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# Phenomenological Study of At-Risk Youth Attending an Alternative Education Residential Program

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Phenomenological Study of At-Risk Youth  
Attending an Alternative Education Residential Program

by  
Valeria M. Harris-Richard

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler School of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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2015

## Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Valeria M. Harris-Richard under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Signature

Valeria M. Harris-Richard

Name

May , 2015

Date

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First, I must take a moment to give thanks and honor to God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ; it was no way possible for me to do this on my own. Now, I vow to contribute back by serving students with a heart of understanding, caring, and nurturing with the goal to help them move forward in their endeavors constantly reminding them that in spite of struggles, success lies on the other side! To my Chair, Dr. James Pann; thank you for your guidance and support especially in times when I felt overly anxious and overwhelming—your calmness always quieted the storm. To my Committee Member, Dr. David Weintraub, who is very meticulous, supportive, and wanting the best work out of his students—thank you! Again, thank you both for having such high expectations! I really believe I can achieve anything now! To those administrators who open the doors to the educational sector for me, thank you. To my editor who worked diligently and to the rest of my family, friends, colleagues, and alternative program staff of this study—thank you. To my mother, thank you for your cheers, prayers, and believing in me. Dad, thanks for your prayers. To my children thank you for your prayers and inspiration. To my siblings, who always felt I was so smart—know that you too are more than capable of anything. To my only niece—thank you for your prayers; let your courage continue to carry you. Aunt Vivian Jones and Elder Bonita Vinegar thank you, I am grateful to have such spiritual support, your faith never waivers! To my aunt Nora B. Smith; thank you—words could not ever describe my love and gratitude. Now, to my husband, comforter, friend, love of my life, my Boaz—Jerry Richard, I love you very much and appreciate you for everything you are to me and our children. Thank you for your support and sacrifices. You are loved more than you will ever know. God reserved you just for me and I am so grateful.

## **Abstract**

Phenomenological Study of At-Risk Youth Attending an Alternative Education Residential Program. Valeria M. Harris-Richard, 2015: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler School of Education. ERIC Descriptors: At Risk Students, Dropout Programs, Dropout Characteristics, Student Behavior

At-risk youth are the population of students who cannot manage to conform to the traditional school expectations due to their behavior choices. However, their choices are reflections of both avoidable and unavoidable conditions and circumstances. The bottom line is that those conditions usually lead them to drop out of school. There are several factors that contribute to why youth drop out of school. While some factors are more obvious than others, the overall goal should be to minimize factors that are within the control of stakeholders and decision makers so that youth have opportunities to complete high school with a traditional high school diploma or general equivalency diploma.

Participants of the study provided solid feedback as to why they dropped out of high school. Some dropped out for family problems, lack of motivation, student school relationships, academic challenges, and behavior issues. When the educational sector cannot control their behaviors, the decision makers can help minimize issues that have been proven to contribute to those behaviors. As an example, they can provide alternative programs, students with academic support, healthy working relationships, motivation, teaching strategies, learning styles and interventions, and school accountability. Participants in this study felt that these were main reasons why they were able to complete school when all odds were against them. Students felt having an alternative route that consisted of caring school relationships, different teaching and learning styles, motivation, academic, attendance, behavior support, and a solid accountability plan were the solution to them graduating and moving on to become effective and productive citizens.

## Table of Contents

	Page
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Definition of Terms.....	8
Purpose of the Study.....	9
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	11
Alternative Programs.....	11
Racial Disparities.....	20
Impact and Issues of Dropouts.....	25
Importance of Collaboration.....	32
Commonly Used Methodologies to Study Similar Problems.....	35
Research Questions.....	37
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	38
Participants.....	38
Participants' Characteristics.....	38
Data Collection Tools.....	39
Procedures.....	40
Data Analysis.....	41
Ethical Considerations.....	42
Trustworthiness.....	43
Potential Research Bias.....	44
Chapter 4: Findings.....	46
Research Question 1.....	47
Research Question 2.....	50
Research Question 3.....	54
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	57
Discussion of Results.....	57
Implications.....	59
Conclusions.....	62
Limitations.....	63
Recommendations.....	64
Summary.....	67
References.....	69
Appendix	
Semistructured Interview Questions.....	79
Tables	
1    Summary of the Participants' Demographics and Pseudonyms.....	39
2    Summary of Themes.....	58

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

Across the United States, students are deciding to leave school before they graduate. Some students believe there is no solution to their academic, personal, or behavior problems (Johnson & Perkins, 2009). The U.S. educational and legislative system has a focus on accountability in regards to educating students more than ever before. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 compels educators to pay close attention to youth at-risk of dropping out (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Those at risk include students who are of ethnic minorities, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, with disabilities, and with second language is English. Unfortunately, on the average, these students not only score significantly lower on standardized state tests, but are also more likely to struggle academically and to drop out of school than that of their peers (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

Dropping out of high school is related to a number of negative outcomes. Dropouts tend to make less income, have more health issues, remain unemployed, and make up higher percentages of the nation's incarcerated population (Pleis, Lucas, & Ward, 2009; Rouse, Belfield, & Levin, 2007). Youth who drop out of high school, as compared to those who completed high school, cost the economy approximately \$240,000 over their individual lifespans in terms of lower tax contributions, higher reliance on Medicaid and Medicare, higher rates of criminal activity, and higher reliance on social welfare (Levine & Belfied, 2007).

There is an increase in the number of students dropping out of high school in Georgia. Over a period of 3 years in the state of Georgia, the dropout rate increased from 2.6% to 2.8%. According to the Georgia Department of Education (2011), dropouts

averaged over 21,000 in number annually with less than 70% of the students graduating on time from high school.

**Phenomenon of interest.** As student dropout remains a serious concern, parents and students sometimes discover and choose alternative routes for their education. However, some students are forced to take an alternative route for nonacademic reasons, such as attendance, age, and, most often, behavior. Alternative education programs (AEPs) have become very prevalent. In the United States, the number of alternative schools has risen since the 1990s, serving from nearly 3,000 to more than 600,000 students, who make up 1.3% of the total public school student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). There are a number of wide-ranging AEPs in the United States to serve these students (Van Acker, 2007). Of these programs, many have become a viable means of providing education and socialization for students who have debilitating characteristics; are disadvantaged; or are exhibiting social, emotional, or behavioral issues in school (Powell, 2003).

Alternative schools are a single method for preventing the unembellished and long-lasting consequences of underachievement and student dropout (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). According to Board Rule 160-4-8-12 (Georgia Department of Education, 2010), school systems should provide their AEPs with effective research-based instructional materials, resources, and textbooks as are provided to the traditional programs. According to the local school superintendent, students in the district alternative program are not provided those same resources due to budget constraints and the design of the alternative program.

Further research included an indication that while no two individuals are the same or have the same frame of reference, the majority of youth enrolled in these programs

have faced similar challenges (Carswell et al., 2009). Consequently, these individuals have been exposed to negative social and environmental risk factors throughout their lives, such as family adversity, poverty, inadequate parental monitoring, or physical and emotional trauma. Carswell et al. (2009) reported, “Due to such negative life experiences, many of these youth suffer from academic and behavioral difficulties that lead to their expulsion from traditional schools and transfers to alternative education programs” (p. 446).

**Background and justification.** While all the youth who attend the National Guard Youth Challenge Program that the researcher studied did so voluntarily, minimal research had been conducted to examine which interventions have impacted the success of those attending (National Guard Youth Challenge Program Director, personal communication, October 15, 2012). One of the reasons for this study is that there is a shortage of information supporting a critical need for the program or proving which factors make the program unique from others in the region.

The alternative program evaluated in this study was initiated by a former Chief of Youth Programs for the National Guard Bureau at the Pentagon in the late 1980s (Georgia National Guard Youth Challenge [GNGYC] Program, 2012). The chief was tasked with finding ways for the National Guard to assist communities in carrying out the mission of “adding value” to America (GNGYC Program, 2012). American youth aged 16 to 18 years who dropped out of school without their diplomas had reached proportions (GNGYC Program, 2012). Some leaders believed this had actually formed a long-range internal security and defense threat for the United States (GNGYC Program, 2012). The implication is that if a generation of American youth cannot read and write well, they will not be able to function as active participants in the American system (GNGYC Program,

2012).

As a result, the southeastern alternative school program was tasked by the Chief of Youth Programs to help at-risk students obtain the personal skills necessary to receive a general equivalency diploma or high school diploma in order to become employable upon completing the program (GNGYC Program, 2012). Additionally, the program is designed to help students develop life and discipline skills to better help them control their behavior when conflict arises. Consequently, this should help them become productive citizens of society.

The southeastern program used for this study was an at-risk program, which targets participants (high school dropouts) who are unemployed, are drug free, and do not have a criminal record (GNGYC Program, 2012). In the state of Georgia, students can drop out of school at the age of 16 years without the consent of their parents (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). This program is designed to cater to students 16 to 18 years of age. In this program, 47% of the students are 16 years old, 42% are 17 years old, and 11% are 18 years old (GNGYC Program, 2012). This specific AEP is a 5-month residential phase program that consists of 230 to 300 students per term (GNGYC Program, 2012). The statistical breakdown of the southeastern program is 80% males to 20% females (GNGYC Program, 2012). Racially, that breakdown consists of 47% Black males and 34% White males (leaving 2% Hispanic males), and 15% Black females, and 2% White females (GNGYC Program, 2012).

The program focuses on eight core components: citizenship, academic excellence (general equivalency diploma attainment), life-coping skills, community service, health and hygiene, skills training, leadership fellowship, and physical training (GNGYC Program, 2011). Additionally, according to the GNGYC Program (2011), the mission of

this program is to “reclaim the lives of at-risk youth to produce program graduates with the values, skills, education and self-discipline necessary to succeed as adults” (p. 12). Because the program is designed to minimize external distractions, youth who are accepted into this southeastern program do not come from the local community.

While there are studies investigating why students attend different alternative programs, there is not adequate research to explain why students chose a program structured like this residential at-risk program (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). The researcher believes it is important to research the participants’ views of why they chose to attend this program. According to the local school district superintendent, most students who attend the alternative program have been dismissed from public schools because they have repeatedly violated school policy. However, students in the district alternative program were not provided the same resources in the traditional school setting, due to budget constraints and the design of the current alternative program (School Superintendent, Hinesville Georgia, personal communication, May 4, 2012).

On an average, there are approximately 300 students who choose to attend a local residential alternative program in southeastern Georgia. Some alternative programs do help rehabilitate the behavior of students so they can successfully complete alternative school or return to a traditional school setting (Van Acker, 2007). Yet, a large percentage of students choose this residential alternative route as opposed to going back to complete public school (Director, GNGYC Program, Ft. Stewart, personal communication, October 15, 2012).

According to Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldyke (2009), alternative education is not a new concept; it has been an active player in the American public school system for more than 40 years. Alternative schools and programs have become recognized largely for their

mission to educate students who are most at risk to fail in the regular public education system, assisting them in becoming productive citizens of society.

The researcher believes it would be beneficial to explore what components of AEPS exist, but are missing out of traditional schools that foster positive behavior in at-risk youth. Connor, Poyrazli, Ferrer-Wreder, and Grahame (2004) indicated that AEPs generate positive behavior changes in target individuals. Conner et al. investigated how AEPs affect self-esteem in relation to age, ethnicity, gender, and risk behaviors among students outside mainstream educational systems. In successful, nonmainstream schools, staff members spend constructive time with students, follow up daily with absent students, and present themselves as positive behavior models (Connor et al., 2004). In addition, staff members use individualized, hands-on curriculum, and personalized goal setting with students (Connor et al., 2004). As a result, alternative school programs have been credited with raising the self-esteem of at-risk students, consequently building their self-confidence so they can successfully complete high school, apply to and attend universities, and enter society with better paying jobs. Finally, these once, at-risk students could be classified as successful graduates (Connor et al., 2004).

