maestas, Superintendent
Plymouth Public Schools Central Office
253 South Meadow Rd.
Plymouth, MA 02360

May, 2013

Dear Dr. Maestas,

As you are aware from our recent conversation, I am in the final phase of writing my doctoral thesis proposal at Northeastern University. I am writing to request consent to conduct a case study on the alternative high school program. The purpose of this descriptive, qualitative case study is to investigate the perceptions of various educational stakeholders in regard to the components and practices of the alternative program in order to determine what works most effectively with this at-risk population. As a result, the study will also determine what practices can be added, improved, or eliminated from the program in order to assist the students not only in meeting academic success, but other successes as well. These successes may include, but are not limited to: improved social/emotional skills to assist in daily interactions, the completion of college or career preparation programs, and job attainment. I will utilize three forms of data collection: surveys, open-ended interviews, and focus groups. Prior to beginning data collection, Northeastern University’s IRB will have approved all protocol cover letters, consent forms, and data collection instruments.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at (508) 574-9295 or via email at kbuchanan@plymouth.k12.ma.us, or my advisor, Dr. Margaret Dougherty via e-mail at m.dougherty@neu.edu.

Sincerely,

Kristen Buchanan

PSHS Guidance Counselor
Appendix B

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Northeastern University: College of Professional Studies, Doctor of Education Program
Investigators: Kristen Buchanan and Dr. Margaret Dougherty
Title: Alternative Education: A Case Study

May, 2013

Dear Study Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to consider participation in my educational research on alternative education. The purpose of this case study is to investigate the perceptions of various educational stakeholders in regards to the components and practices of the alternative program in order to determine what works effectively with the at-risk population. As a result, this study will also determine what practices can be added, improved, or eliminated from the program in order to assist the students not only in meeting academic success, but other successes as well.

The study will take place after school in the conference room for two afternoons, totaling approximately 2 hours. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you complete a survey (10 minutes), answer a series of questions in a one-on-one interview (25 minutes) and participate in a focus group (45 minutes to 1 hour).

As part of the focus group you will be given the opportunity to member check, in which you will be provided with a draft of the research data to review. If you feel anything in the report is inaccurate, the results may be adjusted. The interview and focus group will be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study. The information that you provide will have no impact on your professional standing. Evaluation will play no role in this study.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, it is hoped that your insights may help improve or enhance current alternative school practices.
Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Your responses will not be shared with the school administration and any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you, the school or any individual as being of this project. All audio-recordings will be destroyed following transcription and analysis.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time. Your decision to participate or not to participate will have no effect on your standing at the school.

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me at: buchanan.kr@husky.neu.edu or 508-574-9295, or email my advisor Dr. Margaret Dougherty at m.dougherty@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

I greatly appreciate your consideration of my request.

By providing your signature below, you are indicating your consent to participate in this study:

________________________________  _________________ ______
Participant’s Signature       Date       Participant's Printed Name

________________________________  _________________ ______
Researcher’s Signature   Date       Researcher’s Printed Name
Appendix C

Surveys

Survey # ______

Perceptions of Alternative School Programming

The purpose of this survey is to learn from your experiences working in the alternative high school program. The results will be used to help improve practices in order to improve student outcomes. Your participation in this survey is voluntary. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential, no identifiers will be used, and all responses will be presented as aggregate data.

PART ONE

Educator Information

1. Please check the area of certification in which you are employed for in the alternative school program:

   - Social Studies
   - Sciences
   - English/Language Arts
   - Mathematics
   - Wellness (Physical Education/Health)
   - Special Education
   - Guidance
   - Administration

2. Check the highest level of education you have achieved.

   - Bachelors
   - Masters
   - Masters + ___
   - CAGS
   - Doctorate

3. How many total years of work experience do you have in education?

   ______ years

4. How many total years of work experience do you have in alternative education?

   ______ years

5. What is your gender?

   - Male
   - Female
PART TWO

Scale of Self-Efficacy in Education

Directions to participants: In this section, please indicate HOW MUCH YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE with each of the statements by circling a number 1-5 for each question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I feel that I am making a significant educational difference in the lives of my students.
2. If I try really hard, I can get through to even the most difficult and unmotivated students.
3. Children are so private and complex, I never know if I am getting through to them.
4. I usually know how to get through to students.
5. Most of a student's school motivation depends on the home environment, so I have limited influence.
6. There is a limited amount that I can do to raise the basic performance level of students.
7. I am successful with the students in my school.
8. I am uncertain how to reach some of my students.
9. I feel as though some of my students are not making any academic progress.
10. My students' peers influence their motivation more than I do.
11. Most of a student's performance depends on the home environment, so I have limited influence.
12. My students' peers influence their academic performance more than I do.
Part Three

Educator Surveys

Relatedness

Directions to participants: In this section, please indicate \textbf{HOW MUCH YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE} with each of the statements by writing a number 1-4 (or N/A) for each question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Does Not Apply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I show genuine care for each student.
   \begin{itemize}
   \item I reach as many diverse students as possible.
   \item I interact with all students.
   \item I call students by name.
   \item I greet students at the door.
   \item I make reference to student's lives outside of school
   \item I welcome and values student input.
   \end{itemize}

2. I express high expectations for each student.
   \begin{itemize}
   \item I am empowering and supportive.
   \item I encourage students to support one another.
   \end{itemize}

3. I take time to help students individually.
   \begin{itemize}
   \item My belief in and commitment to students and their learning is clear
   \end{itemize}

4. I encourage students to make mistakes and learn from them.
   \begin{itemize}
   \item I create an environment where students feel comfortable taking risks.
   \item I do not allow students to tease each other for wrong answers.
   \item I create an environment where students can openly and safely talk about experiences of stereotypes, bias, and institutional racism.
   \item I make students feel their opinions are valued.
   \end{itemize}
5. I openly commend students' genuine efforts and excellent work.
   • I make positive comments to students, encouraging their efforts.

6. I welcome others to observe in the classroom.

7. I encourage and listen to student feedback, even when I disagree.

8. I have clear, consistent, and equal consequences or treatment for behaviors.
   • I model and enforce the use of respectful language.
   • I make sure students are respectful with their bodies.
   • I model respect of cultural diversity/ differences.

9. Students are respectful to each other and me.

10. I utilize students as learning aids for each other.

11. I use culturally appropriate language and encourage students to do so as well.

Rigor, Challenge and Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Does Not Apply</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I am presenting challenging topics for students to analyze, explore, and discuss.
   • I see students are asking questions.
   • I see students are asking “what would happen if” … type questions.
   • I see students are giving examples

2. I encourage students to articulate and share their ideas with one another

3. Learning is active.
4. There is evidence of students coming to new views or understandings.

5. Students know my expectations for work.
   - Evidence by the conversations being held, large and small group discussions, and questions being asked of students.

6. I plan activities that are thinking centered and engaging.
   - Classroom discussion

7. I make sure that students understand what they are doing and what they are learning.
   - I make sure essential question are posted.
   - I make sure objectives of the day posted.
   - I verbally ask why students are doing a particular lesson.
   - I state the objective for a particular lesson.

8. I choose books that allow students to more deeply examine global issues.

9. I am engaging students at all learning levels.
   - Using assessment, formal and informal, to inform instruction
   - The teacher adjusts when they need to adjust.

**Autonomy and Relevance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Does Not Apply</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Students are engaged in their work.

2. Students pursue their own learning and understanding of the topic because I make it relevant to them.
   - I strive to make sure focused learning is occurring
   - I allow students to work independently
   - Different students have their hands raised each time.
   - I allow students to define their own learning goals.
3. I encourage students to ask meaningful questions.  
   - I see students demonstrate an eagerness to participate in the classroom activity.  
   - I see students are asking hard questions.  
   - Students seem to enjoy learning

4. I make activities for learning motivating and intellectually engaging.

5. I make sure students can relate their own experience or ideas to the lesson.  
   - I make references to student's lives outside of school specific to the topic.  
   - I give students opportunities to share their personal stories relevant to the topic

6. I provide choices for students in learning topics and styles.

7. I display diverse cultural materials, photos, words, art etc that represent cultural diversity.

8. I use culturally relevant resources and strategies to make learning relevant to diverse students.

9. I encourage students to give input on my instruction.

## Competence, Authenticity, and Effectiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Does Not Apply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Students are able to read fluently.

2. Students are able to use graphic organizers to help them explain their thinking in writing.

3. Students reflect on higher level questions posed to them.
4. Students are able to work together in cooperative groups to complete projects. 1 2 3 4 N/A

5. Students demonstrate skills and understanding through projects, performances, written work, or classroom discussion. 1 2 3 4 N/A

6. Students are able to develop multiple solutions to problems in class and clearly explain how they solved a problem. 1 2 3 4 N/A

7. Students are able to think, reflect and communicate effectively in a variety of ways. 1 2 3 4 N/A

8. Students can make connections between themselves and people that are different than them. 1 2 3 4 N/A

9. Students understand and use culturally appropriate language. 1 2 3 4 N/A

10. High quality student work is displayed. 1 2 3 4 N/A

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS SURVEY!
Appendix D

Open-ended Interview: Educator Perceptions

Why was the alternative high school implemented in 2007?

Were there any special funds to establish this program?

What were some of the considerations that went into the design of the alternative high school?

Do you believe the alternative high school is addressing those original considerations?