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** Although AEPs continue to grow in scope and size throughout the United States, limited empirical research is available regarding the feasibility of these programs or the types or groups of students who ultimately attend them. Youth referred to AEPs are normally struggling socially, academically, and emotionally. Therefore, further research is required for implementing effective, school-based, preventive, intervention methods targeting highly vulnerable individuals, such as, African American youth in disadvantaged urban locations because a high percentage of them drop out of traditional schools and attend alternative programs (Lehr et al., 2009).

The literature clearly and consistently indicates that African American youth are disproportionately at higher risk for serious educational, social, and physical problems than Caucasian youth (Carswell et al., 2009). The social and educational problem of dropping out of school is substantial for racial and ethnic minorities, particularly in African Americans and Hispanics (Peguero, 2011). Peguero (2011) wrote, “Although it is known that family socioeconomic status, gender, school involvement, and parental involvement are factors associated with dropping out, the role of exposure to violence and victimization, particularly for racial and ethnic minorities, remain unknown” (p. 3756).

Alternative school educators often express a need and desire for additional staff, which can help address the emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of students (Lehr et al., 2009). Staffing and instruction should be examined in light of evidence indicating AEPs serve students with behavior problems (Lehr et al., 2009). Furthermore, despite the findings in research, gaps regarding outcome studies for AEPs remain (Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007).

**Audience.** Exploring the functions of alternative education may assist school system administrators in implementing interventions within the traditional public school setting in order to increase the number of students graduating and to decrease the number of students dropping out of school. Additionally, this study may help improve the current components in AEPs to address issues that remain a challenge. In addition, this study could serve as a resource for researchers and educators to use when exploring the characteristics of at-risk youth and alternative education. Investigating this alternative program may reveal which components that do work in regard to student success. Conversely, it could expose those components that do not work.

## Definition of Terms

The definitions of the following terms are intended to ensure uniformity and an understanding of the terms throughout this study. The researcher provided all definitions not accompanied by a citation.

*Alternative education programs* (AEPs), for the purpose of this study, are defined as educational program options that differ from the traditional public school; one that focuses on the academic and emotional needs of at-risk youth preventing high school dropout and promoting high school graduation (Van Acker, 2007).

*Antisocial behavior*, according to Van Acker (2007), is defined as “recurrent violations of socially prescribed patterns of behavior” usually involving aggression, vandalism, rule infractions, defiance of adult authority, and violation of social norms and mores (p. 5).

*At-risk characteristics* include a lack of interest in school, lack of parental involvement, poor academic performance, difficulty completing work, aggressive behavior, introverted behavior, violation of behavioral norms, lack of motivation, frequent absenteeism, low self-esteem, and short attention span (Bucci & Reitzammer, as cited in Caram, 2001).

*At-risk students* are students who have been listed as abusing drugs, selling drugs, are pregnant, exhibiting sexual activity, displaying delinquent or unlawful behavior, are adjudicated juveniles, are truant, dropping out of school, and fraternizing with gangs (Caram, 2001).

*Care* is defined as a relationship in which an individual has a sense of understanding from the perspective of another (Schussler & Collins, 2006).

*Contributing factors* are commonalities identified in at-risk students, including

ethnic groups, age, grade, family unit, or socioeconomic status.

*Dysfunctional family* is an unstable family unit in which a youth lived at home with a single biological parent or legal guardian.

*Effective alternative program* was one that provided a nurturing environment, which included caring, flexible, enriched, and meaningful academic, social and behavior intervention programs, to include mentoring and life skills (Karp, 2009; Russo, 2011).

### **Purpose of the Study**

There has been a dearth of qualitative research on the perceptions of at-risk students who attend alternative programs (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of what factors contributed to students attending AEPs versus traditional schools. There is a lack of understanding regarding why the participants choose a residential AEP program. To maximize the success of this program and other similar programs, it was important to examine the perspective of the participants attending them. Additionally, this study could include a need to identify the components in an alternative setting that lead to student success and might reveal the perspectives of at-risk students in an alternative setting so that an in-depth understanding of their experience was obtained. In this study, the researcher sought to fill the gap in research by exploring the views of students attending AEPs in relation to traditional versus alternative education.

While some students enter into an AEP program to avoid dropping out of school, resources should be available to ensure they are given a fair chance to succeed in a traditional public school as well. In particular, such resources include intervention plans that help rehabilitate behavior as a means of preventing students from being sent to alternative programs, thus increasing the likelihood of graduation (Georgia Department

of Education, 2010). Even though AEPs are available, they may not always be the solution for at-risk students because they might not always address the issues, which originally brought the students to an alternative setting. As an example, although the alternative program for this study had several effective components, there were no components in place to address the issue of gang involvement and its impact on youth. Yet, some of the participants of this study were former gang members and forced to engage in gang initiation by performing gang activities; committing acts of violence, including selling or using drugs, fighting, disturbing the peace; and other unlawful conduct activities.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Alternative Programs

Alternative education refers to a broad category of educational programming options that differ from the traditional kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) program offered within the public school system. Although some believe it is a relatively new concept for educating students, Koetke (1999) traced the roots of alternative schooling in the United States to colonial times when education was offered to the general population by the wealthy or through religious groups. Alternative schools have been a part of the American education landscape for decades. In 64% of all school districts in the United States, more than 10,000 alternative schools have been identified, serving over one-half million students (Nibblelink, 2011).

Over a decade ago, Boss (1998) stated the move toward AEPs appears to have arisen out of the progressive, learner-centered, free schools founded in the 1960s. Modern (as of 1998) AEPs include diverse educational programs and service delivery models intended for a different category of students (Boss, 1998). Furthermore, Boss specified these students as those with special education needs, are at risk and disruptive, are in advanced placement courses, attend charter schools, or are home schooled (Boss, 1998).

Yet, Aron and Zweig (2003) identified alternative education as a perspective, not a procedure or a program. As an example, alternative education was based upon a belief that there were many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this could occur (Aron & Zweig, 2003). It is in society's [best] interest for everyone to obtain a minimum of a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma. Additionally, Aron and Zweig stated that all people can be educated; Zweig (2003) concurred. Aron and Zweig (2003) stated that an alternative

program could also be classified in the following categories:

1. General type of alternative education (separate school; separate program; perspective or strategy with a regular-12 school).
2. Target population (women or girls, pregnant or parenting teens, suspended or expelled students, recovered dropouts, delinquent teens, low achievers, all at-risk youth).
3. Focus, purpose, and mix (academic completion or credential; career preparation or credential; disciplinary).
4. Operational setting or proximity to K-12 (resource rooms; pullout programs; schools within a school; separate self-contained alternative school).
5. Operational setting or location of activity (regular school during school hours; school building during nonschool hours; community or recreation center; juvenile or detention center).
6. Educational focus (short-term bridge back to schools for students who are off track; students prematurely transitioning into adulthood; students who were very far behind educationally).
7. Sponsor or administrative entity or nonprofit and community-based organizations; state or local education agency; charter school (Mills-Walker, 2011).

Aron and Zweig (2003) further examined the concept of alternative programs summarized by Raywid (1994). Raywid maintained alternative programs should focus on both educational and personal challenges of at-risk youth. In planning and implementing alternative programs, there should be several factors considered: overaged, expelled, or suspended students and those with truancy issues (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Raywid, 1994). In addition, youth who enter premature adulthood via immigration or teenage pregnancy should be included as well (Raywid, 1994).

While alternative education is not a new theory and has been around for over 40 years, there remains no single standardized definition. Other educators believed alternative schools are defined by the fact they cater to students who are at risk of school failure within the traditional educational sector (Lehr et al., 2009). Interestingly, the U.S. Department of Education (2008) defined an AEP as

a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students which typically cannot meet in a regular school and provides nontraditional education which is not categorized solely as regular education, special education, vocational education, gifted and talented or magnet school programs. (p. 55)

Some researchers defined alternative education as a way of schooling students outside the traditional K-12 school system, by such means as homeschooling, general equivalency diploma preparation programs, special programs for gifted children, and charter schools (Aron, 2006). However, Powell (2003) stated that AEPs have spread across the United States, frequently serving those students at greatest risk of educational failure due to behavioral and emotional concerns.

These programs were initially designed to address disruptive and school-avoidant behaviors with the goal of reducing the dropout rate (Powell, 2003). With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) under the aegis of Public Law 107-110, alternative programs have become a critical point for legislators (Powell, 2003). NCLB requires all students be afforded equal protection and opportunities for an equitable education in environments that are safe and academically sound (Powell, 2003). For years, not all alternative programs provided youth with an affordable and equitable education; in fact, most programs were provided little support (Caram, 2001).

Nibbelink (2011) suggested that despite the impetus of the NCLB, the very existence of alternative schooling implies students are, indeed, being left behind. A

substantial lack of data on alternative school effectiveness brings into question whether its students are still lagging behind their peers in traditional schools (Nibbelink, 2011).

While many studies attest to the effectiveness of alternative schools, Kim and Taylor (2008) utilized a case study method to consider whether alternative schools offered equitable education and found them to be lacking. Lange (2012) stated that low expectations, poor teacher-student relationships, and unclear purpose are all factors of why at-risk students remain unsuccessful in school. Lange further shared that informing policymakers and school leaders of positive dropout prevention programs may decrease the number of at-risk students dropping out of school as a whole (Lange, 2012).

**Positive aspects of AEPs.** Lehr et al. (2009) maintained alternative programs are effective and increasing in number because all employees provide positive and personal interaction. This interaction may include counseling, social skills development, individualized learning objectives, which use a variety of teaching and learning techniques, and communication that expresses genuine concern for a student's well-being and academic progress (Lehr et al., 2009).

In order to be successful, Powell (2003) believed alternative programs must be staffed with quality instructional support personnel trained in positive youth development and empowerment models. If programs are going to be effective, Powell furthered suggested ongoing monitoring is necessary. Such monitoring may include life-skills training, counseling, and shared decision making. Yet, while some researchers stressed the need of educational and parental support, others declared relationships at ecological levels (interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy levels) are just as important (Powell, 2003; Reininger, Pe'rez, Flores, Zhongxue, & Rahbar, 2012). Reininger et al. (2012) contended students maintaining such relationships were less likely to exhibit

inappropriate behavior (such as alcohol and drug abuse, sexual engagement, fighting and school issues) or drop out of school.

Some students who attended AEPs believed they performed and functioned best in a supportive environment that values diversity and supports independence (Reininger et al., 2012). On the other hand, Munoz (2005) suggested that all students can be successful and function in a normal, traditional setting if they were presented with the right combination of circumstances. Munoz further stated that in some districts, continuation programs have become the catchall repository of behaviorally and emotionally disturbed children and that AEPs include the practice of rote behavioral techniques and self-paced curricular approaches at a higher rate than that of mainstream schools (Munoz, 2005).

However, Aron (2006) disagreed believing traditional schools can contribute to negative behavior. Moreover, Aron suggested that one reason at-risk students attend AEPs are because they are not being challenged. The combination of lowered academic standards and ineffectual classroom practices are some of the reasons why AEPs exist (Aron, 2006). Nevertheless, Munoz (2005) stated students attend alternative programs for varied (and sometimes multiple) reasons, such as not having enough credits to graduate, lacking parental support for education, having a dysfunctional home life, working more than 15 hours a week, suffering from substance abuse, having frequent discipline referrals, being unable to adjust to the school setting, becoming pregnant or a student parent, feeling peer pressure to fail or leave school, and transferring from one school to another.

While poor academic achievement, failing classes, grade retention, behavior and discipline problems, and absenteeism are all contributing factors to why students may be

forced to attend AEPs (Aron, 2006; Munoz, 2005), Kallio and Padula (2001) examined the research and found that some students chose to attend AEPs for other reasons. Many students were happy, excited, and positive about being assigned to an AEP because the academic rigors of the alternative school would be more in line with their capabilities than those of their traditional schools (Georgia Department of Education, 2010; Kallio & Padula, 2001). Additionally, these same students stated they were excited and looking forward to being in classrooms where the student:teacher ratio would be smaller than that of traditional school settings, as a result, student confidence levels increased and behavior improved (Kallio & Padula., 2001).

DuCloux (2009) found that an effective AEP should provide certain characteristics: social connections, supportive relationships, an emphasis on individuality or self-efficacy, and an organizational or structural environment. DuCloux defined individuality or self-efficacy as the individualized pace and ability of students to progress through their academic work at their own goal level. Social connections and supportive relationships are based on student-teacher interactions or student-adult interactions (DuCloux, 2009).

Karp (2009) and Russo (2011) examined the effectiveness and rationales of alternative programs. An AEP's effectiveness depended on the overall size and the student-teacher ratio (Karp, 2009; Russo, 2011). Alternative programs provide case management, mentoring, computer-assisted instruction, work experience, financial incentives, and life coaching (Karp, 2009; Russo, 2011). Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) believed traditional schools lacked important components (personal relationships with teachers, school-wide focus on maturity and responsibility, and an understanding of social issues) in educating at-risk youth that alternative schools often provided.

**Negative aspects of AEPs.** While AEPs provide an opportunity for at-risk students to complete school, some obstacles still exist. According to Van Acker (2007), antisocial behavior is a recurrent violation of prescribed social patterns of behavior usually involving aggression, vandalism, rule infractions, defiance of adult authority, and violation of social norms. Van Acker stated each behavior displays different actions, but, in most cases, violence and aggression are the primary factors determining placement into AEPs. Kim and Taylor (2008) expressed the concern that AEPs have been labeled with the negative stigma of being dumping grounds for at-risk students who were failing, had behavioral problems, or are juvenile delinquents. D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) found that many students in alternative schools struggle with discipline problems in the traditional classroom, some of which follow: (a) truancy, (b) drug and alcohol violations, (c) possession of weapons, (d) fighting, vandalism, (e) insubordination, and (f) disrespect.

At-risk students have special needs that must be met to ensure success in school. School counselors receive specialized training, which enables them to work with at-risk populations to meet their needs through intervention and prevention strategies (Georgia Department of Education, 2010). However, not all AEPs have counselors (Johnson & Perkins, 2009). White and Kelly (2010) emphasized the need for school counselors to address negative attitudes toward school, disruptive and aggressive behavior, poor academic skills, and social alienation.

In addition to not having counselors, many alternative program administrators report critical shortages of math, science, special education, and English as a second language teachers (Sindelar, Dewey, Rosenberg, Corbett, & Denslow, 2012). Nibbelink (2011) stated it was common to find AEPs with significantly limited resources and staff

who are not highly qualified by the NCLB standards. AEPs can compromise teacher quality and resources, although both are essential for student success (Nibbelink, 2011). Nibbelink believed alternative school staffs must teach to a wide range of skill levels, and frequently teach some classes outside of their personal content area.

Viadero (2008) noted another issue with AEPs, stating that students who are sent to an AEP for a set period of time may have trouble transitioning back into mainstream schools. Furthermore, some students cannot break the trend of being expelled from traditional schools, thereby continuing the cycle of being in and out of AEPs (Farkas et al., 2005).

Farkas et al. (2005) maintained that continuous professional development is a vital component in implementing strategies to provide behavior intervention for at-risk students. Not all educators are trained to work with at-risk youth, thus leaving their students to repeat the same negative patterns that brought them to the program (Farkas et al., 2005; Simonsen, Britton, & Young, 2010). Kallio and Padula (2001) found that some students completed the program, while others dropped out as soon as they reached legal age. Unfortunately, according to Kallio and Padula, some students in the latter category believed school districts assigned them to alternative schools simply to “warehouse” them until they decided to drop out (p. 14). Kallio and Padula revealed that students who felt this way exhibited a lower academic remediation rate than those who felt they were getting another chance.

However, Loomis (2011) found that some students placed in AEPs reported problems they felt stemmed from a traditional school setting, while others viewed admittance into the AEP as a second chance. Loomis viewed the result of students failing classes and falling behind on credits was a surrender of hope of graduation and an

academic future beyond high school on their part, until they transferred to an AEP and experienced smaller class sizes, which made them feel supported. Loomis stated that once in the AEP, those students believed they would graduate and have a productive life after high school.

Carswell et al. (2009) recommended keeping students mainstreamed in classrooms with smaller class sizes. They posited that AEPs should be designed to provide at-risk students second opportunities to succeed within the established public education environment (Carswell et al., 2009).

Alternative schools have a higher teacher turnover rate than that of traditional schools due to teacher burnout (Robertson & Singleton, 2010). Unfortunately, when teachers leave in the middle of a school year, their students may regress because of the sudden shift in classroom authority and teaching style (Robertson & Singleton, 2010).

Dupper (2006) examined and reported that alternative schools are successful and exist because of the self-worth they provide students. When AEPs focus on academic need versus student behavior, they are more successful (Dupper, 2006). However, Van Acker (2007) stated that while AEPs are designed to meet the different needs of at-risk students, they can disrupt a youth's involvement in traditional education.

Osher and Kendziora (2010) suggested four social and emotional conditions necessary for student learning, which reinforce each other. The first addresses physical and emotional safety (Osher & Kendziora, 2010). When students feel safe in the school environment, they are more likely to conform to rules and norms because they feel mutual trust and respect (Osher & Kendziora, 2010). The second condition involves connectedness and the experience of support, which relate to dropout and delinquency (Osher & Kendziora, 2010). The third condition is student perception of their teacher and

other educators, pointing out that student achievement demonstrates a direct correlation to educator engagement, cultural competency, and high expectations (Osher & Kendziora, 2010). The fourth condition involves the effect of social-emotional values on students and their peers (Osher & Kendziora, 2010). The lack of professional development and support for educators in building these conditions and responding positively rather than punitively to student misbehavior is prevalent (Coggshall, Ott, & Lasagna, 2010). Without proper professional training teachers are less likely to deal with behavioral issues positively, which results in students being removed from the classroom and placed in alternative programs (Coggshall et al., 2010).

Some AEPs are not evaluated, nor do they have an accountability plan for the staff in place. Nibbelink (2011) stated that the overall effectiveness of AEPs that are not measured with local public school data may be skewed. Additionally, local, state, and national standards may be inconsistently applied, thus affecting student success (Nibbelink, 2011). Therefore, stakeholders should define the qualitative and quantitative data needed to evaluate the success and effectiveness of alternative schools at local, state, and national levels (Nibbelink, 2011).

### **Racial Disparities**

There were many assumptions as to why students drop out of school and later end up completing school through alternative settings. Some believe race can be a contributing factor of student dropout. Likewise, a lack of teacher understanding of student culture may be a component of student dropout (Bakari, 2003; Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). Some educators believe racial or cultural characteristics of students may impact their academic abilities (Bakari, 2003; Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). While poor, Black, at-risk students demonstrate lower academic performance than middle-class White

students, it was clear those characteristics are not prescriptive of student outcomes (Bakari, 2003; Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). Rubie-Davies (2006) stated there are a number of examples of high-performing, Black, at-risk students where their teachers' expectations played a critical role. Ironically, students who notice their teachers' low regard for them often lower their own self-perceptions (Rubie-Davies, 2006). Consequently, because the problem of disengagement is ultimately a function of a student's personal characteristics, a teacher may feel there is nothing they as teachers can do to address the issue (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002).

Some argued cultural differences contribute to student dropout while others maintained that in addition to cultural mannerisms and speech patterns, race may be the reason some teachers lower their expectations for student achievement (Iizuka, Barrett, Gillies, Cook, & Miller, 2014). On the contrary, Franklin et al. (2007) argued student academic and behavioral disengagement is often a choice, and not a result of the presuppositions teachers may hold about students. As an example, students may have familial or ecological issues that retard commitment to education and thus academic achievement (Franklin et al., 2007).

DuCloux (2009) stated another possibility could be the gender or ethnicity of the teacher. Black and Hispanic students may respond differently to male and female teachers compared to how White students respond (DuCloux, 2009). In addition, they may be influenced by other factors, such as language barriers between teacher and student, or the teaching style; length of employment; and type and extent of education and training of the teacher (DuCloux, 2009). Because research showed Hispanics make up a large percentage of students attending AEPs nationally, it could be beneficial for teachers of the same ethnicity to work in a capacity of serving at-risk youth (Franklin et

al., 2007).

Skiba and Horner (2011) found academic performance to be an issue as it relates to a student's race and demographic background. Fairchild et al. (2012) found that teacher performance is also affected. They stated teacher satisfaction, organizational commitment, academic achievement, and work-related attitudes in White, Hispanic and Black teachers are contingent on their students' demographic characteristics (Fairchild et al., 2012).

Kunkel (2013) stated Black and Hispanic students are overrepresented where suspensions and expulsions are concerned, which could ultimately lead to alternative placement. Students with low socioeconomic status are at higher risk of dropping out of school, thereby explaining why Black and Hispanic students are less likely to attend college than their White peers (Kunkel, 2013).

Crowder and South (2003) believed the association of retention and dropout among Black, White, and Latino students is difficult to define. On the other hand, Stearns and Glennie (2006) suggested the process of dropping out, no matter the reasons influencing their decisions, differs by racial group.

The question remains: if and how, race factors into student success or failure. Losen and Skiba (2010) reported that over the past 3 decades, African American students have shown an increase in school suspension rates of 9% points, from 6% in 1973 to 15% in 2006. Skiba and Horner (2011) reported,

Now, during the same period, the suspension rate for all students grew at a much smaller rate from 3.7% to 6.9%. The gap between suspension rates for African American students and White students has grown from 3% in the 1970s to more than 10% in the 2000s. African Americans are now over three times more likely than White students to be suspended from school for behavioral offenses in schools. Therefore, schools are working on various stages of implementing school wide positive behavior support strategies to reduce these trends. (p. 90)

Nationally, African American and Hispanic poverty-stricken males have the highest dropout rates (Harper, Terry, & Twiggs, 2009). According to Harper et al. (2009), while the challenges African American and Hispanic males face may be associated with a single factor; in more cases, there are usually multiple factors. Race, socioeconomic status, and gender are involved in determining whether or not they attend AEPs (Harper et al., 2009). Cataldi, Laird, and KewalRamani (2009) stated that although some studies report gender differences, suggesting males are more likely than females to drop out of high school before receiving diplomas, they maintain unlike ethnic differences in graduation rates, there is controversy as to whether or not gender differences exist.

Bowers, Sprott, and Taff (2013) and Swanson (2009) agreed that students who fail to graduate from high school experience higher rates of unemployment and incarceration and lower overall lifetime earnings and life expectancy. At the socioeconomic level, Silvia and Watts (2011) reported the Caucasian per capita income is nearly double that of African Americans. They also indicated the unemployment rate for minority groups make up more than half the overall national unemployment rate (Silvia & Watts, 2011). Fletcher (2010) reported President Obama suggested tough strategies to reduce the nation's current dropout rate. The Obama focus on the issue was concentrated on minority students within the nation's poorest schools (Fletcher, 2010).