How?

Do you believe the alternative high school is making an impact on the ultimate student problems?

How?

In what ways is the alternative high school meeting the social, emotional, and educational needs of the students?

What makes the alternative high school a different experience for the students socially, emotionally, and academically, when compared to the tradition high school setting?

To what extent do you think that the alternative school experience contributes to motivation?

Student success?

Self-esteem?

What are your favorite aspects of the alternative program?

What are your least favorite aspects?

To what extent do you think parents are involved in the alternative school program?

Do you think that affects their success?

In your opinion, how could the alternative program be improved?
Appendix E

Focus Group Questions

1. What specific factors within the alternative school environment lead to the students achieving a sense of:

   a). Accountability?

   b). Effectiveness?

   c). Connectedness?

   d). Do you believe the majority of students achieve this overall sense of well-being?

   e). If so, do you believe this sense of well-being continues to outside factors as well, such as home or work, and ultimately future endeavors?

2. What do you think the biggest motivators are for the student population in the alternative program, when compared to the traditional day school that lead to success?

3. In what ways are parents currently involved in the alternative high school program?

   a) How do you think that can be increased?

4. As the model changes in the next year, what supports do you think the student population would benefit from in order to assist them in achieving a sense of well-being and a variety of successes?

   b) What supports would the teachers benefit from in order to assist their students in achieving a sense of well-being and a variety of successes?

5. Throughout the individual interviews, there were some suggestions and concerns mentioned, including (we will discuss each as a group):

   • Adding more electives and course offerings
   • Improving transportation
   • How to discipline students when there are transportation issues
   • Facility
   • Dinner time format
   • How to motivate more students towards setting goals and ultimately pursuing post-secondary options
   • Meeting more regularly as a faculty and to include students at times
• Changing the faculty pay to a stipend (salary) rather than the district wide tutoring rate in order to have it as part of retirement
• Others?

6. In what ways is the alternative program preparing the students socially, emotionally, and academically for life after high school?

   a) Do you believe the students have the skills necessary to communicate effectively and successfully in the “real world”, once they leave the high school environment?

   b) If not, what could be implemented to assist with increased future successes
Appendix F

Recruitment Letter (E-mail)

June, 2013

Dear Alternative School Educator,

As you may be aware, I am currently pursuing a doctorate in education from Northeastern University. As part of this educational process, I am conducting a research project on the alternative high school program. The purpose of this case study research is to investigate the perceptions of various educational stakeholders in regard to the components and practices of the alternative program in order to determine what works most effectively with the at-risk population.

I am looking for educators, including administration and counseling staff, who are currently involved in the alternative program to participate in my research project. Please consider this a formal request for your participation.

The study will take place after school in the conference room for two afternoons, totaling approximately 2 hours. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete three forms of data collection: answer survey questions (approximately 20 minutes), answer a series of questions in a one-on-one interview (approximately 25 minutes), and participate in a focus group (approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour).

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time. Your decision to participate or not to participate will have no effect on your standing at the school.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at (508) 574-9295 or via email at buchanan.kr@husky.neu.edu, or my advisor, Dr. Margaret Dougherty at (781) 340-6996 or via e-mail at m.dougherty@neu.edu.

Thank you for taking the time to consider participation in my educational research on alternative education.

Kristen Buchanan
Appendix G

Self-efficacy Survey Permission E-mail

Kristen Buchanan< buchanan.kr@husky.neu.edu>

Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale
1 message

Kristen Buchanan< buchanan.kr@husky.neu.edu> Tue, Apr 23, 2013 at 8:47 PM
To: kathy.hoover-dempsey@vanderbilt.edu

Hello Dr. Hoover-Dempsey,

I am currently in the EDD program at Northeastern University and am planning on using your teacher self-efficacy scale for my research this summer. Based on the statement of use section on your website, I understand that you do not ask for written permission but I just wanted to take a moment to thank you for all the research you have shared and to let you know the purpose of my study.

The purpose of this descriptive, qualitative case study is to investigate the perceptions of various educational stakeholders in regards to the components and practices of a southeastern New England alternative program to ultimately determine what works most effectively with the at-risk population. The research questions will be guided by the components of Deci and Ryan’s (1985, 2000) self-determination theory: achieving competence, autonomy, and relatedness in order to foster a sense of emotional, social, and academic well-being. The researcher will utilize three forms of data collection: surveys, open-ended interviews, and focus groups.

Research Questions:
1. How do educators and administrators perceive the alternative education program affects students competence, autonomy, and relatedness?
2. How do educators and administrators perceive the program may be improved to meet the specific needs of the students?

Thank you and I will be sure to cite appropriately and pass along my findings.