However, Ramirez and Carpenter (2009) found that race or ethnicity was not a significant predictor of which students would drop out of school. They believed the key to policy development related to overcoming the achievement gap is more likely to be found by understanding the differences within groups, rather than between groups (Ramirez & Carpenter, 2009). KewalRamani, Gilbertson, and Fox (2007) agreed ethnicity is an issue and reported that one in five African American students will fail a

grade, whereas the overall average for students is one in 10. According to data among Caucasian, Hispanic, and African American students, Ramirez and Carpenter (2009) found Caucasian students attending a school with predominantly minority students face increased gang activity, frequent suspensions, and retention, thus are more likely to drop out of school themselves.

Cregor and Hewitt (2011) stated that many African American and Hispanic youth are headed to the “*University of Penitentiary*” because the school-to-prison pipeline continues to expand. Criminally, racial profiling and bias begins early: K-12 African American students are twice as likely as their Caucasian peers to be suspended from school, and three times more likely to be expelled (Cregor & Hewitt, 2011).

In research, there was documentation that more than 5 decades after the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), school staff members are still trying to find ways of equalizing educational opportunity to enhance the life chances of racial and ethnic minority students. The researcher believed educators must continue to fight for multiracial schooling in the United States. Du Bois (1935) stated that

a mixed school with poor and unsympathetic teachers, with hostile opinions, and no teaching concerning Black folk is bad. [Du Bois believed] a segregated school that employed ignorant placeholders, inadequate equipment for students and teachers, poor salaries, of not paying educators their worth, and wretched housing, poor building was equally bad. (p. 335)

DuBois suggested that while mixed schools had similar issues as it related to equipment and personnel issues overall, they were still better because they provided equal and quality education for all youth. Harper et al. (2009) agreed schools should continue to evaluate the effectiveness of the U.S. approach to school integration and call attention to ineffective educational practices and policies to ensure all students are mastering academics.

## **Impact and Issues of Dropouts**

The high school dropout rate is a complex problem for which there is no single answer. Personal, as well as economic, consequences of the failure to complete high school have been extensively studied and documented (Gottlob & Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, 2007). However, debate still exists as to which factor best predicts high school dropout and to what degree. According to Lehr, Lanners, and Lange (2003), all the factors contributing to the decision to drop out of high school, the personal characteristics of individual students have the strongest effect.

Osher et al. (2012) stated when a child was not viewed as a “whole child,” important issues can be overlooked, externally and internally, thus leading the child to drop out of school (p. 287). Osher et al. further stated that many factors, such as adverse childhood experiences, poverty, racism, parent-child issues, and lack of appropriate health care, are external to the school. Interactions between children, youth, parents, school personnel, and service providers contributed to a cycle of negative encounters that can lead to or intensify a student’s behavioral and academic problems, disengagement from learning, and disconnection from school and can, ultimately, contribute to dropout, delinquency, arrest, and incarceration (Osher & Kendziora, 2010).

Crowder and South (2003) stated it is difficult to explain the association of retention and dropout among Black, White, and Hispanic students. Stearns, Moller, Blau, and Potochnick (2007) stated students, regardless of race who repeat a grade prior to high school, have a higher risk of dropping out of high school than students who are continuously promoted. They also reported students who fail standardized tests are more likely to be retained and eventually drop out of school, arguing that grade retention and dropout can be a result of the frustration self-esteem theory, participation-identification

theory and the social capital theory (Stearns et al., 2007). Additional background variables correlated with retention and student dropout, such as low test scores, lack of educational aspirations, and misbehavior in school also factor into the decision to drop out (Stearns et al., 2007). However, Crowder and Smith (2003) believed there is not enough substantial evidence to prove retention has a direct correlation to students dropping out of school.

Other research included findings that attendance rates have proven to be a reliable predictor of the risk level for not graduating from high school (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Balfanz (2009) stated that a student's attendance patterns are the most accurate indicators that a student is falling behind academically and may drop out. They reported data that revealed that 80% of high school dropouts were chronically truant in the year before dropping out. Likemindedly, Allensworth and Eason (2007) explained that many dropouts have attendance problems before entering high school. They conveyed attendance is the most important determinant of passing classes and graduating from high school. Reporting 1 week of absence per semester substantially increases the likelihood of failing a class and course attendance is eight times more predictive of course failure in the freshman year than eighth-grade test scores (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Youth who do not obtain high school diplomas or their equivalent are placed to be a financial burden on society (Chapman, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2010; Suh & Suh, 2007). Suh and Suh (2007) reported that, after studying *A Nation at Risk*, the National Council on Excellence in Education found that the United States is academically behind other industrialized nations. Wirt and Kirst (1989) reported how the outcomes stated in *A Nation at Risk* were a result of the combination of the decline of educational standards

and the inability of U.S. students to compete academically internationally. Suh and Suh further noted that the National Council on Excellence in Education linked the nation's academic situation and the country's economic prosperity or lack thereof.

In 2008, the National Center for Education Statistics identified American citizens within the ages of 18 and 67 years who never complete high school earn a median income around \$23,000 (Mills-Walker, 2011). Interestingly, of that same age group with some type of high school credential, the income almost doubled (Mills-Walker, 2011).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the loss of income equated to roughly \$630,000 per dropout (Mills-Walker, 2011). Furthermore, Chapman et al. (2010) projected those students who drop out of high school will cost the U.S. economy approximately \$240,000 over their lifetime.

Keeping at-risk youth in school has been a main concern for educators, community leaders, and both state and federal government officials since the 1970s when large cities across the country began to notice the trend of rising dropout rates (Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2011). Suh et al. (2011) reported that dropout rates for students in extremely distressed, impoverished neighborhoods are higher than three times the national average. Numerous collegiate- and government-supported research studies on the factors that lead students to be at risk and how best to keep those who are at risk in school have been completed (Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005).

With this information in hand, Bowers et al. (2013) and Kunkel (2013) investigated a means for intervention, such as the development of programs, which could reduce student dropout rates. The interventions suggested follow:

1. Look closely at student discipline patterns that occurred on school campuses and involving staff members in the process.

2. Consult with behavior specialists to ensure that best practices and positive behavioral supports are used when disciplining students and providing training when needed.
3. Address patterns of inequity (when identified) among students by changing current policies or practices.
4. Analyze referral processes and policy for special education services.
5. Monitor closely prereferral interventions and ensure best practices in response to intervention are being employed.
6. Collect and evaluate data regarding referrals and discipline across ethnic and socioeconomic groups.
7. Critique practices for placement in advanced classes and programs.
8. Work with school counselors and other staff members to evaluate practices for student placement in advanced classes and programs to reduce the number of students acting out in class due to boredom.
9. Empower families to act on behalf of their children by equipping them with the knowledge and resources to help improve their children's academic performance.
10. Provide families with information on school policies, academic resources, and support programs.
11. Listen to parent and guardian feedback and suggestions on school policies and programs.
12. Provide additional academic services to disadvantaged or struggling students.
13. Create or continue programs that offer additional support to disadvantaged students.
14. Provide additional support before, during, or after school to help students

make additional academic gains (Bowers et al., 2013; Kunkel, 2013).

Bailey (2013) and Iizuka et al. (2014) believed interventions are not totally effective because they do not always benefit students who come from low socioeconomic situations or are classified as ethnic minorities. Bailey reported that some researchers wrote that dropouts are encountered most often among disadvantaged groups because of poverty and the marginalization of collateral costs involved in education, even when it is free. Constantinescu and Constantinescu (2013) argued there are differences in the quality of education and unequal access to education for certain social categories.

Bowers et al. (2013) contended students can be identified as probable candidates for dropping out of school as early as their entrance into high school, while others maintain they can be identified much earlier. To support their predictions, Bowers et al. developed a prediction indicator for identifying potential dropouts. Bowers et al. suggested the issue is important predicting who will drop out and in determining the dropout interventions a school can implement. Contrarily, Balfanz, Herzog, and MacIver (2007) and Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, and Pagani (2008) suggested multiple problems can arise from labeling students as future dropouts based on unproven factors. They feared inaccurate predictors could target students as dropouts who might not actually be at risk or, conversely, students who eventually dropped out, but are never identified as being at risk (Balfanz et al., 2007; Janosz et al., 2008). Many dropout indicators only accurately identify 50% to 60% of the students who eventually drop out (Balfanz et al., 2007; Janosz et al., 2008). Swanson (2009) and Waldfogel, Garfinkel, and Kelly (2007) reported that some studies include statements that U.S. graduation rates are estimated to average between 70% and 80%.

An achievement gap between Black and White students have been documented

consistently at all education levels. A recent analysis indicated that among all first-time, postsecondary students, 36% of White students attained bachelor's degrees within 6 years compared with only 17% of Black students (Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, & Shepherd, 2010). Of the fourth and eighth graders who scored above the 75th percentile in reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress report in 2011, more than 70% were White and fewer than 8% were Black—despite some narrowing of average achievement gaps since the early 1990s (Radford et al., 2010). Fryer and Levitt (2004) detected evidence of the Black-White achievement gap as early as kindergarten, and Burchinal et al. (2011) identified this gap among low-income children as young as 3 years of age in the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. This pervasive Black-White achievement gap has severe long-term consequences because it perpetuates historical racial differences in socioeconomic status—where socioeconomic status is generally measured through a three-pronged approach: educational attainment, income, and occupational status. In particular, the Black-White achievement gap is believed to be directly connected to educational attainment (Radford et al., 2010). Furthermore, education has an indirect impact on the remaining components of socioeconomic status through its association with lifetime wage premiums and through its relationship to minimum eligibility requirements in higher professions (Taniguchi, 2005).

Because the first year in high school is so important for student success, it stands to reason this is the most important time for at-risk, high school students to have an intervention (Oakes & Waite, 2009). Cohen and Smerdon (2009) explained that educators have to be proactive by paying attention to the high school transition and to intervening early to promote academic recovery; thus, many reformers identify this as necessary.

Stanley and Plucker (2008) stated that educators need to establish programs identifying at-risk and struggling students early, ideally in middle school, but no later than the freshman year of high school. Evidence has mounted that there is a need to be an early and successful high school intervention if students are going to be successful (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). If educators are aware students are more at risk and want them to break patterns that can derail their graduation, early middle school is the time for a major intervention to minimize their risk of dropping out of high school (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008).

According to Oakes and Waite (2009), once educators understand the need for an intervention, they need to decide how best to intervene. One of the key actions of the National Middle School Association is providing targeted early intervention for failing students (Oakes & Waite, 2009). School systems have to develop district-wide or statewide, early, warning systems to help identify students at risk of dropping out and to develop the mechanisms that trigger appropriate supports for these students (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

Bridgeland et al. (2009) stated that waiting until students fail or go off track is not the time to rectify the issue; rather, identifying those students before these issues arise is the most responsible and professional thing to do. Boutelle (2010) contended schools and districts have to identify the students most likely to fail early on before they begin failing. Once the students have been identified, schools need to provide effective and measurable interventions to increase their chances of graduating on time (Boutelle, 2010). Boutelle stated that one major part of any responsible intervention plan is to start early to redirect at-risk students' energies toward proper graduation goals.

Because of the strong link between freshman-year, course performance and

eventual graduation from high school, it is important to choose interventions and strategies that will help students in their overall success (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). One of the major keys in developing these interventions is to focus on the freshman transition year and the importance of getting off to a good start in high school (Neild et al., 2008).

Another key is to focus on the student as a whole; as an example, adolescent literacy is one of the major deficits found in students who are at risk of dropping out. The greatest need in this area is to develop reading comprehension and fluency (Jetton & Dole, 2005). This is not just a regional- or school-level problem, but a national problem. Bridgeland et al. (2009) stated that intense literacy instruction for students by ensuring they have a double dose of English to supplement their deficiencies helps students be successful in their first year of high school.

Bask and Katarina (2013) suggested students can drop out because they feel hopeless and inadequate or have high levels of cynicism. Although, according to some researchers, there are no solid reasons why students drop out, other researchers surmised that academic performance, low socioeconomic status, and behavior are the most common factors (Connor & McKee, 2008; Golden & Kist, 2005; Mills-Walker, 2011; Plank, Deluca, & Estacion, 2005; Suh & Suh, 2007).

### **Importance of Collaboration**

School systems can continue to create, implement and execute interventions for students, but parental involvement remains critical to overall student academic achievement (Swanson, 2009; Waldfogel et al., 2007). Osher and Penn (2010) presumed high-performing schools share a critical common trait: a high level of involvement with families and their local communities. These schools often have a focus on building trust

and collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and community constituents, embracing a philosophy of partnership in which power and responsibility are shared among all stakeholders (Osher & Penn, 2010). Swanson (2009) and Waldfogel et al. (2007) agreed that school success depends on the support of the family, but that the schools' efforts are often hindered by a lack of active support from parents. Only in rare cases do teachers perceive cooperation with parents toward building a real partnership for academic or behavioral solutions (Swanson, 2009; Waldfogel et al., 2007). According to Osher and Penn, this kind of partnership is evident to the students' academic and social needs and to their mental needs. On another note, to justify the lack of cooperation between the two, educators corroborated the problem is the family disinterest for the education of their children (Swanson, 2009; Waldfogel et al., 2007). While some declare mentoring is an effective intervention for student achievement, others argue they differ. As an example, Simões and Alarcão's (2013) opinions deviated about how to manage the communication between mentors and other significant adults. These experts urged agencies to invest in raising the quality of the interactions between parents and mentors. They are more skeptical, disputing that the parental or guardian involvement in mentoring should be minimal to avoid negative influences (Simões & Alarcão, 2013).

There is no direct reason at-risk youth drop out of school. However, Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan, and Herrera (2011) suggested school-based mentoring may increase their success in completing school. They believed overall that younger boys and older girls benefit more from having a school mentor. In some aspects, teaching and mentoring have common features; teachers have proven to be more successful at improving the academic performance of the mentees than community-based mentoring programs (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). Although mentoring is a debating

aspect, it is agreed there are better outcomes when the mentors are older, have a background in educational or caregiver roles, and feel confident in their ability to cope with youth who are weak and easily influenced (DuBois et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2011; Simões & Alarcão, 2013).

In fact, Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, and Rhodes (2012) avowed that school-based mentoring tends to deliver better outcomes when the mentoring relationships are longer. Mentoring is viewed in many ways; as an example, Deutsch and Spencer (2009) stated that mentor-mentee contacts are frequent and consistent with school-based mentoring. Other researchers believed mentoring is more effective when mentors work with the adults who are significant in the lives of the mentees, such as parents, guardians, or others who can positively affect mentoring outcomes (Chan et al., 2013). Parental relationship quality could also be mediated by the association between mentoring relationships and youth outcomes (Chan et al., 2013).

There are many reasons students are placed in alternative programs for remediation and then later return to the traditional school, which are disputed by educational researchers. Thomas (2011) argued many students returning to traditional schools exhibit the same behaviors that targeted them for alternative education in the first place. Thomas stated the return of these students to traditional classrooms affects students already in the traditional school and exposes them to negative behaviors. Wolf and Wolf (2008) maintained the goal should be to develop and implement guidelines that will rehabilitate student behavior. When students are in alternative programs, they need to receive instruction in academics, strategies, and interventions for correcting the behaviors that placed them in the alternative program, thereby increasing their chances of successfully returning to traditional school (Thomas, 2011). Supported, Wolf and Wolf

asserted alternative and traditional stakeholders need to work together to analyze actions and behaviors that remove students from traditional settings.

Wolf and Wolf (2008) suggested many public schools are experiencing improved student, staff, and school outcomes with the adoption of a positive behavioral interventions and supports framework, which organizes evidence-based practices into an integrated continuum of supports. Although alternative programs are often more restrictive and specialized because of the intensified needs of students, some share the same instructional, behavioral, and organizational characteristics as that of traditional schools (Wolf & Wolf, 2008).

### **Commonly Used Methodologies to Study Similar Problems**

Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) studied the perceptions of 33 at-risk youth in an alternative school program. The purpose of the study was to better understand the views of their traditional versus alternative school experience. The study used a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design in which the data were collected through semistructured interviews. The interview guide consisted of 36 questions and all interviews were conducted by a trained doctoral student or a certified school social worker. The study took place either on campus or on an off-campus private setting. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. The study used a quasi-experimental method with purposive and convenience sampling groups. The at-risk youth in this study shared as a result that traditional schools lack the personal relationships with their students as opposed to their alternative setting. Students felt that the alternative setting is more effective in understanding their social issues and focuses on their maturity and responsibility. Finally, students concluded that in the alternative setting, the peer pressure is more positive than that of their traditional school. In conclusion, students shared that

the overall learning environment in the alternative school setting is more effective in providing them with the resources and support to be successful (Lagana-Riordan et al, 2011).

In comparison, Loomis (2011), a high school administrator, found that when evaluating the views of 10 at-risk youth who chose to transfer from a comprehensive high school to an alternative setting, students agreed that the academic, personal, and emotional support was better at the alternative setting (Lagana-Riordan et al, 2011). The study used a qualitative phenomenological methodology. The purpose was to capture the perceptions of the at-risk students' school experiences. A total of five females and five males consented to participate in the study. The researcher used a three-step, semistructured interview process, in which the researcher met with the participants three different times to compare, review, and transcribe their information. The interview process took 1 month. The questionnaire consisted of 10 interview questions. A purposeful sampling was used for the study.

The findings of the Loomis (2011) study indicated that the at-risk youth felt the alternative school setting provides better teacher-student relationships; curriculum and instruction are clearer and easier to understand; and smaller class sizes in the alternative setting allows them to do better academically, which results in them all graduating. Osher and Penn (2010) confirmed educators who seek good relationships with their students' families recognize, respect, and address their needs, class, and cultural differences between them. Furthermore, educators should apply that knowledge to help increase overall student academic performance.

The findings of the study were consistent that the alternative school setting is better designed and structured to assist the unique needs of at-risk youth. In fact, these

students experienced less distractions and behavior incidents (i.e., gang-involvement, drugs, fighting, rumors) occurring at the alternative setting (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Loomis, 2011).

### **Research Questions**

This study was designed to address three research questions:

1. What factors influenced students' decision to enroll in the alternative program?
2. How is the participants' experience in traditional school settings different from their experience in an AEP?
3. What factors are most important for student success in this alternative program?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Participants**

Purposeful sampling was employed in this qualitative study. In an effort to recruit an equal number of males and females, the researcher had a conference with the alternative program site director to discuss the focus of the study, sampling, and selection criteria. The target population was 211 participants and the sample group was 59 participants. The selection criteria of participants consisted of male and female youth aged 16 to 19 years who were expelled from or had dropped out of a traditional public school. A total of 10 individuals who met the criteria were selected to participate in this investigation.

### **Participants' Characteristics**

The 10 participants who agreed to participate in this study were eight males and two females. The participants came from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including African American, Caucasian, Hispanic, and those designated as other. All participants were from northern Georgia and attended a southeastern alternative school in Georgia. All participants dropped out of a traditional high school setting. Some chose to attend the alternative program while the majority had no option to remain in public school. Participants were selected because they were considered adults and were able to provide their personal consent to participate in the study. Additionally, they met the exclusion criteria of age, ethnicity, and gender that were required components of the study outlined in the researcher's University Protocol Submission Form.

In Table 1, a breakdown of participants' demographics is presented. Nine participants indicated that they did not live with both biological parents. Two of the participants shared that they were adopted. One participant admitted to being homeless

and another lived with the participant's grandparents. Two students lived with their biological mother. One lived with the biological mother and stepfather. One indicated lived with the biological father and grandparents. One lived with the biological father, and, finally, only one lived with both biological parents. Five participants were from low socioeconomic backgrounds and the other five were from middle class backgrounds. All 10 participants successfully completed the alternative school program with their high school diploma or GED and with a new outlook on the challenges that exist in life.

Table 1

*Summary of the Participants' Demographics and Pseudonyms*

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
P1CM	18	Male	Caucasian
P2HM	18	Male	Hispanic
P3AM	18	Male	African American
P4AM	18	Male	African American
P5AM	18	Male	African American
P6AF	18	Female	African American
P7CM	18	Male	Caucasian
P8AF	18	Female	African American
P9CM	19	Male	Caucasian
P10OM	18	Male	Multicultural or other

**Data Collection Tools**

For this study, the primary source of data was through semistructured interviews with a guided, researcher-developed questionnaire to explore the participants' perspectives further (see the appendix). The researcher took field notes to supplement the

questionnaire and utilized an audiotape recorder to reflect and verify all recordings. All interviews were conducted on site at the alternative school in the lecture hall. An employee from the program was available the entire time the study was conducted. That individual served as the gatekeeper and helped the researcher locate participants and escorted them to the designate area where the participants were interviewed.

All data were saved on the researcher's computer in a Word document to secure the information. Additionally, for backup purposes, data were saved on a USB drive designated for this study. All electronic files were encrypted and password protected. All paper forms were locked up in a secured area to protect the participants' privacy.

### **Procedures**

After the approval of the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and site director, participants who accepted to participate in the study were approached by the researcher. The researcher explained the purpose and process of the study, shared that there were no direct benefits to the study, and reminded the participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequences. However, the researcher explained that if they should choose to withdraw from the study, after the study was completed—their information will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the conclusion of the study and could still be used as a part of the research as expressed in their voluntary packets. Participants received an explanation that their names would be coded with the use of a pseudonym to protect their privacy.

Participants were also told that a tape recorder was present so that she could respond back to their interviews to accurately capture their responses. The researcher advised each participant that the semistructured interview would take approximately 30

to 60 minutes.

Finally, the interview process began and copies of the consent forms, participation voluntary forms, and researcher introductory cover letter were provided to the site counselor to be placed in each participant's personal file. After all permissions were granted, the researcher followed steps explaining all the data in the analysis section.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to fully describe the participants' perceptions and experiences, this phenomenological study followed Moustakas' (1994) principles and suggestions for data collection and analysis, including a modified version of the five-stage method of analysis of phenomenological data. Prior to the data collection, the researcher bracketed personal experiences to avoid incorporating assumptions based on personal experiences of the topic. Thus, before interviewing participants, the researcher set aside professional experience of alternative programs and at-risk youth to refrain from subjectivity and uphold personal values and morals.

In the first stage in the analysis, the researcher verbally collected data, read through written notes repeatedly to obtain an overall feeling and understanding for them, organized the data into computer files to eliminate what was not relevant to the study from the information that should be shared with others as it applied directly to the research questions of this study and responded to the semistructured interview questionnaire. The second stage consisted on identifying participants' significant phrases or sentences, reassessed and replayed all transcripts repeatedly, which was done in an effort to listen for what pertained directly and only to each participant's experience. The researcher also applied open coding with colleagues to compare and contrast findings.

In the third stage, the researcher formulated meaning to the initial codes and

clustered them into themes. This allowed the researcher to gather what was common and relevant to all participants. To do this, the researcher applied open coding and separated major themes into tables, ensuring they had equal value, utilizing Moustakas' (1994) horizontalization process. In the fourth stage, the results were integrated into an in-depth, exhaustive description of the phenomenon; doing this supported the researcher in gaining meaningful descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon in which all participants experienced.