-Kristen Buchanan

* Authors’ Statement of Use: Retrieved from: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/peabody/family-
We thank you for your interest in our research. On behalf of Kathy Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler, you have permission to use and/or modify any of these scales. We ask that you cite the following:


If you use any of the scales at Level 1 in the model-based graphic (including Parental Role Construction, Parental Efficacy, General School Invitations, Specific School Invitations, Specific Child Invitations, Time and Energy, Knowledge and Skills), please cite also:


If you use the Parent Efficacy for Helping Children Succeed in School, please cite also


If you use either the Teacher Self-Efficacy for Teaching scale or the Teacher Perceptions of Parent Efficacy for Helping Children Succeed in School scale, please also cite:


Hello,

I am a currently enrolled in the doctorate of education program at Northeastern University, where I am currently looking to do a case study on a local alternative program. The purpose of this descriptive, qualitative case study is to investigate the perceptions of various educational stakeholders in regard to the components and practices of a southeastern New England alternative program to ultimately determine what works most effectively with the at-risk population. Many of the questions in your teacher evaluation survey relate to my study and I was hoping to use parts of it in my own survey, with appropriate citations and credit given to you. I know they are free resources as you stated on your website, but I wanted to be sure to let you know of my intent.

Thank you for your very informative website,

Kristen Buchanan

buchanan.kr@husky.neu.edu
Appendix: I

Full Results from the Scale of Self-Efficacy

### Scale of Self-Efficacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. I feel that I am making a significant educational difference in the lives of my students.
2. If I try really hard, I can get through to even the most difficult and unmotivated students.
3. Children are so private and complex, I never know if I am getting through to them.
4. I usually know how to get through to students.
5. Most of a student's school motivation depends on the home environment, so I have limited...
6. There is a limited amount that I can do to raise the basic performance level of students.
7. I am successful with the students in my school.
8. I am uncertain how to reach some of my students.
9. I feel as though some of my students are not making any academic progress.
10. My students' peers influence their motivation more than I do.
11. Most of a student's performance depends on the home environment, so I have limited...
12. My students' peers influence their academic performance more than I do.

Legend:
- **Strongly Disagree**
- **Disagree**
- **Neither Agree Nor Disagree**
- **Agree**
- **Strongly Agree**
Appendix: J

Scale of Relatedness

1. I show genuine care for each student.
2. I express high expectations for each student.
3. I take time to help students individually.
4. I encourage students to make mistakes and learn from them.
5. I openly commend students' genuine efforts and excellent work.
6. I welcome others to observe in the classroom.
7. I encourage and listen to student feedback, even when I disagree.
8. I have clear, consistent, and equal consequences or treatment for behaviors.
9. Students are respectful to each other and me.
10. I utilize students as learning aids for each other.
11. I use culturally appropriate language and encourage students to do so as well.

Participant Percentages

- Does Not Apply
- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Rarely

Relatedness

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%
Participant Percentages
Appendix: K

Scale of Rigor, Challenge, and Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rigor, Challenge and Engagement</th>
<th>Does Not Apply</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. I am engaging students at all learning levels.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. I choose books that allow students to more deeply examine global issues.</td>
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<td>7. I make sure that students understand what they are doing and what they are learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I plan activities that are thinking centered and engaging.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Students know my expectations for work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. There is evidence of students coming to new views understandings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Learning is active.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I encourage students to articulate and share their ideas with one another.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. I am presenting challenging topics for students to analyze, explore, and discuss.</td>
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Appendix: L

Scale of Autonomy and Relevance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does Not Apply</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. Students are engaged in their work.

2. Students pursue their own learning and understanding of the topic because I make it relevant to them.

3. I encourage students to ask meaningful questions.

4. I make activities for learning motivating and intellectually engaging.

5. I make sure students can relate their own experience or ideas to the lesson.

6. I provide choices for students in learning topics and styles.

7. I display diverse cultural materials, photos, words, art etc that represent cultural diversity.

8. I use culturally relevant resources and strategies to make learning relevant to diverse students.

9. I encourage students to give input on my instruction.

Participant Percentages

0%  20%  40%  60%  80%  100%

1. Students are engaged in their work.
Appendix: M

Scale of Competence, Authenticity, and Effectiveness

1. Students are able to read fluently.
2. Students are able to use graphic organizers to help them explain their thinking in writing.
3. Students reflect on higher level questions posed to them.
4. Students are able to work together in cooperative groups to complete projects.
5. Students demonstrate skills and understanding through projects, performances, written work, or classroom discussion.
6. Students are able to develop multiple solutions to problems in class and clearly explain how they solved a problem.
7. Students are able to think, reflect and communicate effectively in a variety of ways.
8. Students can make connections between themselves and people that are different than them.
9. Students understand and use culturally appropriate language.
10. High quality student work is displayed.