Finally, in the fifth stage, the findings were validated with participants. The researcher restated the responses to the participant to ensure their answers were correct and nothing was based on personal assumptions and understanding. To increase validity, verification included literature searches, bracketing the researcher's past experiences, and reflecting back to participant's field notes and data input responses.

Additionally, the researcher repeatedly listened to participants' tape recorder sessions to eliminate writing any erroneous information. This analysis led to eight major themes based on 150 significant statements that emerged from the participants' responses. These main themes are reported in the findings chapter providing exhaustive quotes from the participants that experienced this phenomenon. Finally, after the researcher compared these themes with other authors' literature discussed in this study, five primary clinical implications and recommendations for future research are presented in the final chapter.

### **Ethical Considerations**

First and foremost, the researcher gained personal consent from each participant and ensured the individual understood that personal participation was completely volunteered. The researcher provided signed consent forms to the site counselor to be placed in

participating youth personnel file.

Other steps taken by the researcher to avoid ethical issues, consisted of upholding the guidelines as they related to anonymity, confidentiality, and personal consent for this study. Therefore, the names of all informants and participants remained confidential with the use of pseudonyms or aliases. The researcher obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board before implementing the study. Also, the purpose of the study was disclosed to all participants and, at the end of the study, the main findings were revealed, but any information that may cause harm or compromise the anonymity and confidentiality of participants was not disclosed.

During the interview process, although every effort was made to speak clearly and straightforward to each participant, the researcher asked the participants to advise if they did not understand a question so it could be rephrased. The researcher also checked the participants' comprehension to ensure they understood what the questions were asking. In addition, the researcher did not share personal stories with any participants regarding the professional experience of at-risk youth or alternative programs and no information was exchanged amongst participants. This was done in an effort to avoid any bias and secure confidentiality.

### **Trustworthiness**

In this study, the researcher sought to enhance the trustworthiness through several mechanisms outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1995). Prolonged engagement was utilized to gain understanding of participants' experiences. Lincoln and Guba suggested the committee members served as "peer debriefers" to keep the researcher honest in the data by constantly asking hard questions about the methods used and interpretations (p. 149). The committee chair constantly encouraged the researcher to listen to participants'

feedback as a reminder of the importance of recording only what participants actually stated. The committee chair also questioned the tables and charts to ensure that no information was revealed to link the answers back to participants.

To maximize trustworthiness the researcher used colleagues for open coding to confirm emerging findings and employed a modified version of Lincoln and Guba's (1995) trail audit method, in order to keep participants' raw materials with her during the study, such as instruments, notes, and the tape recorder. All documents were retained by the researcher upon leaving the interview site by counting all documents and cross-referencing with an alternative school counselor.

### **Potential Research Bias**

The researcher is the founder of a nonprofit organization that focuses on at-risk youth, the challenges they faced in education, and the way other stakeholders (e.g., educators, community organizations) served them. The researcher is obligated to help, encourage, and support at-risk students in overcoming barriers, which contributed to their negative behaviors that, in turn, eventually may lead them to expulsion from traditional schools or could cause them to drop out.

Because the researcher is quite familiar with at-risk youth and alternative programs, it would have been easy to be subjective during this study in regards to the potential responses during participants' interviews and in the research findings. However, to avoid subjectivity during this study, the researcher acknowledged professional and personal experiences, and understood how they could shape the collection and interpretation of data. Constantly setting aside personal experiences, the researcher relied on the rich descriptions of the participants to learn of the phenomena.

The researcher understands the struggles that could lead youth to drop out of

school and, more importantly, believed they could still become successful, productive, and professional adults. However, in this investigation, information was continuously sought from the participants' point of view and reported on their perceptions and experiences. The researcher cautiously listened to the participants and blocked out notions that would interfere with the study.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

The main purpose of this study was to understand the educational experiences of at-risk youth attending a residential alternative program in southeastern Georgia. The aim of the study was to gather relevant in-depth information from 10 participants (eight males and two females), 18 years of age or older, regarding their perceptions and feelings of attending this alternative program. This was done in an effort to contribute to the literature on alternative programs and their impact on students' academic growth, as well as understand the reasons why at-risk students chose to leave traditional school and pursue other educational opportunities, such as residential alternative programs. To maximize the success of alternative program and other similar programs for at-risk students, it was important to examine the perspective of the participants attending them. The ultimate goal of this study was to better understand the specific phenomena of why students chose an alternative method for completing school. The researcher desires to increase student achievement for traditional and alternative schools. Findings from this study will be made available to school administrators who could use them to improve their learning environments. The perceptions of at-risk students were examined and described in terms of how the alternative program provided support to them academically, personally, and emotionally. The information obtained in this study could assist teachers, counselors, district administrators, and all other stakeholders to be more effective and to support at-risk students complete their high school education and become productive citizens.

This chapter included a presentation of the analysis of the information gathered during this study through a phenomenological research design; data were collected and analyzed from 10 interview transcripts and analytic memos. In this chapter, the

description and background information of the participants interviewed for this study is provided. There were eight main categories responding to the three research questions that guided this study, which were explained, organized, and embedded in detail following the participants' background information.

### **Research Question 1**

What factors influenced students' decision to enroll in the alternative program?

There was an array of differences found in the participating students' educational experiences between traditional versus alternative schools. Participants in this study shared several reasons for their decision to leave public school education for an alternative education. A combination of three reasons was given:

1. Lack of support from the staff at the traditional school. Some of the participants felt that teachers did not show concern for how they learned. They either got an understanding of their studies or not. Participants shared that teachers did not motivate them and, when not motivated, students tended to give up.

2. Personal challenges and at-risk behaviors. The participants did take responsibility of their negative behavior and admitted to their negative choices leading them to the alternative school. In fact, when asked why they dropped out of school, five participants responded that their behavior or unavoidable circumstances were the main contributing factors of what led them to take the alternate route.

3. Family issues, such as parent illnesses or their relationship with their parents. As an example, three of the 10 participants elaborated on the concern of their relationships with their parents and shared how they disappointed their parents with their at-risk behaviors. One participant even indicated how the participant was forced to live out in the streets and sell drugs to survive and help take care of the participant's mother

who was terminally ill. One reported the effect that participant's parents' divorce had on the participant academically and emotionally. Another commented on a broken relationship with the father.

**Theme 1: Lack of support from traditional school staff.** Relationships were important whenever positive results were expected. The teachers' main focus should have been to provide academic support. It was a good practice to build trusting relationship with students as well. This was essential to assist student learning and academic progression. A few of the participants felt that the traditional school did not meet their educational needs and felt that teachers and school staff of traditional programs were not attentive to their students' education, academic strengths, and interest. Some participant comments follow:

[P3CM] But, you have people here (at the AEP) who care; they can be on you about your work. . . . traditional school, some students need additional help.

[P6AF] The AEP staff can relate to us more and they take time to get to know every cadet. They are good listeners. You can tell them, anything like bad or good and they will not judge you.

[P10OM] When I was not motivated, it made me depressed. It also impacts how much work a student can get done, most people like to be pat [them] on the back when they do well. Students need to hear when they are doing well. Teachers need to motivate their students. Peers and family member should motivate them as well.

[P7CM] I could have kept going to public school. At my original public school, I was making A's and B's, but when I transferred to another public school, I started getting all F's. I felt that they were not working with me enough. For example, they were not explaining the math I felt that it was one of my weaker subjects, until I came here [AEP]. I have grown to figure it out more.

[P1CM] Traditional school—it is not so strict and they are not on you to stay on one task. Here at the AEP, I had to learn respect, leadership skills; in the traditional school, if you don't do the work you are just going to fail. They are not on you like here at Youth Challenge—you will get trouble if do not do your work.

**Theme 2: Personal challenges and at-risk behaviors of participants.** Some

participants expressed their personal challenges of peer pressure and at-risk behaviors, including illegal actions, such as robbery, selling drugs, gang involvement, truancy, and drinking under age, which led them to alternative education. Participants shared how they now realized the challenge of avoiding trouble and spending time with friends was not always the easier thing to do when it came to their education. An example was the response of some participants when asked the reasons they dropped out:

[P1CM] Because of my charges of possession, disturbing, trafficking, marijuana, consumption of alcohol under age of 21, lane drag, loud music, obstruction of officer, disorderly conduct, affray, and fighting in school. Evading law enforcement agencies and hindering law agencies by hiding out from them.

[P2HM] I wasn't doing anything; it would have taken me another 2 to 3 years opposed to getting my GED [general equivalency diploma] done in 5 months here. I was messing with the girls, smoking and skipping class.

[P6AF] I would not have stayed in high school; it was hard to focus and study in traditional school. There was other things that caught my attention, such as skip school, smoke, sit and argue, fight—negative things easier to get into at traditional.

[P8AF] I made mistakes, like running away, stealing and getting on probation, and getting arrested. But, ultimately, it led me to this program, which have made me a better person (I have matured, grown, high school diploma, relationship with dad is much better, I am seeing character traits like leadership [and] standing up for what is right) that I didn't know I had. I even make better decisions when I go home on breaks. I am completing this program; therefore, I believe I will complete other things in life, without quitting or seeing myself through it.

[P9CM became very appalling when explaining,] I was kicked out of all Georgia Public Schools. I actually cannot ever go back to any public school in the state of Georgia, because of my gang involvement, drugs, disruptive conduct and violence.

**Theme 3: Family challenges and obstacles.** While several participants in this study suffered peer pressures and academic issues, there were other reasons why some dropped out of school. Many times, financial and burdensome challenges take preference over the student's education. There are numerous reasons for why at-risk youth drop out of school; oftentimes, it is family circumstances that the participants could not control:

[P6AF, sadly and teary eyed explained] My mother was sick with cancer, and bills were high and I had to work to help my mother, and I was forced to go into the streets (to make money).

[P9CM] My adopted parents got divorce and their work schedule didn't allow for them to be there for me more. It would have had a big difference in my education if they could have been there for me.

[P8AF became introspective and took a long pause because of the deterioration of the relationship with father] I want to learn how to build a healthy relationship with my father again.

## **Research Question 2**

How is the participants' experience in traditional school settings different from their experience in an AEP? Learning styles and teaching methods were equally important to participants when asked what assisted them in being successful in the alternative program. Learning styles are determined by studying how students learn and grasp the concept of the instructional material. It could consist of visual, kinesthetic, or verbal. Whereas, teaching methods were ways in which the teacher delivered the material, such as in the form of lecture, technology, audio, or a combination. Participants felt that they should be taught material that was relevant to everyday life. They shared how each student had a different way of learning. While some learned visual, hands on, or individually, some actually benefited while learning in small groups. Participants also stated that regardless of how teachers delivered the material, they should be motivated to teach so that the students could be motivated to learn.

**Theme 4: Teaching instructional practices.** There were components found in the alternative school that contributed to participants successfully completing the program and obtaining their high school diploma or general equivalency diploma. Students elaborated about how the alternative program was more structured and how the staff members were more supportive compared to the school they previously attended.

Four participants indicated that traditional teachers taught in a repetitive way with a limited exchange of ideas and opinions. Many times, the communication was not at a level where the participants could understand the information because it was not individualized. Some participant comments follow:

[P2HM] I was always in school, just not in some of the classes. My grades were C's and B average. I wasn't motivated. It is easier to skip and I didn't have to go. So I just came here (to the AEP) because I wasn't motivated to go to traditional school. I have already completed my GED [general equivalency diploma] here. I had to go to class and meet the time constraints.

[P4AM] In a traditional school, [no teachers were] helping students stay focused on their goals and helping them stay motivated. Teachers need to have material that will help students pass End-of-Course Testing. In youth challenge, they already are assisting students, as long as students apply themselves, they have all the help they need.

[P6AF] You do the work, you pass; if not, you fail. But, you have people here that care. They can be on you about your work; traditional school some students need additional help. They work in smaller groups here at youth challenge; you get the help that you need.

[P8AF] So they should have smaller groups in traditional school. I think they need more hands on. It's not about book work. Be social. Instead of telling them what to do, show the students—work with them, do other activities. Don't bore students with textbooks; provide outside activities related to science and biology and be more open to those activities. Teachers should provide support to the students. They should be there for the students and not the paycheck.

In the alternative schools, students were able to learn at their individual pace and with their personal learning style. P10OM in this alternative program announced,

The school board can put new programs in place to make it less difficult for students to learn. They also need to put programs in school so that students can have fun and enjoy being in school. In the traditional school, all teachers give homework at the same time, which made it more difficult to keep up with. Like, you can have homework in every class at the same time. But, in youth challenge with the Provost Program, students get to finish and start their work at their own pace. It is a self-taught, online program, but a teacher is available. The student can e-mail the teacher with any concerns. It is also a research center available as a part of program. It is also lessons to help the student. The teacher assigns the students work, but they can still work at their own pace.

**Theme 5: School climate and learning environment.** The school climate and learning environment also appeared to be an essential factor as to why students felt they were able to be successful in the alternative school verses the traditional school setting.

Some participants' responses follow:

[P8AF] I believe it is most helpful in general—for schools and students—to have a better learning environment/atmosphere. [One participant stated how the program minimized external distractions, by saying] to eliminate distractions, such as boyfriends, friends, telephone, cellular device, social networks, and drugs. I was even a distraction to myself. It was a way for me to escape all the different distractions that were in my life and that weren't doing me any good. Coming to the AEP gave me a change of environment.

[P2HM] A discipline environment has been known to contribute to the learning environment of at-risk youth because their behavior is normally so negative by the time they dropped out of school. However, discipline in an alternative school can be challenging. In interviewing the participant's one simply admitted that] people think dropping out of school is easier, but you can be away from your family going to youth challenge and not everyone can do the discipline here. I have learned how to deal with discipline. But if you are court order to go to alternative school you don't have a choice.

[P3AM] It's a good thing that it is different here because they take all distractions from you here (electronics, separate males from females, took civilian clothing and make you dress in uniform no jewelry). You can't get your hair did the way you want it. It is based off a military setting.

[P6AF] They help us change our life skills, such as biting our tongue (to be quiet) and they taught us how to cope when things do not go our way. In a traditional school we were not able to learn these types of skills. If you want to learn they will teach you, but if you don't they will get you away from kids that want to learn, and they will dismiss kids that are not use to being in a discipline environment. But here they try and reach the students, visual; hands on whatever the student learning needs are.

### **Theme 6: Lack of implementation of attendance policy and school**

**accountability plan.** Attendance has a direct correlation of student success. Simply put, if students are not attending any form of school, how can they learn? Attendance affects academics; too many absences would result in students falling behind their peers. The participants in this study felt as if the traditional school did not care whether they

attended school or not. Participants expressed that they could miss days of school without any liability, even to the point where they felt their skipping actually went unnoticed. But, unfortunately their truancy caused them to miss more days than allowed, which resulted in them having to drop out of school or be retained in the same grade. Obviously, the participants chose to drop out and attend the alternative school. The participants shared how staff at the traditional school did not enforce the attendance policy and how they can skip school all day. P2HM declared,

It is easier to skip and you didn't have to go. So I just came here to Youth Challenge because I wasn't motivated to go to traditional school. I have already completed my GED [general equivalency diploma] here I had to go to class and meet the time constraints.

Another participant even explained that that participant could skip different classes and attend another and was never confronted by staff about personal attendance. When asked did the students miss anything about traditional school, the participants responded,

[P3AM] Yes, like able to walk around on my own to classes. Doing what I want to, like make my own decision—like choose my lunch time, and then go back to class. Unlike, here at AEP you have a certain time for everything, there are no options, like you have to be at school you can't skip, you can skip public school. At public school they don't enforce the rules, students have cars, they can walk out class, they do not enforce anything. [P3AM went on to share personal feelings of who is responsible for enforcing attendance policy saying,] that the school superintendent, board of education, school administrators, counselors, president, city councils, mayor, too, including parents and students themselves should be held accountability.

[P7CM] Teachers should make classes more fun and interested so that students would want to attend.

[P10OM] Students can skip school and the school staff won't even know it. Some ways the school board can help is by making sure students attend school. They need to do attendance, in one state (Texas) the school board penalize the parents by charging them a fine.

[P6AF] My grades were C, D, F. I would come to certain classes like the early

classes so they can mark my attendance, like mark me present; then I would leave school. Every day I left school early.

[P5AM] My grades got worse in the last 2 years of high school before finally dropping out and enrolling in the alternative program. . . .In Grades 9 and 10, I had (A, B, and C's), an overall B, and I went to school all the time, I skip a little—not drastic. However, in the 11th and 12th grades, my grades went down and my attendance went down, too. Because of my truancy, I was referred to the court system.

Six of the participants shared how skipping in the traditional school was an issue unresolved that contributed to their failure in public school.

### **Research Question 3**

What factors are most important for student success in this alternative program?

Some factors were more important than others when it came to what helped at-risk youth complete school. These participants typically communicated the structured and discipline of the alternative program. Participants did not like their distractions being taken from them in traditional school, but after being in the alternative program, they learned they were just that—distractions, which kept them from focusing on learning. Most importantly, the attendance policy, learning style, and structure in the alternative programs were essential in the success of students. However, these participants also expressed the relationships they had with the alternative staff were especially positive influences in their completing the program.

**Theme 7: Supportive and effective relationships.** Some participants declared one of the reasons they failed in traditional school was the lack of student-teacher relationship. When asked what they expected to learn from the alternative program, P8AF shared,

To become a better citizen. To learn better coping skills on how to deal with family. I want to learn how to make right choices. I expected to gain my high school diploma. I expected to learn about the military life.

P9CM communicated that the alternative program was helpful,

because it is a military academy, you have to figure it is going to be more face-to-face, one-on-one contact with staff (teachers, counselors, medical staff), like traditional school, you may have one adult that really trying to help you. I feel that you had to do everything on your own in traditional school, like study, making your own friends, teachers—they didn't focus on the student individual needs.

**Theme 8: Students perception of education and future success.** The

participants in this study constantly revealed how they now understood the importance of education. They concluded the staff of the alternative program and their traditional school experience helped them to understand the importance of education. These participants contended the effects would have financially positives on their adult lifestyle.

The participants could seek to enroll in college, Job Corp, workforce, or the military. This could help them continue on the right track to be successful adults and contributing citizens to society. While the AEP provided them the academic support, participants were also given emotional, physical, and behavioral support. As a result of their personal educational experiences, 8 of the 10 participants believed that students under no circumstances should be given the option to drop out of school. Some participant comments follow:

[P3AM] I think you need education; without it you can't do nothing in the world. Such as job, make nothing of your life, without a diploma or degree.

[P4AM] In order to do something, you need education.

[P5AM] In order to be successful you need a good education.

[P6AF] When you are given students the opportunity to choose, you are giving them an option and I don't think any age is an option to drop out of school.

[P7HM] I think you never stop learning; education is always going to be a value.

[P8AF] We all need education. Without education, we lack those things that humans should know (basics, bills, kids, family, jobs).

[P9CM] I would suggest alternative education because it teaches you to be a better citizen of society. I think education is an important key to life. Without education, we wouldn't know nothing so education is important in teaching us the basic skills.

[P10OM] Dropping out of school—it doesn't teach students when things get hard, you still have to push to get things done.

[P1CM] If they want to drop out, students need to be evaluated because that it is financial burden that can hurt them in life.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of at-risk youth attending a southeastern Georgia alternative program. The participants' perceptions were examined for two reasons: first, to determine if there were components in the alternative school that met their personal, emotional, and academic needs that were missing in the traditional public school; and, second, if there evidence of missing elements in the alternative school that could be improved to further meet the needs of its at-risk students.

### **Discussion of Results**

There were a total of eight themes (see Table 2) that emerged from the data. The first finding was that participants had negative feelings of their traditional school experiences. Participants felt they had a lack of support from staff at the traditional school (Theme 1); participants expressed that teachers did not show an interest of their academic needs, nurses showed a lack of concern, and counselors and administrators were not accessible.

The second finding was that participants shared their personal challenges and at-risk behaviors (Theme 2), which led them to alternative school. Participants shared behaviors, such as drugs, alcohol, truancy, gang involvement, and robbery, were all behaviors that contributed to them leaving traditional school. The third finding participants discussed was their family challenges and obstacles (Theme 3) that affected them academically. Some participants explained that the instructional practices of teachers from their previous schools did not teach in a way the participants could understand (Theme 4). Participants noted the fact that the teachers would all assign homework while at the same time, making it hard for them to keep up. The participants expressed that they were not focused in school and eventually fell too far behind with

attendance and grades. As a result, these negative factors led them to drop out and enroll in the alternative setting. The fifth finding (Theme 5) was realized when the participants discussed how the school climate and learning environment in traditional school was not conducive enough to minimize their behaviors. While some of the participants explained how they felt the traditional school environment was too lenient and carefree, other participants indicated that staff just did not care about them.

Table 2

*Summary of Themes*

Theme number	Summary of theme
1	Lack of support from traditional school
2	Personal challenges and at-risk behaviors
3	Family challenges and obstacles
4	Teaching instructional practices
5	School climate and learning environment
6	Lack of implementation of attendance policy and school accountability plan
7	Supportive and effective relationships
8	Students perception of education and future success

All 10 participants had something to say about the attendance, although all were not in truancy violation. They concurred that there was a lack of implementation of an attendance policy and school accountability plan (Theme 6). Theme 7 was supportive and effective relationships, which were important to participants. Some shared how positive

relationships and support in the alternative program were what helped them complete the program successfully. Family support was also important and participants expressed how it affected them academically and emotionally.

Finally, Finding 8 was students' perceptions of education and future success (Theme 8); all 10 participants concluded that without an education, an individual cannot be successful. They all believed that, at a minimum, a high school diploma or equivalency was necessary to enter college or the workforce, but, most importantly, to be prolific and victorious citizens.

### **Implications**

There are five primary clinical implications of the findings. The first was the importance of having teachers, counselors, and administrators in the learning environment who were caring and supportive when it came to working with at-risk youth. Participants in this study expressed a concern of how they felt hopeless due to the lack of school support. Lange (2012), Loomis (2011), and Reininger et al. (2012) indicated that that supportive relationships can be influential in reducing the negative behaviors that at-risk youth normally exhibited, such as alcohol, drugs, and fighting. The negative behaviors were some of the same behaviors the participants in this study experienced. The difference is that participants felt that the caring relationships they maintained with the alternative school staff in this program was rewarding and undoubtedly made a positive influence towards their behavior.

The second implication was the need to promote flexible learning styles. DuCloux (2009) revealed that working at their individual paces, students benefitted personally in their studies, as did the teacher and the learning environment. Some students learned better from peer mentors; in fact, participants in this study shared how working with their

peers was beneficial to them. Participants believed working with peer tutors increased their academic performance. DuBois et al. (2011), Schwartz et al. (2011), and Simões and Alarcão (2013) stated youth mentoring had a better outcome when the mentor was older and was from the participant's school.

The third implication was the use of instructional practices geared towards at-risk youth. Smaller groups have been proven to be effective for both traditional and alternative programs (Carswell et al., 2009; Loomis, 2011). The utilization of different teaching methods, which are practical to real-life situations, has been demonstrated to keep the attention and interest of students. Participants in this study declared that the teachers from their public schools using textbook and lecture teaching style did not provide them with the relevance of how the material would prepare them to be productive citizens. As a result, they became bored and unmotivated, which led to other issues, such as falling behind academically and with their attendance. However, at this alternative program, they embraced the different teaching methods, such as hands on, computer guided, and instructional techniques.

The fourth implication was school-based mentoring. Several participants of this study shared how employees of the alternative program were more like their confidantes. Participants explained how they could talk to them about personal matters and not be judged. Participants felt that having someone to talk too was essential in them completing the program. Although the participants appreciated the camaraderie they were more inspired by the mentoring they received from the program. Participants shared the employees guided them in the right direction, but, ultimately, encouraged them to make their own decisions. Furthermore, participants went on to discuss how employees disclosed their personal experiences, which built trusting relationships between the

students and the employees. This led the participants to realize that regardless of wrong choices with the right support and guidance; they could still have effective law-abiding lives.

DuBois et al. (2011) affirmed that there is a direct correlation between academic achievement and mentoring, particularly when the mentors are older, serve as caregivers, and have an educational background. The participants of this study were residential tenants for 5 months. Trusting relationships are built on getting to know an individual, which takes time. Five months allowed the employees to observe these participants' behaviors, actions, and activities on a daily basis. More importantly, Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, and Rhodes (2012) agreed that mentoring is more likely to have better outcomes when the mentoring relationships are longer. Deutsch and Spencer (2009) affirmed stating mentor-mentee contacts are better when they are frequent and consistent. Other researchers believed mentoring is more effective when the adults can positively affect the mentees (Chan et al., 2013). The employees in this alternative program had the ability to determine the consequences of the participants' behavior; however, they encouraged personal responsibility, which, ultimately, taught the participants to make better choices and to be mindful of their actions.

The fifth and final clinical implication was professional development. When teachers are not properly trained, they will more likely write referrals on students and not utilize positive behavior intervention strategies. This too could be viewed as a lack of classroom management or the inability to teach students (Coggshall, Ott, & Lasagna, 2010). Unfortunately, when a student is written up repeatedly, it will result in them being removed from the traditional classroom setting and placed in alternative programs. At the same time, too many referrals could result in teachers not having a contract for the

new school year.

Participants of this study suggested they felt teachers from their public schools did not care for their personal or academic needs. The participants repeatedly communicated how teachers were so uncaring until they did not even notice if they were in class or not. However, it could have been a matter of teachers not knowing how to handle or respond to at-risk behaviors (Coggshall et al., 2010). Professional development is a fundamental component, one that should create approaches that will cultivate behavior interventions for at-risk students. Teachers should be provided ongoing learning because not all educators are trained to work with at-risk youth (Simonsen et al., 2010).

### **Conclusions**

Overall, it was revealed in this study that there were components missing in both traditional and alternative programs that were important to students completing school successfully and moving forward to become productive citizens. After revisiting the literature and conducting the study, the researcher had a better understanding of why at-risk youth were choosing alternative programs. There were several preconceptions of what group of children would drop out of school. However, before coming to such a conclusion; it was relevant that one gain an understanding of which were considered at risk, why at-risk youth behave the way they do or perform the way they do from an academic standpoint.

It is critical to understand the backgrounds of at-risk youth; some believe that socioeconomic status holds great significance of who will drop out. Iizuka et al. (2014), Kunkel (2013) and Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) believed that those at risk are the underachieving students. As a result of this study, the researcher has learned that drop out occurs in students from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, they are not always

the students who are performing low academically. Fairchild et al. (2012) found that teachers perform based on the students' socioeconomic status leading students to perform to lower levels. They also shared that teachers have lower expectations for students based on certain gender, ethnicity and other demographic variables.

### **Limitations**

There were limitations affecting this study. The researcher sought to study only participants in the southeastern region alternative program. This program is based on a military structure and design. Therefore, the findings and implications of this study may not relate and be applicable to other geographic regions or other professions, or even other alternative programs, because not all alternative programs follow the same guidelines.

The sample group was another limitation. The researcher chose to use only participants who were 18 years of age. Therefore, the result of this study cannot be generalized to younger students.

Another limitation included the time frame; the study was conducted towards the end of the participants' enrollment of the program. Thus, this was only a snapshot based on the conditions during that time. Participants may have expressed themselves differently if the study was conducted during the beginning of their enrollment. In other words, their emotions could have contributed to how they responded to the questions.

Another limitation consisted of minimizing the study to only the student body and not the employees, such as counselors, administrators, and teachers; this reduced the level of feedback received to examine in order to gain relevant information regarding the study. Employees could have provided pertinent information that could have expanded the findings of this study. Finally, an important limitation was the researcher self-

reporting the data, meaning data could have been erroneous. To deal with this limitation, the researcher sought the guidance and support of the committee and colleagues.

### **Recommendations**

It is vital to understand that alternative schools should not be viewed as prison cells, a place to hold at-risk students until they become of age to drop out of school (Kim & Taylor, 2008). The right components of the present alternative programs are proven to be effective for students positively. The researcher offers five recommendations after comparing and examining the participants' feedback of each category, in addition to reviewing the exhaustive literature review. The five recommendations are related to the needs and success of at-risk youth.

The first recommendation is to hire qualified staff to work with at-risk youth. Just because a teacher is certified in a particular subject (math, English, social studies, or science) does not qualify them to work with this particular group of students. Nibblelink (2011) contended that teachers must be willing to teach outside of their content areas to reach at-risk youth of all skill levels. Oftentimes, when teachers are not trained to work with at-risk youth, they suffer teacher burnout and quit. Unfortunately, this leaves a high teacher turnover rate, which leaves an unstable learning environment that negatively influences the behavior of youth. When hiring educators to work with at-risk youth, it would be advantageous for them to have a background or formal training for working with children who exhibit at-risk behaviors.

Robertson and Singleton (2010) found that when teachers are not properly trained, they leave school breaking contracts in the middle of the year. Nevertheless, teachers do need to be certified to teach content areas in order to be highly qualified; however, most alternative programs do not always have certified teachers (Sindelar et al., 2012). More

importantly, highly qualified teachers are mandated by the No Child Left Behind legislation. Therefore, at-risk youth should be provided the same opportunity of having highly qualified staff as that of traditional school students.

The second recommendation is that educators should be provided with ongoing professional learning. Coggshall et al. (2010), Powell (2003), and Robertson and Singleton (2010) found that constantly offering and requiring professional development to teachers is necessary to ensure students' academic achievement. Professional development grants and the current strategies and trends to educators are effective to students in at-risk learning. These strategies should be proven to work by conversing with at-risk educators to include at-risk youth. Today's youth are able to tell educators what practices have been successful to them. The participants in this study indicated technology based with direct instruction have been effective for them to complete the program successfully. What the participants found most important was the opportunity to work at their individual paces while having access to the instructors when questions arose or when they were unable to resolve the problem independently. Karp (2009) and Russo (2011) concluded computer assistance instruction was proven to be effective in their findings, as well when it came to educating at-risk youth.

The third recommendation is to have on-site academic, behavior, and emotional staff support whether it is in alternative programs or traditional schools. One of the issues with traditional schools is that normally there is not designated qualified staff on site to deal with them. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) stated that there is not enough educated staff in traditional schools to help with the social issues that at-risk students may have. Skiba and Horner (2011) and White and Kelly (2010) shared these same components are missing at the alternative program sites. When educators and staff members are not

redirecting the behavior that the at-risk youth struggle with, the youth are more likely to repeat those behaviors. Thus, it is critical to have staff members on site who are equipped to help rehabilitate those behaviors so that the at-risk youth are progressing—not regressing (Bowers et al., 2013; Kunkel, 2013).

The fourth recommendation is that of on-site career and college readiness availability. Participants from this study will seek to enter college. Providing career awareness on the site could help students enroll in a program in college that they will most likely complete. As youth prepare to leave traditional schools or alternative programs, it is positive practice to afford them the opportunity for college preparations courses along with trades that will better prepare them to be productive and gain employment immediately after graduating. Students who drop out of school without a high school diploma are major liabilities on the economy and country (Bowers et al., 2013; Kunkel, 2013; Mills-Walker, 2011). Building partnerships with local community constituents is a way to increase work readiness and college opportunities for the students (Osher & Penn, 2010).

Finally, the fifth recommendation, which the researcher believes is most important to ensuring all other recommendations are in place is for both traditional and alternative programs to have a solid, overall, attendance policy and accountability plan. Research studies were found wherein students who attend AEP and have regular attendance normally increase 80% in the year the student drop out of school. Attendance is believed to be a direct correlation to student dropout and academic progress, resulting eventually in students going to alternative school or remaining a high school dropout (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

While there is no one indicator of why students fall behind or drop out of school,

it starts with policymakers. Interventions to increase student and teacher performance cannot move forward if policymakers do not put interventions in place and hold all educators accountable to ensure they are implementing them (Lange, 2012; Ramirez & Carpenter, 2009).

In conclusion, while Bailey (2013), Constantinescu and Constantinescu (2013), and Iizuka et al. (2014) documented that students are unequally educated based on social categories. The researcher believes all youth, regardless of age, ethnicity, race, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, or creed, should be provided a safe, fair, and quality education. With the five recommendations established and executed in both traditional and alternative programs, fewer students will drop out of school and more will graduate to become and remain productive citizens.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, while there is no single reason why students drop out of the traditional school system and turn to alternative education for an option, this study shared the perceptions of at-risk youth who completed their high school diploma or general equivalency diploma through an alternative residential program in Georgia. This study revealed and shared several reasons why at-risk youth choose alternative education. The main goal of alternative programs is to meet the needs of at-risk youth who are struggling academically, whether it is from the lack of emotional, personal, or behavioral conditions. The focus is to dropout prevention and to help youth graduate. Students are dropping out of school every day, which has a severe impact on society. Society faces an economic disadvantage when we concentrate on the behavior of at-risk youth and not the solution.

There were several factors shared by the participants that contributed to their completing the program successfully. Staff evaluating the behavior that led them to

alternative education and then providing onsite resources to help rehabilitate those behaviors was essential. However, what the researcher found to be very critical in the success of the participants was their desire to want help and embrace opportunity. Teaching our youth how to take responsibility of their actions and providing them with the consequences of remaining high school dropouts or taking an alternative route to complete their high school education is a roadmap to the next phase of their lives.

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Appendix  
Semistructured Interview Questions

## Semistructured Interview Questions

1. How did you learn about this AEP program?
2. What are your expectations of this program?
3. In what ways do you think it will differ from a traditional school setting?
4. What, if any, options did you have to complete a regular high school program?
5. Why did you drop out of school?
6. What are your future educational plans?
7. What would you say to other students who are contemplating dropping out of public school and entering an alternative program?
8. What would you change about your current education circumstances if you could go back in time?
9. How were your grades and attendance in school?
10. What do you think about education?
11. Are there some things you miss about traditional school, if so what are they?
12. Why did you choose alternative education opposed to completing school traditionally?
13. What do you think is most helpful in assisting students with completing school?
14. Whose responsibility (do you believe) is it to ensure all students are offered a quality and fair education?
15. Whose responsibility (do you believe) is it to make sure students are regularly attending school? Should students be able to drop out of school once they reach a certain age? If so, do you believe that should be and why?